

HISTORIC CORNER : HISTORIC CHOICES

A Critical Analysis of Current Plans and Recommendations for Changes for The Charles Company Retail Project at Lake/Calaveras

Altadena, California

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An Open Paper for Review by Community, Elected Officials, and Developers

Presented & Supported by:

Neighbors Building a Better Altadena

Altadena Chamber of Commerce

Altadena Heritage

Altadena Historical Society

Eliot Arts Magnet Middle School PTA

Eliot Arts Magnet Middle School School Site Council

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Introduction to Altadena's Lake Avenue District and the Proposed Building at Lake and Calaveras

Lake Avenue – a busy North/South street in the small town of Altadena – literally ascends into the mountains as one travels north from Pasadena. The historic “town center” of Altadena, it is a useful thoroughfare of businesses and residences, reminding pedestrians and drivers of Altadena’s special relationship between urban and rural, a community perched at foot of the San Gabriel mountains with the giant LA basin stretching out below us.

Altadena Junction – at the corner of Calaveras and Lake Avenue – within a few blocks of the top of the Avenue – has historic significance in the community. It was once the meeting point of the urban rail lines and the Lowe railway, which took riders straight up the mountain. While there is no longer a railway here, the intersection is a business and cultural center, near Elliot Middle School, the Altadena post-office, a large grocery store, and many independent, long-lived Altadena businesses and local artisans.

Altadenans are increasingly organizing to preserve and grow our special community character, and have said so in a variety of ways. In recent years, dozens of activists have participated in helping make all of Altadena more walkable, in particular working towards a pedestrian-friendly Lake Avenue. This desire for walkability has been repeated in various documents as well: the Altadena Community Plan, the zoning code, and the 2012 Visioning Report. Walkable areas are good for business – attracting buyers with foot traffic – and for Altadenans, express the type of healthy community we want to be.

At the Altadena Junction intersection, the Charles Company is constructing a new retail project to fill in what was for more than ten years an empty lot. The bank building that once occupied the site has long since burned down. The community is excited as a whole for a new building, new stores, and is warmly open to Aldi coming as the anchor store.

Once built, this building will sit at historic Altadena Junction for decades to come, and will set a precedent for what is acceptable “by-right” development on Lake Avenue, Lincoln Avenue, Fair Oaks Avenue, and throughout Altadena.

Unfortunately, the plans that were approved by County, and are in the very beginning stages of development, are shocking to the community. The current plan shows a building facing away from Lake Avenue and this “A+” corner, with an entrance in the back. The building discourages foot traffic with few windows and no entrances on the street side, and effectively closes off businesses in the development from pedestrian activity. Its design offers little – aesthetically or with other features – that will improve the walkability and sociability of Altadena’s historic junction.

In this context, activists, historians, and architects from Altadena have put together this analysis of the building plan, as we believe it violates both the spirit and letter of our current community development plan. We hope the County and Developer will work together to improve the plan for our historic town center, so that it comes into closer alignment with our community standards and the spirit of Altadena.

Altadena’s Community Standards District and Land Use Guidelines and the Proposed Building at Lake & Calaveras

Careful analysis of the proposed Charles Company building at the Calaveras and Lake Intersections shows several important aspects of the current building plan that fail to meet the CSD guidelines. Outlined below are those violations.

