



City of Palo Alto

City Council Staff Report

(ID # 6724)

Report Type: Study Session

Meeting Date: 4/4/2016

Summary Title: PreScreening for Proposed Hotel at 3200 El Camino Real

Title: Prescreening of a Proposed Hotel Development at 3200 El Camino Real That Requires a Variance or Ordinance Amendment to Modify or Eliminate the 50'-0" Special Setback Along Hansen Way

From: City Manager

Lead Department: Planning and Community Environment

Recommendation

Staff recommends that the City Council conduct a prescreening review of the applicant's proposed hotel development as it relates to a 50'-0" special setback at 3200 El Camino Real and provide comments. Pre-screenings are akin to Study Sessions, and while City Council comments are requested, no formal action will be taken.

Executive Summary

The applicant has submitted an application for review of a hotel project by the Architectural Review Board (ARB). The proposal would also require approval of either a variance or a legislative change to the special setback along Hansen Way, and the applicant is seeking to gauge the City Council's support for the proposal.

The subject property is located at the southwest corner of Hansen Way and El Camino Real, fronting on El Camino Real. There is an existing, low scale hotel on the site that currently intrudes into the 50 foot special setback along Hansen Way. Under the proposal, the existing hotel would be removed and replaced with a larger hotel that would also be designed to encroach into a 50 foot special setback.

The 50 foot special setback extends the full length of the property adjacent to Hansen Way and along all of the other properties fronting on Hansen Way; it dates from the establishment of the Stanford Research Park and its annexation to the City. The property immediately adjacent to the subject site includes buildings that intrude into the special setback by about 14 feet, which may provide a rationale for the hotel proposal to do the same, either via approval of a variance or via a legislative change to the City's zoning map to adjust the setback at this location.

Because this project raises policy considerations and may involve a legislative change, it is being presented to the City Council for general comments. It is anticipated project design modifications would occur following the Council's discussion. No formal action is requested of the City Council.

Background

The subject property contains an existing two-story 16,943 square foot hotel with 36-guestrooms, which would be replaced with a four-story, 50'-0" tall hotel and 93 guestrooms with a two-level basement parking garage. In order to implement the project, or some variation of the project, the applicant seeks the removal or reduction of the special setback along Hansen Way and is considering a variance application or ordinance (zoning map change) to modify/eliminate the setback requirement.

The applicant has requested preliminary review by the City Council to gauge the City's interest in the proposed hotel. The preliminary ARB concept plans are available; however, the applicant may seek a different site plan and building design based on comments received from the prescreening discussion. These initial concept plans demonstrate the constraints of the site. (See <http://www.cityofpaloalto.org/civicax/filebank/blobdload.aspx?BlobID=42946> for the plans and attachments for application and supporting material.)

The project site (site) consists of a 28,878 square foot parcel (0.62 acres), located at the southwestern corner of the Hansen Way and El Camino Real intersection (see location map, Attachment A). The site is within the Commercial Service (CS) zoning designation. Presently, the site includes a two-story, 16,943 square foot hotel with 36-guestrooms constructed in 1947, with a surface parking lot. The site includes a 50'-0" special setback along Hansen Way that was established in 1959 after the construction of the hotel, rendering the hotel a "non-complying facility" subject to Palo Alto Municipal Code (PAMC) Section 18.70.

Properties to the east along El Camino Real and directly across Hansen Way are zoned Research Park (RP) and include surface parking facilities to support research and development offices at 607 Hansen Way. Properties to the west of the site, zoned CS, include the Fish Market and McDonalds restaurants. To the north of the site, across El Camino Real, properties that are also zoned CS include Footlocker, and personal services uses. To the south of the site (rear) are research and development uses as part of the Stanford Research Park, zoned RP.

The CS zoning district was established to create and maintain areas accommodating citywide and regional services that may be inappropriate in neighborhood or pedestrian oriented shopping areas, and which generally require automotive access for customer convenience, servicing of vehicles or equipment, loading or unloading, or parking of commercial service vehicles. The PAMC allows for a maximum of 0.4:1 for development with the exception of 2.0:1 for hotel development.

