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West side stories: Developer and city square up for fight over 646-unit housing high-rises

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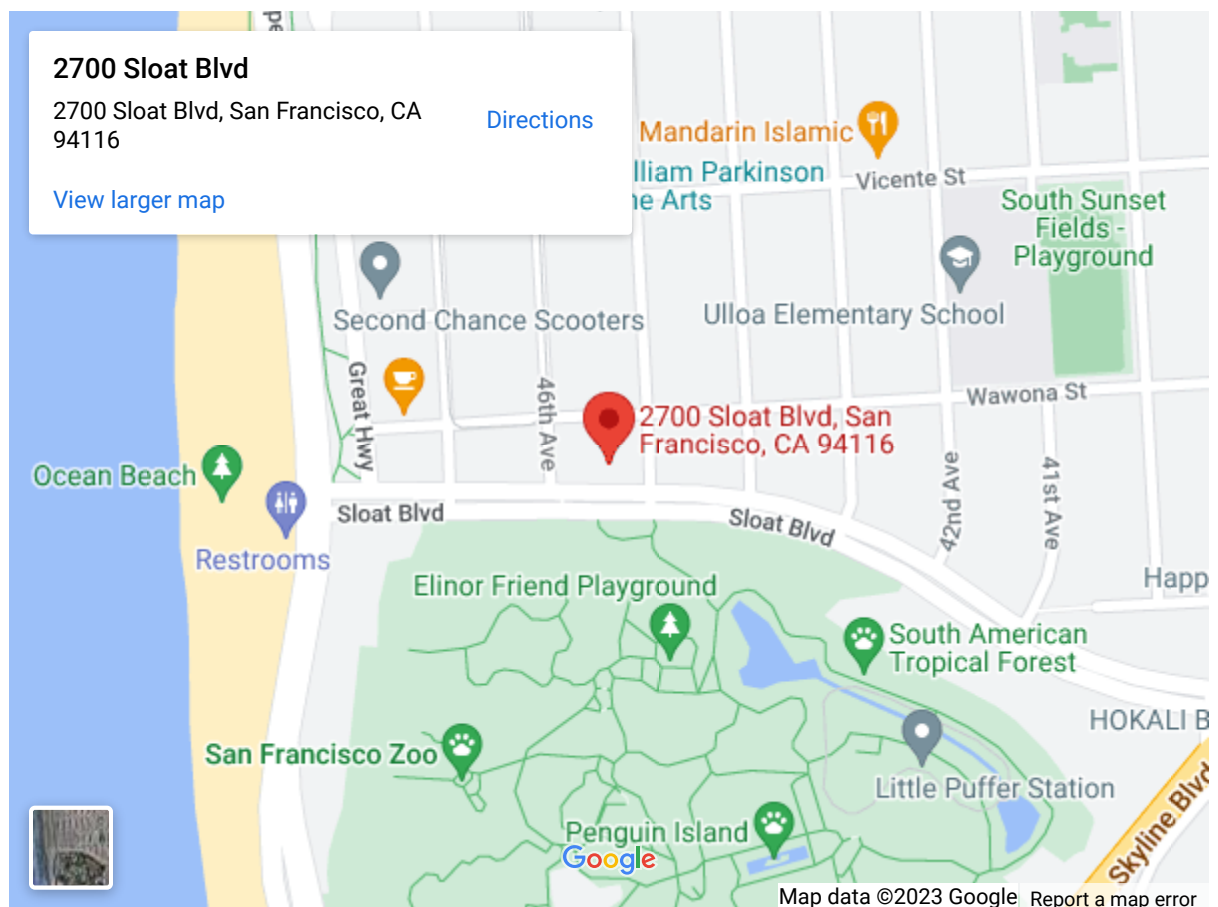
CH Planning is moving to redesign a roughly 400-unit project at 2700 Sloat Blvd., pictured here, into a 646-unit project measuring 560 feet tall.

