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Condos tailored to first-timers

Proposal - Gerding/Edlen submits plans for a downtown tower, hoping to keep most units priced below \$300,000

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A major developer plans to build a 16-story "entry-level" condominium near Portland State University that could become a catalyst for affordable housing on nearby blocks.

Gerding/Edlen Development's proposal would put 354 comparatively small condos in a 175-foot-tall slab tower at 1700 S.W. Fourth Ave., sitting above 5,700 square feet of ground-level retail space.

Although it's too early to set prices, Mark Edlen, a principal in the development company, said he hoped most of the units would sell for less than \$300,000, with many targeted below \$250,000.

"The idea is to get a younger group of people for the most part -- it might be their first house," said Thomas Hacker, an architect whose firm is working with GBD Architects on the plans.

Prices would be kept comparatively low by the size of the units, many of which would be less than 600 square feet. There would be no balconies, and buyers would have the option of not buying a parking space. Residents could forgo parking entirely or rent a space, Edlen said.

Walls between many one-bedroom units could be removed, Edlen said, allowing owners to expand their units in the event of marriage or starting families. Though lacking balconies, the units would have large windows opening 90 degrees to allow fresh air and create a feeling of spaciousness, Hacker said.

The tower would replace a single-story office building erected in the early 1960s as part of the South Auditorium Urban Renewal Area. The proposed condo building would complement the district's "towers in the park" design theme, said Abigail Fowle, a planner for the city's Bureau of Development Services.

Though Portland's first urban renewal area won numerous design awards, the 83-acre project failed to capture the urban vitality that planners seek today. The new building would sit just inside the western boundary of the old renewal district.

"The goal is to bring a lot of life to this area," Hacker said. "We think it will significantly improve the quality of this part of the city."

The Fourth Avenue facade shows window fronts canted in alternating directions every three floors, somewhat akin to a basket weave. Hacker said the goal was to represent "a sense of individual houses making up the whole" rather than a single glass slab.

A younger market

Edlen said sales at The Civic, a 260-unit project under construction at 1926 W. Burnside, convinced his firm there is a market for younger buyers. He said the average buyer at The Civic is 31.

Edlen said The Civic experimented with 20 units without parking spaces. "They sold out quickly," convincing the developer to offer units at 1700 S.W. Fourth without parking, if buyers so choose.

Hacker presented the 1700 S.W. Fourth plan Thursday to the Portland Design Commission, which reacted favorably but lacked a quorum late in the meeting, which delayed a vote. "I'm sure we're going to want to see you get under construction as soon as possible," said Mike McCulloch, commission chairman.

Three additional blocks

Hacker also discussed conceptual plans for three nearby blocks. One is immediately south of the proposed tower, between Montgomery and Harrison streets, where Hacker said the owner is considering a market-rate apartment building.

The other two, between Montgomery and Harrison streets and Fourth and Sixth avenues, include PSU's Center for Advanced Technology and a block targeted by the Portland Development Commission for urban-density housing.

Hacker showed models with towers on all four blocks arranged to protect views. He described the area as "clearly underdeveloped" and said it offered an opportunity for "a much broader range of uses and a great deal of urban housing." He said three blocks could hold approximately 700 units, which would be targeted to downtown workers.

The 1700 building would include many one-bedroom "shotgun" units measuring 14-by-42 feet, and a smaller number of wider units measuring 21-by-25 feet. The shotgun shape is common in many recent Portland condos.

Hacker said the squarer floor plan is gaining popularity in other American and European cities. "We think it will be very popular in Portland," he said.

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