Through the preliminary ARB process, the applicant proposed to demolish the existing building and site improvements. In its place, the applicant proposed the construction of a four-story, 50'-0" tall 52,449 square foot hotel with 93 guestrooms. The conceptual project includes an encroachment into the 50'-0' Hansen Way setback, which is effectively half the width of the site. The applicant seeks relief from the setback in the form of a Variance pursuant to PAMC 18.76.030 or a Zoning Amendment to the City's Setback Map (established by Ordinance 1896 in 1959) to amend the setback pursuant to PAMC 18.80.

The application of the special setback limits the use of the site to approximately 50'-0" in width both above ground and below ground. Surface parking can be situated within the special setback area.

Origins of the Setback & Existing Intrusions

The original purpose of the 50'-0" special setback is not known for sure. It may have been established to accommodate future street widening in the Stanford Research Park, or to provide for landscape screening (and privacy) of Research Park buildings and uses. While there is no capital improvement plan to implement street widening of Hansen Way at this time, the legislated setbacks here and throughout the Research Park effectively constitute a "reserve" for possible future improvements (which could theoretically involve roads, bicycle and pedestrian facilities, landscaping, utilities, etc.).

The adjacent office complex at 600 Hansen Way was constructed in 1983 and does not conform with the special setback. The complex has its closest building setback approximately 36'-0" from the property line along Hansen Way. This represents an encroachment into the special setback. There is no justification stated in the project file for this deviation and staff is unable to uncover a reason as to why this occurred. Nonetheless, this condition may constitute a rationale for a similar encroachment into the special setback by the hotel proposed at 3200 El Camino Real.

El Camino Real Design Guidelines and South El Camino Real Guidelines

The project is subject to the El Camino Real Design Guidelines and the South El Camino Real Guidelines. The Guidelines consider the site a part of the California Avenue Corridor Area. According to the Guidelines, new buildings should front El Camino Real with prominent facades. Entries should face El Camino Real, or be clearly visible and easily accessible to pedestrians. Auto-oriented development should include pedestrian-friendly design elements to accommodate those arriving by foot or transit. The project includes what appears to be a secondary entry from El Camino Real.

The policies within the Guidelines support having new buildings situated closer to the street and furthermore when considering corner properties, such as the subject site, the building should define the corner.

Discussion

If there is a desire to address the special setback there are two courses of action that could be taken. The first is a variance to the special setback based on a rationale having to do with the adjacent building's intrusion into the setback. The second is a zoning amendment to eliminate or reduce the special setback from the setback map over the site. The two methods are described below.

Variance

PAMC Section 18.76.030 provides the procedures for applying a Variance. The purpose of a variance is to:

- (1) Provide a way for a site with special physical constraints, resulting from natural or built features, to be used in ways similar to other sites in the same vicinity and zoning district; and
- (2) Provide a way to grant relief when strict application of the zoning regulations would subject development of a site to substantial hardships, constraints, or practical difficulties that do not normally arise on other sites in the same vicinity and zoning district.

In order to grant a variance, all of the following findings for a variance need to be made by the Director of Planning:

- (1) Because of special circumstances applicable to the subject property, including (but not limited to) size, shape, topography, location, or surroundings, the strict application of the requirements and regulations prescribed in this title substantially deprives such property of privileges enjoyed by other property in the vicinity and in the same zoning district as the subject property. Special circumstances that are expressly excluded from consideration are:
 - A. The personal circumstances of the property owner, and
 - B. Any changes in the size or shape of the subject property made by the property owner or his predecessors in interest while the property was subject to the same zoning designation.
- (2) The granting of the application shall not affect substantial compliance with the regulations or constitute a grant of special privileges inconsistent with the limitations upon other properties in the vicinity and in the same zoning district as the subject property, and
- (3) The granting of the application is consistent with the Palo Alto Comprehensive Plan and the purposes of this title (Zoning), and
- (4) The granting of the application will not be detrimental or injurious to property or improvements in the vicinity, will not be detrimental to the public health, safety, general welfare, or convenience.

Zoning Amendment

PAMC Section 18.80 provides the procedures for amending the zoning code, maps and districts. This is a legislative action that would require adoption of an ordinance following receipt of a recommendation from the Planning & Transportation Commission.

