



ULI Technical Assistance Panel
City of Kirkland Totem Lake Business District
Questions Presented
July 2011

Introduction

The City of Kirkland's objective for the ULI Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) is to obtain practical advice on methods to achieve the vision of transforming the Totem Lake Business District into a high-density, mixed-use Urban Center.

Background

Kirkland's Comprehensive Plan envisions the transformation of the Totem Lake Business District (TLBD) into a high-density, mixed-use Urban Center. The heart of the TLBD is Totem Center, located in the NE quadrant of the district. Within Totem Center are two key properties: Evergreen Hospital and the Totem Lake Mall. Evergreen Hospital, with 3,200 employees, is the City's largest employer. Several new hospital buildings have been constructed in recent years and there are expansion plans and also necessary land zoned to accommodate future growth. A cluster of medical offices is located immediately west and north of the hospital.

A bus transit station on the southwest corner of the hospital campus is a recent upgrade, situated to serve the hospital, revitalized mall property, neighboring businesses and residential uses. Totem Lake Mall is aging and slated for redevelopment as a multi-story, mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented town center. A master plan for redevelopment was proposed by property owners and approved by the City in 2006, along with a development agreement committing the City to invest future tax revenues derived from the town center development in street and other public improvements. The development is on hold and plans are likely to change, but the City and principal owner, Coventry Real Estate Advisors, is optimistic that the mall will eventually redevelop.

Evergreen Hospital and the planned redevelopment of the Totem Lake Mall form a solid foundation for growth of the TLBD. However, the prospects for redevelopment are uncertain in the remainder of the TLBD and in particular, on nearby properties south of the hospital and mall. The City is enlisting the help of the ULI TAP to help Kirkland position that area for reinvestment along with considering issues of a more general nature as follows:

General Questions

1. Scale of Development: Consistent with the Urban Center vision, zoning regulations allow high intensity development in the TLBD and require development to be designed with an urban form and be served by an urban level of infrastructure.

Questions: Is this type of development realistic in the foreseeable future, given regional economic conditions? Are there appropriate intermediate forms of development that would support and preserve options for long term urban development?

2. Transportation Improvements: The study area is bisected by arterial streets carrying high traffic volumes and creating large blocks. Plans call for a limited number of traffic capacity improvements, improving street connections and breaking up blocks with internal street grids. Greater reliance on transit service is anticipated. City funds for transportation improvements are limited.

Questions: Given limited funds, what are the best ways of maintaining vehicular access while improving walkability and transit use? Are there suggested ways to improve the connectivity among the four quadrants of the TLBD formed by the intersection of I-405 and NE 124th Street?

3. Burlington Northern Railroad right of way: The unused railroad right-of-way (ROW) cuts through the TLBD and extends southward through Kirkland to the City of Bellevue. The ROW is now owned by the Port of Seattle, but acquisition by either Kirkland or King County is a possibility. There is particular interest in developing a pedestrian and bicycle trail, and the ROW could also be used for future regional rail transit.

Questions: Would acquisition and development of the railroad ROW be considered an asset to attract redevelopment? How could the City maximize this potential?

4. Amenities: The City seeks to make the TLBD a more pedestrian-oriented people place. To do so, a mix of well-designed parks, plazas and open spaces is desired. As an example, a master plan for Totem Lake and the areas that surround it is expected to get underway following the ULI TAP.

Question: What investments in amenities could the City make that would be most effective in attracting new development?

Questions Specific to Two Sub-areas

5. Totem Lake and surrounding properties: Totem Lake is a significant natural open space that could be an amenity, but is inaccessible and not very visible. Surrounding properties are subject to strict environmental regulations. Water exiting the west side of the lake is currently piped to the west side of I-405 where it becomes a tributary of Juanita Creek.

Questions: Is the lake a potential amenity to attract development? Would improvement of the lake as a nature park be an asset? Would day-lighting of the stream be desirable? What can the City do to maximize the potential of the lake? What kinds of development are appropriate surrounding the lake?

6. Area West of 124th Avenue NE: The area lying between 124th Avenue NE and I-405 has been envisioned as a future urban village, with upper story office or residential uses, ground floor retail uses, and an internal street grid. Regulations for this area are structured to limit the height of buildings unless certain internal streets are improved and a master plan is approved for an area of at least 4 acres. Floor area ratio limits are established to limit traffic on a constrained street network.

Questions: Is this a realistic vision? Is it reasonable to insist on ground floor retail given the retail focus at Totem Lake Mall? Are regulations tying permitted height to land aggregation and improvement of an internal street grid appropriate? Are FAR limits a serious inhibition to redevelopment? Are there better ways to promote desired redevelopment?