

City and Borough of Sitka

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Coast Guard City, USA

Planning and Community Development Department

AGENDA ITEM

Case No: V 22-02
Proposal: Reduction in Parking Requirement
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 and Tongass Drive

KEY POINTS AND CONCERNS

- Sitka General Code requires 1 parking space per 5 occupants of a hospital based on maximum occupancy
- Applicants anticipate lower demand for parking than code requires

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment A: Aerial
Attachment B: Site & Parking Plan
Attachment C: Plat
Attachment D: Photos
Attachment E: Applicant Materials

BACKGROUND/PROJECT DESCRIPTION

In conjunction with CUP 20-12, a request made by the applicant for a new hospital development at 227 Tongass Drive, a variance to reduce parking requirements is requested. SGC 22.20.100(G)(11) requires hospitals to have a one parking space for each five occupants, based on maximum capacity. The new hospital building is anticipated to have a maximum occupancy of 1,623 which would result in a parking requirement of 325 spaces.

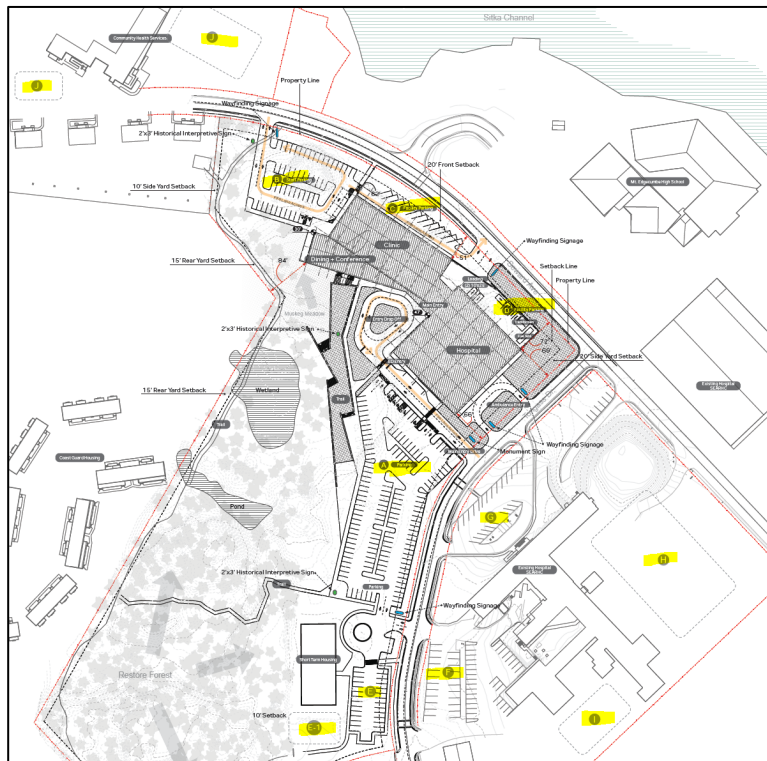
The applicant has made this variance request under the following justifications:

- The campus in total will have 428 parking spaces available, estimating that this will be 17% higher than actual anticipated peak need and 100 stalls more than typical daily demand.
- Many SEARHC patients fly to Sitka for care as they are a regional healthcare provider, meaning that some patients do not have personal vehicles that would require parking.
- Reducing parking requirements will decrease the impact on wetlands in the area and the buffer to neighboring U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) housing.
- The combination of reduced parking requirements and a smaller footprint for parking areas to be developed means that the parking lots can have wider drive aisles and other improvements, improving ease of use and access.
- Less parking availability will lead to less traffic in the campus vicinity.

ANALYSIS

For the purpose of analysis, the staff report will refer to parking areas using the lettering system provided by the applicant.

A full version of this diagram is provided in the Site & Parking Plan attachment.



SGC 22.20.100(D)(2) requires that for hospitals, parking facilities be no farther than 150' from the facility. Per SGC 22.20.100(D), distance is measured "*from the nearest point of the parking facilities to the nearest point of the building that such facility is required to serve.*" This distinction is important, as it would be impractical to require that each parking space (as opposed to the lot) be within 150' of the building.

Parking lots A, B, C, and D meet this distance requirement, are on the same lot, and have no apparent need to share this parking with other buildings, unambiguously providing 203 of the required spaces.

Parking lot G appears to be within 150' of the building (approximately 139' at the closest point assuming the provided parking plan is consistently scaled), contributing another 18 spaces. However, there may be other uses of these spaces depending on future use of the existing hospital building.

Parking lots E and E-1, if considered as a continuation of parking lot A (given that it is on the same property) would contribute an additional 36 parking spaces for hospital overflow. The Short Term Housing building adjacent to these lots has a parking requirement of 4 spaces which was calculated by applying the hotel/motel parking requirement, which is why all 40 spaces provided in these lots are not considered as eligible to contribute to hospital overflow parking in this analysis.