Next Steps

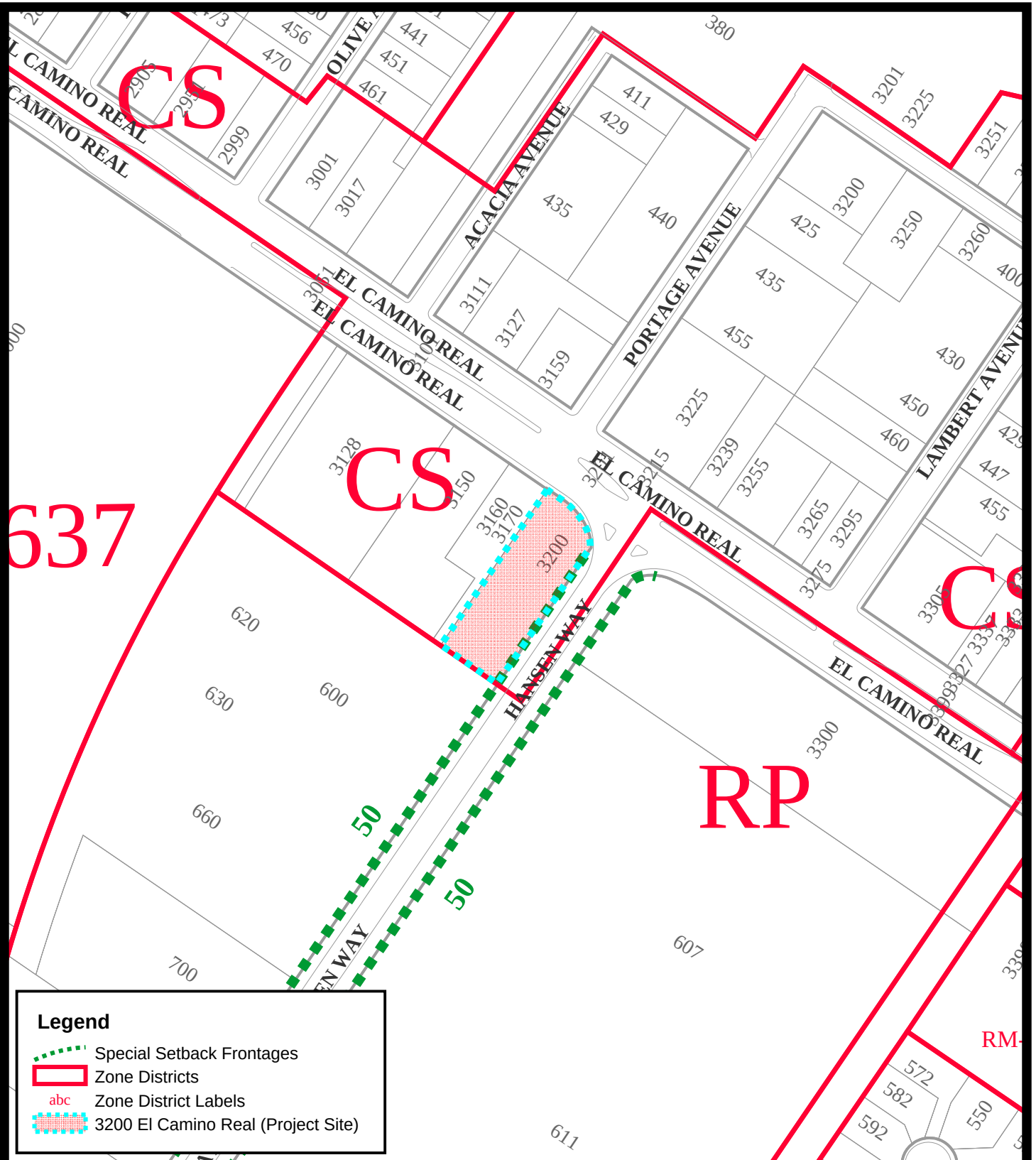
While the applicant has filed for ARB review, the applicant is also considering different design options that will be informed by the City Council's discussion. It is anticipated the applicant would make some project modifications and submit revised plans to the ARB.