The developer behind one of the largest residential proposals on San Francisco's west side says it wants to go bigger — if the city lets it.

CH Planning LLC intends to file an application to build a 646-unit, 560-foot tall mixed-use tower at 2700 Sloat Blvd., founder Raelynn Hickey said Wednesday. The roughly one-acre site is home to the Outer Sunset's Sloat Garden Center.

CH's plans for the site, just a few blocks from the Pacific Ocean, have evolved over the years: The developer first submitted plans for an eight-story, 213-unit project in 2020 before resubmitting plans for a 12-story, 400-unit version at the end of 2021.

This latest proposal, which would employ the state-density bonus law to boost square footage, would make for one of the tallest residential projects in San Francisco outside downtown. At 10 to 14 feet per floor, it could contain 40 to 56 stories.



The developer and the Planning Department have been discussion the latest iteration for some time, with city officials repeatedly telling CH that its plans are not compliant with local zoning codes.

It's not that the city takes issue with the quantity of housing, Dan

Sider, chief of staff for the Planning Department, said Tuesday. San Francisco believes the property “can support a tremendous amount of housing,” he said, “significantly more housing, using state density bonus law, than had been suggested previously.”

At issue is the way CH has proposed the housing, Sider said. The state density law allows CH to provide more affordable homes in exchange for greater density than allowed by zoning, but Sider said CH must first propose a “base project” that complies with the city’s zoning regulations.

Complicating things is that San Francisco and CH disagree on the impact of a zoning regulation called “bulk code,” which regulates a building’s massing — put simply and literally, how bulky it is. The existing zoning at 2700 Sloat limits the amount of bulk, so CH proposed a base project that would have four slender towers — each, it says, individually compliant with bulk code — on top of a single podium. The project’s design meant CH would only need to build that one podium, lowering the overall project cost.

Sider said there are ways of getting around the city's bulk regulations, but that the four-tower proposal simply isn't one of them. San Francisco, following its own regulations, would not consider the bulk of the individual towers but would group the four towers as a single building — a building out of compliance with bulk code.

San Francisco’s code does not explicitly prohibit projects like CH’s, Sider said, but the city has long interpreted its own code to regulate projects that way. On March 8, amid the back and forth with CH, San Francisco Zoning Administrator Corey Teague issued the city’s interpretation, in writing, to staff.

The city suggested CH move forward with the project as four separate buildings, each with its own podium, and apply the density bonus on a building-by-building basis.

But CH project consultant John Hickey said moving forward with the separate buildings would dramatically raise costs, threatening the project’s feasibility. And he and Raelynn Hickey are frustrated by the city’s recently issued written interpretation of the bulk code, saying it feels like it materialized out of thin air.

They have an ally on their side. Sonja Trauss, executive director of the nonprofit housing advocacy group YIMBY, said Wednesday she sees the city's reaction to the evolving plans as a sign San Francisco is "not that serious about building housing."

"If they were, they'd be like — let's do it," she told me, adding 2700 Sloat could set a precedent for other large projects in "well-resourced" neighborhoods on San Francisco's west side, which could soon be rezoned to accommodate more than 36,000 new homes as part of the city's efforts to meet state-assigned housing production goals.

She said the city's approach to interpreting code is wrong.

"What has happened now is actually the most problematic way to go about it," Trauss said. "In the letter, (the zoning administrator) says, the code is silent on this, so I will assume it is prohibited. That is not how zoning works."

Sider said the written interpretation issued by the city was "nothing new," a simple reiteration of existing policy that had been issued to keep developers from "trying to argue something that is inarguable."

But CH plans to argue its case anyway, with Raelynn Hickey telling me it may submit the 646-unit proposal as soon as this week. The 646-unit plans would include ground-floor retail and restaurant space with a public access observation deck, public car share program and other tenant amenities.

Sider, asked what San Francisco would do upon receiving a project application it had deemed out of compliance, said the department would work with the project sponsor to bring the proposal into compliance.



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