Code compliant provided parking (depending on interpretation):

- Lots A, B, C, D = 203
- Lots A, B, C, D, G = 221
- Lots A, B, C, D, E, E-1 = 239
- Lots A, B, C, D, E, E-1, G = 257

This means that if a conservative interpretation of parking requirements is taken, the parking variance requested is 37.5% lower than code requirement. If a more encompassing interpretation is made, the parking variance requested is 20.9% lower than code requirement.

Campus Parking Model

While a total of 428 parking spaces are available on the campus, the other uses on the campus such as the Community Health Services building as well as clinic buildings on Seward Avenue have their own parking requirements and demands. Future uses of the existing hospital building are still unknown, complicating the ability to determine the adequacy of parking under a campus model. Without the information to do a full campus analysis of parking requirements, staff cannot determine whether 428 parking spaces meets code required parking at a campus level, though the applicant has stated a need for 415 spaces total. The numbers behind the forecasts related to peak and daily demand were not provided, however the stated results of that analysis indicate that campus wide parking will be adequate for anticipated demand.

Out-of-Town Patients

Given the role of SEARHC as a regional healthcare provider, many patients are not local residents and do not have a personal vehicle to access the campus. The parking requirement of 1 space per 5 occupants for hospitals does account for this to some degree (as even solely local hospitals have

patients dropped-off or transported by emergency vehicle). Ultimately, staff agrees this is a fair consideration to make for the applicant's particular operating model.

Wetlands and Buffer

The site plan provided depicts the presence of wetlands on the western side of the lot. Wetlands do provide habitat, and their disturbance does require more federal permitting as well as generally higher development expenses. There is also a trail built on this side of the campus which offers a health/recreation asset for staff and residents.

This area is heavily wooded/vegetated and provides a sizeable buffer between the project area and the neighboring USCG housing. As USCG housing ages and demand for housing grows, redevelopment and/or increased density may be needed. Preserving this buffer would protect the sense of privacy enjoyed by current USCG housing residents and make development/redevelopment of housing in this area more attractive/tenable in the future.

Driving Aisles & Ease of Access

If the amount of space for parking is fixed, decreasing parking requirements within that space does allow more space for things such as wider driving aisles and landscaping. The amount of "fixed" space for parking in this case is derived from the applicant's preference to minimally impact wetlands and minimize impervious surfaces.

Less Parking, Less Traffic

The applicant did not provide supporting information for this assertion.

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 significant portion of site visitation being out-of-town patients and the presence of wetlands can be considered as special circumstances.

Potential Impacts

Generally, the potential impacts resulting from a lack of parking would be longer walks between distant parking spaces and destinations, the propensity of drivers to find other parking nearby that may be suboptimal (along streets, "creating" parking where there is open space), or to utilize parking on nearby/neighboring properties. In this case, there is no on-street parking available on either Tongass Drive or Seward Avenue, so crowding of cars parked on streets is not a realistic outcome. Vehicular access to Mt. Edgecumbe High School (MEHS) housing is restricted, protecting those parking facilities. Parking overflow could be seen on the lower MEHS and UAS parking lots or at Sealing Cove, but given the distance to the hospital building from these lots, it is unlikely that

staff/visitors would see these as viable parking alternatives. However, the applicant does not anticipate that lowering the parking requirement would result in a lack of parking given the number of out-of-town patients accessing the facility, current parking levels observed, and forecasted demand. The applicant does have active programs in place to incentivize walking/bike commuting for staff, and some staff members utilize public transit.

The potential impacts of holding to code required parking levels would be disturbance of wetlands and decreasing the buffer to the neighboring property to the west.

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 reduction in parking requirements for the proposed hospital promotes efficient development of a regional health care resource consistent with these two provisions in the Comprehensive Plan.

RECOMMENDATION

Overall, staff is supportive of a reduction in parking, taking into account the amount of out-of-town visitation for services at this site. Further, the applicant has a vested interest in providing adequate parking for its staff and visitors to ensure quality of service and minimize adverse impacts on their own property/operations. There are few parking areas nearby that would realistically be used as alternatives and no on-street parking available in the area, so impacts are most likely to be felt by the applicant on its own property. There is also benefit in preserving wetlands and the buffer to the neighboring property.

As a counterpoint, parking is a continual community concern, and striking the right balance between meeting parking demand and efficient development is challenging. The code does not offer alternative ways to gauge parking adequacy outside of the prescribed requirements, making it difficult to account for special circumstances in an objective way. Further, the unknowns surrounding future use of the existing hospital building and other development on the campus creates uncertainty around judging the adequacy of proposed parking levels.

Motions in favor of approval

- 1) **“I move to approve the variance to decrease required parking associated with a proposed hospital 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 parking provided shall be no less than the number of spaces represented in the parking plan submitted with this application. Any decrease in parking spaces or increase in maximum building occupancy will require a new variance request to be approved by the Planning Commission.
2. 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.
3. 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.

- 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