Environmental Review

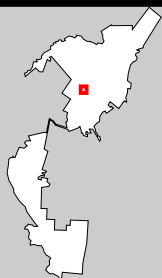
This preliminary review is a study session in which Councilmembers may provide comment, but no formal action will be taken. Thus, no CEQA review is required at this time.

Attachments:

- Attachment A: Location Map(PDF)
- Attachment B: Applicant Request (PDF)
- Attachment C: Site Plan Exhibits (PDF)



The City of
Palo Alto



3200 El Camino Real Area Map with Zoning Districts

This map is a product of the
City of Palo Alto GIS



1 March 2016

Mr. Jonathan Lait
City of Palo Alto
P&CE Department
250 Hamilton Avenue
Palo Alto, CA 94301

(transmitted by email)

Mr. Lait,

The Hotel Parmani is seeking City Council input with respect to the possible removal or reduction of the special setback requirement along Hansen Way, for its parcel only, in the form of a zoning amendment or a variance.

The special setback of 50 feet presents a unique condition not present at virtually any other CS zoned parcel in Palo Alto. The special setback disproportionately impacts our site as compared to other parcels along Hansen Way in that it constrains our buildable area to only 50% of the lot. Typical CS zoning allows and even encourages development up to the property line. We wish to engage in a conversation regarding the removal of this unusual constraint on our site and will propose a few project options to illustrate the range of what is possible on this prominent corner at the base of Stanford Research Park. For purposes of a pre-screen, we do not intend on discussing FAR as we understand that to be related to the outcome of the setback discussion.

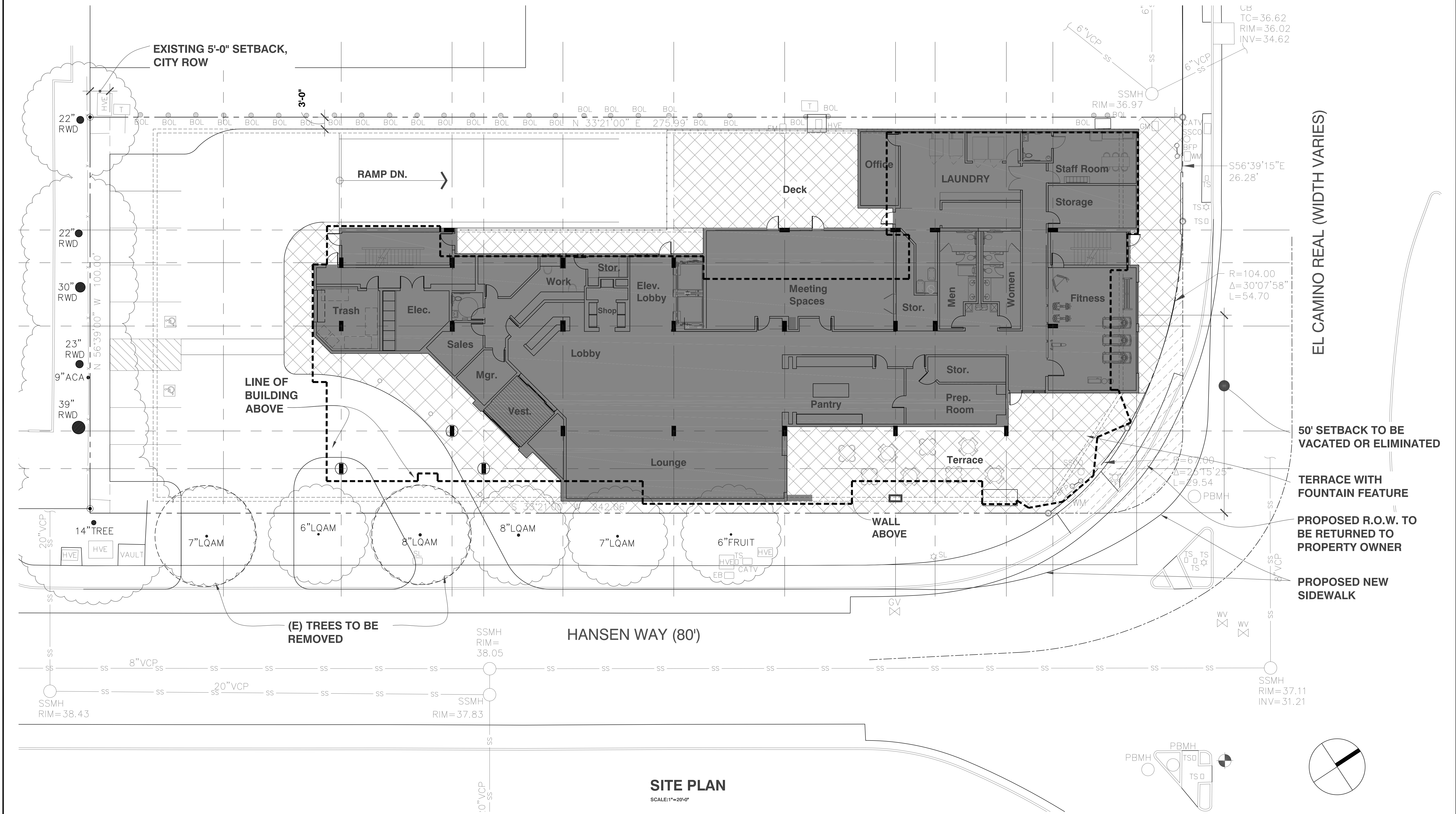
Please let us know the earliest we can be placed on City Council's agenda.

