

Council to Vote Monday on Eliminating Housing at the President Hotel Apartments

Although providing more housing is a Council priority, Palo Alto's City Council plans to vote this Monday instead on possibly eliminating 75 small Downtown apartment units by changing a law to help the new owners of the President Hotel Apartments convert it into a hotel. While many of the current tenants have left, others remain and would like to stay as long as possible.

The vote on Monday is over the Downtown Grandfathered Facilities law. It says that oversized Downtown buildings cannot change from one use to another, which means the six-floor President Hotel building can't currently legally switch from being apartments to a hotel.

The specific legal clause governing this was introduced and adopted in 2016. City staff point out that the clause hampers other oversized Downtown buildings from switching uses too. For example, the former Cheesecake Factory building cannot switch from restaurant usage to retail and the former North Face store cannot switch from retail use to a health spa. However, the Council could easily allow those changes while continuing to ban residential uses, such as the President Hotel Apartments and the 85 unit Staller Court building at Gilman and Forest, from switching to hotel, office, and other commercial uses.

City staff argue that it's urgent that the clause be removed in order "to preserve the public health, safety, and welfare" and seeks to expedite the process. This urgency argument seems backwards, as keeping the clause in place will help protect our housing supply and current Downtown tenants and thus clearly benefit the public welfare. The staff report has no mention at all of the adverse impacts of eliminating housing for Downtown residents, future renters, and our jobs/housing imbalance.

Although other city rules may also prevent the President Hotel conversion, the law being discussed Monday currently provides very strong protection for existing residences. We therefore recommend:

- 1) No change be made to the law without a full vetting and review by the Planning and Transportation Commission, as is normally required, and

- 2) That any revision should continue to prevent residential uses from changing to commercial ones so as to preserve Downtown housing and protect tenants from being displaced.

In order to delay when they must move out, tenants in the President Hotel Apartments recently signed agreements barring them from making public comments opposing the hotel conversion. That means the rest of us have to speak for them. If you can't attend this Monday's council meeting, please email the City Council at City.Council@CityofPaloAlto.org a message in your own words.

Thanks,

The PAN (Palo Alto Neighborhoods) Code Enforcement, Development, and Zoning Committee

Maggie Heath, co-chair

Jeff Levinsky, co-chair

Arthur Keller, member

Links:

Monday's Council

Agenda: <https://www.cityofpaloalto.org/civicax/filebank/documents/67943>

Staff Report on Downtown Oversized Building Law

Change: <https://www.cityofpaloalto.org/civicax/filebank/documents/67962>

Recent Palo Alto Weekly

Story: <https://www.paloaltoonline.com/square/2018/11/30/documents-reveal-secret-dealings-over-president-hotel>

Recent Palo Alto Daily Post Story: <https://padailypost.com/2018/12/02/typo-in-city-code-is-stopping-the-elimination-of-apartments-at-hotel-president/>

Recent Palo Alto Matters Story: <https://paloaltomatters.org/get-informed/newsletters/november-19-newsletter/#presidenthotel>