

City and Borough of Sitka

PROVIDING FOR TODAY...PREPARING FOR TOMORROW

Coast Guard City, USA

Planning and Community Development Department

AGENDA ITEM

Case No: V 22-01
Proposal: Increase maximum height from 40' to 126' for a hospital
Applicant: Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium (SEARHC)
Owner: Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium (SEARHC)
Location: 227 Tongass Drive
Legal: Lot 1, SEARHC Subdivision
Zone: P - Public
Size: 15.2 acres
Parcel ID: 1-9410-000
Existing Use: Healthcare
Adjacent Use: Education, U.S. Coast Guard
Utilities: Existing, Expansion via Sitka Channel
Access: Airport Road & Tongass Drive

KEY POINTS AND CONCERNS

- Sitka General Code sets a maximum allowable height in the P district at 40'
- Current hospital building is approximately 68' tall, standing 126' from sea level
- Increase in height better accommodates patient mobility needs and preserves habitat and buffer to neighboring properties

RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Planning Commission approve the variance to increase maximum height to 126' at 227 Tongass Drive subject to the recommended conditions of approval.

BACKGROUND/PROJECT DESCRIPTION

In conjunction with CUP 20-12, a request made by SEARHC for a new hospital development at 227 Tongass Drive, a variance in allowable height is requested. The new hospital building will be 126' in height to accommodate the increased capacity for services planned for the new facility. The current building is 68' tall.

SEARHC has made this variance request for two reasons:

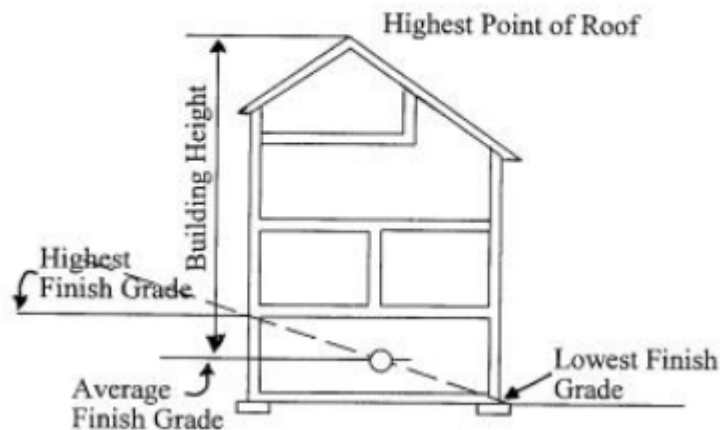
- Modern hospital design standards prefer increased building height as opposed to larger footprints/floors to better accommodate patient mobility needs. Taller buildings with smaller floor sizes mean less distance for patients to walk when stepping off an elevator and accessing office/clinic spaces
- A smaller building footprint will result in less need to disturb wetlands present on the property and preserves buffer (distance and vegetation) between this property and the neighboring U.S. Coast Guard housing.

ANALYSIS

The Sitka General Code limits the maximum height of principal structures to 40' in the Public lands district. The current hospital building is a legal nonconforming development as it exceeds this maximum.

For zoning requirements, maximum height is measured from the average finished grade to the highest point of the roof.

Figure 22.20.050
Building Height Measurement



The applicant has also included some dimensions based on height from sea level that are helpful in comparing the current hospital and proposed new hospital heights on a like-for-like basis. This is also helpful in understanding potential air space impacts from an aviation standpoint.

- The current hospital building is 68' tall, with its finished grade at 58' above sea level. This brings the total structure height to **126'** above sea level.
- The new hospital building will be 126' tall, with its finished grade at 38.5' above sea level. This brings the total structure height to **164.5'** above sea level.
- Therefore, airspace is impacted incrementally by 38.5' (164.5' – 126').

Building plans do include mechanical space above the maximum building height denoted above, however this is addressed in SGC 22.20.050(B): *“Exempted Structures. Roof structures for housing of fire- or smokestacks, tanks, ventilating fans required to operate and maintain the building and other necessary mechanical equipment may be erected above the permitted height provided nothing increases or provides additional floor space.”*

Given that CBS does not manage airspace, we cannot provide an analysis of whether this impact is significant/problematic. Staff recommends as condition of approval for this variance that the applicant provide proof of review and approval from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) for the building height (including the mechanical spaces) prior to Planning Department approval of the building permit associated with the hospital construction.