	CSD Guidelines	Current Building Plan	Recommendation
Building Frontage	CSD Section E.1.d.viii(A) states: <i>“To encourage the continuity of retail sales and services, at least 50 percent of the total width of the building’s ground floor parallel to and facing the commercial street shall be devoted to entrances, show windows, or other displays which are of interest to pedestrians.”</i>	The building’s frontage along Lake Avenue is 201 feet; of this, 96 feet (47.8%) appear to be show windows and graphic displays framed as windows. The frontage includes no entrances of any kind. This falls short of the 50% standard, leaving over half the Lake Avenue facade a mix of expansive brick walls and shallow arches providing little dimensional relief. The arches are not components of the display cases, as the graphic displays consist of the graphic panels and the frames that hold them, just as the show windows consist of the transparent glass panes and their frames that hold them.	Opportunities to place a pedestrian friendly entrance exist. The easier option is the addition of a Lake Avenue-facing door at the NW corner. The more difficult, yet more desirable solution of adding an entry at the SW corner of the building has some inherent challenges but would be a great boon for the community’s walkability.
Height of Building – Grade Issues	CSD Section E.1.d.viii(E) states: <i>“A minimum of 50 percent of the building frontage above the first story shall be differentiated by recessed windows, balconies, offset planes, or other architectural details which provide dimensional relief. Long, unbroken building facades are to be avoided.”</i>	The grade change along Lake Avenue is considerable, and requires thoughtful design to address the pedestrian character of the street. The approved building’s floor area consists of one story. At its highest point along the commercial street, however, the bottom of the southernmost window is nine feet above the grade, well above the heads of pedestrians, and effectively a second story as seen from the commercial street. While the CSD does not provide a specific minimum height that windows must be above the sidewalk, for the southern half of its 201-foot frontage, the building’s brick facade is increasingly unbroken by architectural details, save for shallow arch columns, as windows appear ever higher above the sidewalk. Moving southward toward the intersection at Calaveras Street, the unbroken facade becomes longer and without dimensional relief at the pedestrian level.	This is an area where better care toward design could have led to a lower entrance level at the SW corner of the building which would have brought more character to that prominent area. To mitigate the current design the strategies already underway to extend the pergola, add some planting and seating and better the construction of the exit stair are a good start.
Windows Facing Lake	CSD Section E.1.d.viii(B), which states: <i>“Clear or lightly tinted glass shall be used at and near the street level to allow maximum visual interaction between sidewalk areas and the interior of buildings.”</i>	Based on direct communications with the Charles Company, all of the frames along Lake Avenue are to be opaque and/or graphic displays, permitting no visual interaction between sidewalk and the interior of the building.	Looking at the successful designs of other groceries with great pedestrian engagement through high visibility to the display shelves, we find this to be a great disservice to Altadena. At minimum the opening of these windows to allow light and views inside the building should be investigated, even with a redesign to the interior layout of the shopping aisles being necessary.
Southwest Corner	CSD Section E.1.d.viii(I) includes in its list of required architectural features (minimum 5 from the list): decorative exterior stairs, decorative iron grilles, decorative iron fences.	Features a plain, unattractive fire escape and short trellis. The Charles Company has submitted a tentative design change to the community that includes a decorative wrought iron fire escape staircase. This change would require approval from County.	Option A: Allow a corner entrance and an attractively-landscaped seating area with decorative iron work and shade trees. Option B: A staircase entrance along Lake Avenue that provides mid-building access to the finished floor.
Street-scaping	Altadena Community Plan: Land Use Policy Map, Section 4.5.1, Lake Avenue Commercial Center: <i>“This area would be conceived as a ‘village-like’ environment of mixed uses and extensive streetscape amenities... containing ground level pedestrian-oriented uses and professional offices and residential units in upper levels. Streetscape elements such as sidewalk and street crossing pavement treatments, coordinated street furniture (benches, news racks, trash receptacles, etc.), street trees and landscape planters, pedestrian-oriented lighting, signage, and entry monuments would be introduced to enhance the environment.”</i>	None. The Charles Company has submitted a tentative design change to the community that includes an extended pergola with hanging vines, and benches with surrounding flowers.	Provide planters, street trees, benches and pedestrian lighting for the sidewalk and pedestrian areas.

Conclusion – and Call to Action

Working with local architects and designers, we have identified solutions to each of the identified problems with current plans that work from both an aesthetic and an engineering perspective. Critically, the grade change does not prevent the building from providing access facing Lake Avenue, or at the very least, additional pedestrian-friendly features at the street level.

We urge the Charles Company to increase its commitment to work with Altadenans to enhance a building that will be an asset to the community. While the company's first response to fixing problems was encouraging, it didn't go far enough, and didn't address improving the Lake Avenue facing wall of the building – our main concern. Failing that, we urge that Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich ask the Department of Regional Planning to reconsider its interpretation of the rules that has allowed this project to move forward in opposition to our CSD and our community's desires, and to ensure that this gateway to Altadena is something we can all be proud of.