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August 7, 2025

Re: August 12, 2025 Item #7. Appeal of ABR Approval of 418 N. Milpas St. & 915-923 E. Gutierrez Street Project from April 14, 2025

Dear Mayor Rowse and City Council Members

On behalf of the Allied Neighborhoods Association, we strongly support appeal of the 418 N. Milpas / 915–923 E. Gutierrez Street project. We urge you to consider this appeal in light Santa Barbara's design review requirements as mandated by our Municipal Code and Compatibility Guidelines.

We recognize and support the need for affordable housing, yet we also believe firmly that design and neighborhood compatibility must NOT be sacrificed. Santa Barbara is a Charter City with a rich architectural tradition and specific legal protections intended to preserve the character and livability of its neighborhoods.

During the April 14, 2025 ABR hearing, the board failed to find the project to be compatible with the neighborhood in size, mass, bulk, scale and height. Yet this failure to find neighborhood compatibility wasn't even called out or outlined in the motion which passed. The four-story design is significantly taller than the surrounding one- and two-story buildings. It is massive and will tower over the neighborhood, disrupting the visual scale and character of the corridor. This ruling ignores the fact that adjacent buildings are only 1 and 2 stories architecturally sensitive and date back to the 1920s.

ABR Questions About the Number of Hearings/Staff Comments on Purview

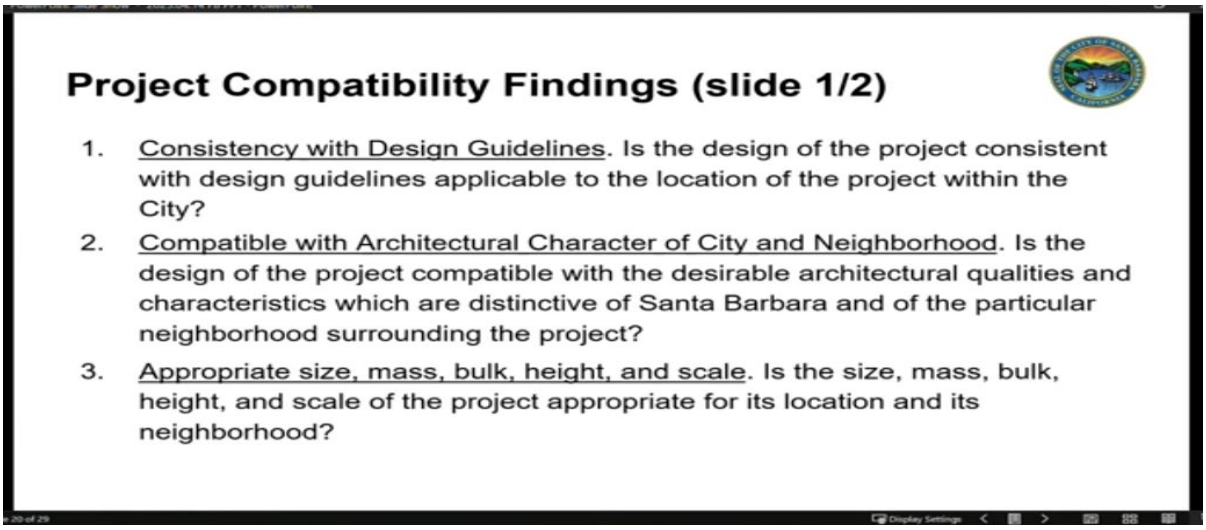
During this hearing, Staff responded to an ABR commissioners' questions about their purview (starting at 2 hours 33 minutes of the recording and continuing a few minutes, ABR April 14, 2025) Click on link to view the recording.

Staff made a statement that the ABR's purview was only to be on the "aesthetics" of the project. Yet what about the Compatibility Guidelines mandating that the project be compatible with the neighborhood for size, mass, bulk, scale and height????

