

Condo tower OK'd on YMCA site

The proposal features a 350-foot high-rise atop a redeveloped athletic facility on Atkinson Drive

By Kristen Consillio

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Jun 13, 2013

The Honolulu Planning Commission approved Wednesday a proposed condominium tower at the site of the YMCA of Honolulu on Atkinson Drive that would rise 350 feet, or more than double the current height limit.

Commissioners recommended approval of a zoning change to the Honolulu City Council subject to conditions, including a traffic management plan, pedestrian easement and archeological monitoring plan due to the high probability of iwi kupuna, or Native Hawaiian burial remains.

The commission also recommended developer MB Property Acquisitions LLC meet with the community at least two more times on the plan to build the Aloha Kai tower well above the 150-foot height limit under existing zoning.

The hearing on the project drew dozens of YMCA members and area residents split on the plan.

In addition to the condominium tower, the plan calls for the redevelopment of the aging YMCA facilities.

Besides complaints that the developer failed to inform neighboring residents of the proposed zoning change, many were also concerned about further traffic congestion, and a new tower blocking scenic views, thereby reducing their property values. More than 30 people testified at the Wednesday hearing.

"I'm going to lose either way," said Curt Carson, a resident of Sunset Towers behind the YMCA. He said two appraisals before and after the project was announced showed a difference of \$180,000 in the value of his property. "I'm going to lose my view. I'm going to lose my property value. I just don't want to be stuck in traffic, too."

The developer is seeking to rezone the 1.8-acre property from A-2, the medium-density apartment district, to AMX-3, the high-density apartment mixed-use zoning. A taller tower, according to the developer, would allow a slimmer building that fits the context of the existing neighborhood.

"I know the area has some issues with traffic, but this has been going on for years," said John Whalen, a representative for MB Property Acquisitions, adding that the project would reduce the number of driveways to the property and propose a new left-turn lane at a traffic signal on Atkinson Drive.

The opposition represents an outpouring of new resistance to a project that has been in the works for more than a year.

YMCA officials announced plans in April 2012 to sell most of its property to San Francisco-based MB Property Acquisitions to develop a 120-unit condominium with 228 parking spaces and new facilities for

the nonprofit. The revised proposal is now 128 units and 283 parking spaces for the higher tower.

"Without the project eventually the (YMCA) building would have to close," said Michael Doss, YMCA executive vice president and chief operating officer. "We simply don't have the resources needed to tear down and rebuild or the capacity to run a capital campaign. This development allows the YMCA to get a new building and remain in this neighborhood."

A number of seniors backing the project told commissioners that having the Central YMCA in their backyard was essential to their health and well-being.

"For seniors like me that is very important," said Catherine Morishige, 87, a YMCA member. "I began going at age 67. Today I go to the Y almost every day. I live on my own in a three-bedroom house ... and have enough energy to be able to spend time with all of (my family)."

Copyright (c) Honolulu Star-Advertiser