Alaska Statute 29.40.040(b)(3) states that a variance may not be granted solely to relieve financial hardship or inconvenience. A required finding for variances involving major structures or expansions in the Sitka General Code echoes this statement by stating that there must be “...special circumstances to the intended use that do not apply generally to the other properties. Special circumstances may include the shape of the parcel, topography of the lot, the size or dimensions of the parcels, the orientation or placement of existing structures, or other circumstances that are outside the control of the property owner”. In this case, the modern design standards for hospital buildings and sensitivity of surrounding habitat and uses can be considered special circumstances. Further, the demands for space in a hospital building that serves the whole community solely (as well as regional care) are unique as compared to most other commercial or institutional buildings in town. Applying the same development standards as typical developments to the hospital building does not account for its unique role and space/size demands.

Potential Impacts

Per review with the CBS Development Review Committee, no adverse impacts are expected to result from the granting of this variance. There are no surrounding uses/structures that should experience changes in views/site lines as a result of the building height, and there is already a building in this area that exceeds the district maximum. The building is also a considerable distance from any major arterial roads and view of motorists.

Impacts to airspace should be evaluated by the appropriate regulatory authority (FAA).

Comprehensive Plan Guidance

The Comprehensive Plan (2030) has two applicable items to this request:

- Economic Development – Key Challenges and Opportunities for the Future: *Sitka's many healthcare resources could position the community as a regional healthcare hub.*
- LU 8.2: *Amend development standards to promote affordable development including increasing height, decreasing minimum lot size and width, establishing lot and structure maximums in specific zones, and reducing parking requirements as appropriate.*

The allowance of taller height for this building promotes efficient development of a regional health care resource consistent with these two provisions in the Comprehensive Plan.

RECOMMENDATION

The Planning Department recommends approval of the request for a maximum allowable height increase at 227 Tongass Drive subject to conditions of approval.

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ATTACHMENTS

Attachment A: Aerial

Attachment B: Site & Elevation Plan

Attachment C: Plat

Attachment D: Photos

Attachment E: Applicant Materials

Motions in favor of approval

- 1) **“I move to approve the variance for an increase in the maximum height of principal structures at 227 Tongass Drive in the Public lands district subject to the conditions of approval as listed in the staff report. The property is also known as Lot 1, SEARHC Subdivision. The request is filed by the Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium. The owner of record is the Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium.”**

Conditions:

1. The maximum height of the building shall not exceed 126’ in height as measured from the average finished grade, excluding mechanical spaces/apparatuses
 2. Prior to Planning Department approval of the building permit associated with the construction of the hospital building, the applicant must provide proof of review and approval from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) for the total building height.
 3. Building plans shall remain consistent with the narrative and plans provided by the applicant for this request. Any major changes (as determined by staff) to development plans will require additional Planning Commission review.
 4. Substantial construction progress must be made on the project within one year of the date of the variance approval or the approval becomes void. In the event it can be documented that other substantial progress has been made, a one-year extension may be granted by the Planning Director if a request is filed within eleven months of initial approval.
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- 2) **“I move to adopt and approve the required findings for variances involving major structures or expansions as listed in the staff report.”**

Before any variance is granted, it shall be shown¹:

- a. That there are special circumstances to the intended use that do not apply generally to the other properties. Special circumstances may include the shape of the parcel, the topography of the lot, the size or dimensions of the parcels, the orientation or placement of existing structures, or other circumstances that are outside the control of the property owner;
- b. The variance is necessary for the preservation and enjoyment of a substantial property right or use possessed by other properties but are denied to this parcel; such uses may include the placement of garages or the expansion of structures that are commonly constructed on other parcels in the vicinity;
- c. That the granting of such a variance will not be materially detrimental to the public welfare or injurious to the property, nearby parcels or public infrastructure;
- d. That the granting of such a variance will not adversely affect the comprehensive plan.

¹ Section 22.30.160(D)(1)—Required Findings for Major Variances