A project may check all the design boxes for characteristics of Santa Barbara's guidelines for Spanish Colonial buildings and be aesthetically pleasing. Yet even an attractive building can be completely out of scale in relation to the neighborhood it will reside in. Our Compatibility Guidelines speak to the context of projects within actual neighborhoods and not just as standalone buildings. That is what creates our city's architectural character and it involves more than just the aesthetics of a standalone building.

Neighborhood Compatibility Must Be Taken Seriously

During the April 14th ABR hearing, Staff showed this slide outlining the Compatibility Guidelines. **It clearly states in items #2 and 3, that the project MUST be compatible with the size, mass, bulk, scale and height for the NEIGHBORHHOOD.**



A majority of the ABR Commissioners did comment, that although they thought the project had come a long way and improved in design, it still did NOT fit with the neighborhood, that it was out of scale with the surrounding neighborhood, in size, mass, bulk, scale and height.

Detailed in the Staff Report page 13 is the specific wording of the actual motion made by Chair Anderson:

"B. Accept the Project Compatibility Analysis Findings Made by ABR (SBMC Chapter 22.68)"

"2. The design of the project is compatible with the architectural character of the city, of the distinctive characteristics of Santa Barbara.

3. The size, mass, bulk, height, and scale meet the zoning code and therefore we can find it appropriate for its location."

This motion is significantly different from what the actual Compatibility Guidelines shown by the staff slides spell out. **Nowhere in these 2 statements and nor the motion, is the word NEIGHBORHOOD present. Why is that? Why was the motion made without any mention of "the neighborhood"?**

This seems to completely sidestep the issue of NEIGHBORHOOD COMPATIBILITY. Isn't the motion supposed to include the word NEIGHBORHOOD as spelled out in the actual wording of what Staff presented to the ABR right before this motion was made??

What happened at that hearing seemed to misinform the Commissioners and served to undermine the purpose of this objective review. This also erodes the integrity of our very knowledgeable ABR commissioners and muzzles them from providing meaningful feedback on projects.

Instead of engaging in a meaningful discussion to review the lack of neighborhood compatibility, the ABR gave the Project Design Approval (PDA) under pressure by the applicant and staff. Staff brought up that there were 2 additional hearings allowed by State law. Why couldn't those hearings be used to make the project better and more compatible with the neighborhood and then be given PDA when it was a better project?

Affordable Units

8 very low-income housing units will be demolished and replaced with 9 very low-income units for a net gain of only 1 very low-income unit. Along with 6 Moderate Income units added, for a total of 7 affordable units for a project total of 90 units. Therefore only 7.7 % of the units are deemed affordable. What a complete give away to developers who are not willing to go further to provide more of the type of housing needed by our residents.

Charter and Process Protections Must Be Upheld

Are we, as a Charter City, obligated to forfeit our mandated design oversight to state pressure when a project does not meet basic neighborhood compatibility findings? This project's size, mass, bulk, scale and height in this neighborhood, raises serious concerns that warrant a more in-depth discussion of these specifics. The Council must uphold the standards that preserve Santa Barbara's unique identity.

Request to Council

We respectfully urge the Council to:

- **Grant the appeal** and ask the project be redesigned within the Compatibility Guidelines for size, bulk, mass, scale and height and compatible with the neighborhood.
- **Require a public, on-the-record finding of the Compatibility Guidelines,** supported by detailed reasoning and evidence, as required by law.
- **Uphold Charter Section 814**, which safeguards Santa Barbara's architectural and community character.
- **Ensure that large-scale projects like this never again bypass a complete and detailed analysis of how the Compatibility Guidelines have been met,** without pressure tactics.

The Allied Neighborhoods Association supports well designed housing suited for the needs of our residents and which reflect the architectural character of city neighborhoods. We recognize that the long-term fabric of our city is at stake when process, precedent, and public needs and impacts are ignored.

Thank you for your service and your attention to this vital matter.

Sincerely,

The Board of Directors
Allied Neighborhoods Association