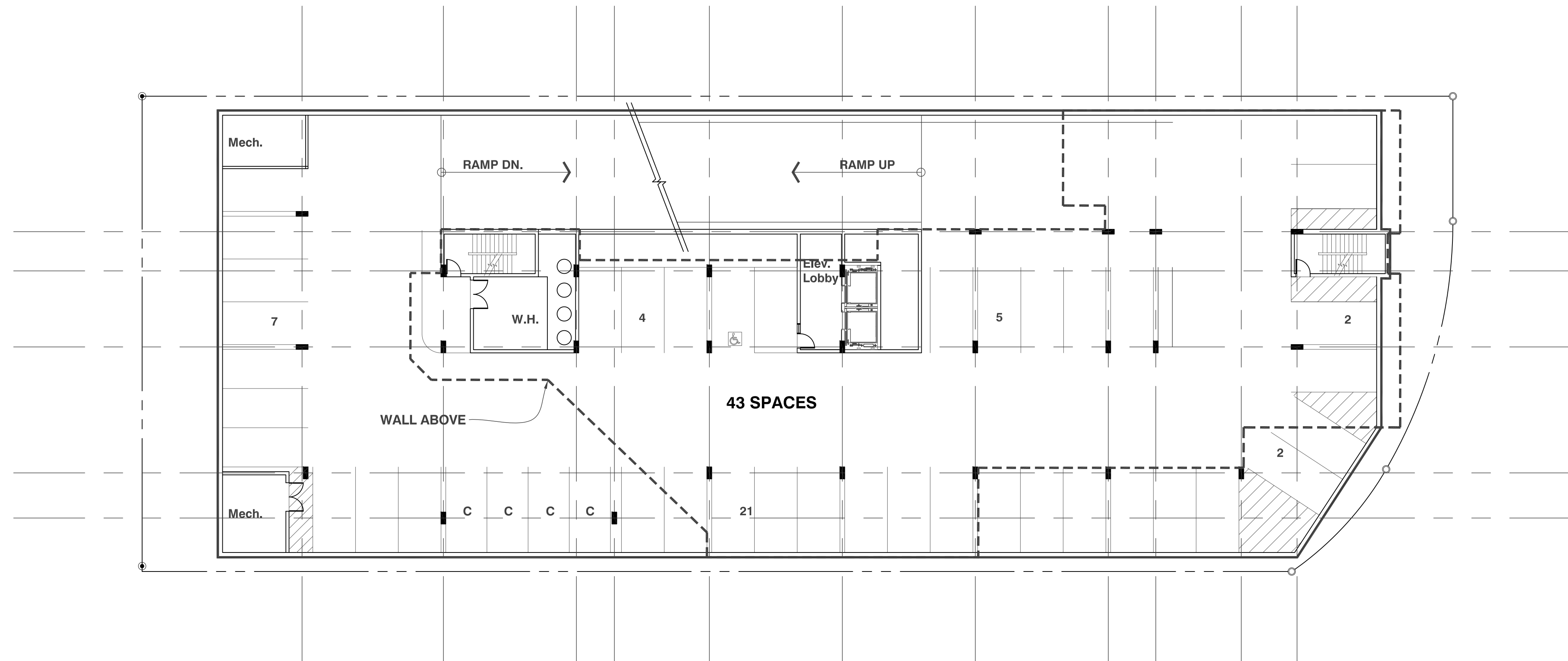
Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Randy Popp', with a stylized, flowing script.

Randy Popp, AIA
Principal
Randolph Popp, ARCHITECT

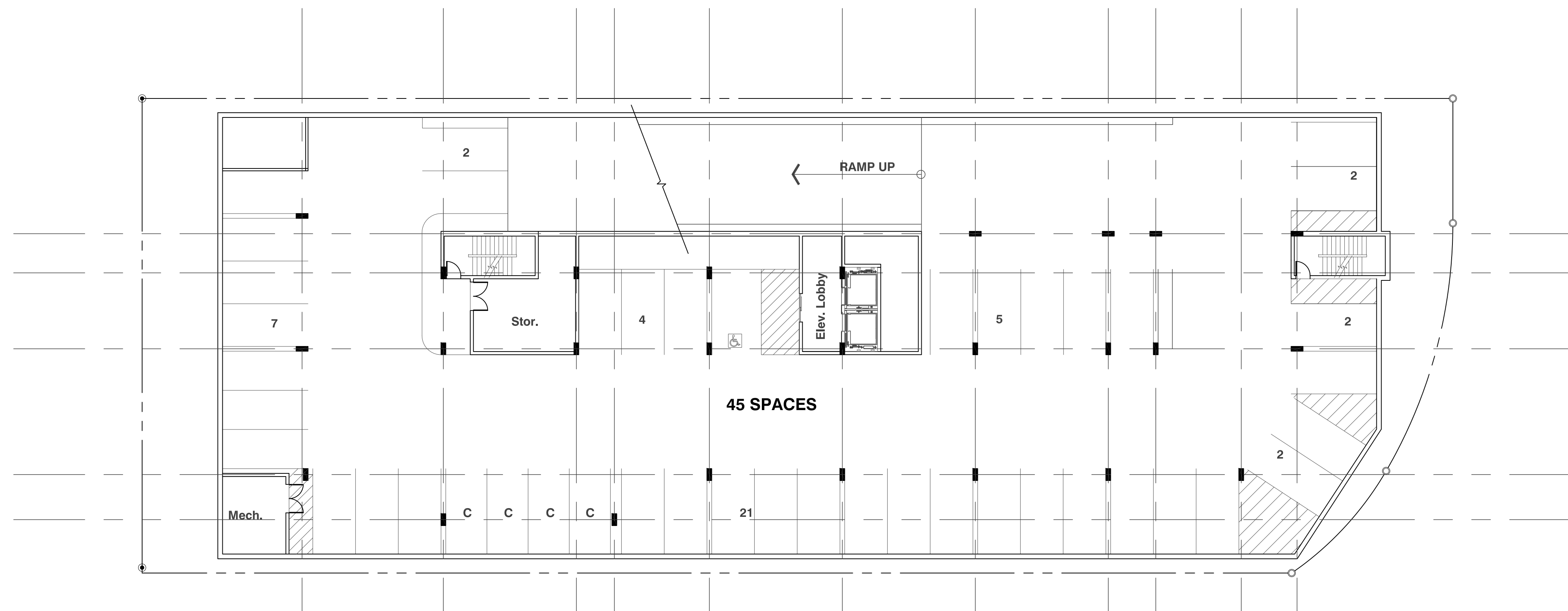
CC: Sheldon Ah Sing – M-Group (email)





Parking Level P1

SCALE: 1/16"=1'-0"



Parking Level P2

SCALE: 1/16"=1'-0"