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Growing Pains

As Portland Plans To Revitalize a Historic District, Some Say There's Such a Thing as Standing Too Tall.

Story by Jane Lotter / Mar. 24, 2006

Portland, Ore., is often called one of the prettiest cities in the Northwest. Straddling the Willamette River, with Mt. Hood dominating its horizon, the metropolis is celebrated for its low-rise buildings, unobscured views, and exceptional urban planning.

But Portland is changing. Skyscrapers are sprouting, particularly in the city's South Waterfront area. Perhaps growth is inevitable in a city second only to Seattle as the largest in the Pacific Northwest. Nevertheless, some Portland residents are troubled by a proposal to allow high rises in the oldest part of the city, the Skidmore/Old Town Historic District.

Known for its 19th-century architecture, the area, often simply called Skidmore, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It's currently zoned at a height limit of 75 feet. However, as part of a city-sponsored redevelopment plan for the area, the Berkeley-based consulting firm Moore Iacofano Goltsman (MIG), Inc., which has a branch office in Portland, recently recommended permitting new construction in Skidmore up to 140 feet, albeit near the edges of the district.

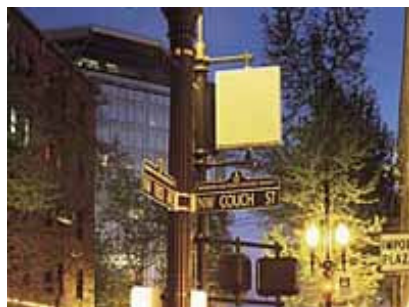
Portland resident and developer John Russell opposes high rises in Skidmore. He was on the Landmarks Commission some 30 ago when it worked to create the Skidmore/Old Town historic district.

"The theory then," Russell says, "was that [future] infill buildings would recreate the mass and height of the historic buildings. And that you would know, when you crossed the boundary of the district, where you were."

In other words, the *fin-de-siècle* sense of place one feels when standing on the street in Skidmore is based not only on the area's impressive collection of masonry and cast-iron buildings in the late Victorian style. It's also based on the amount of sky overhead.



Portland's historic Skidmore neighborhood may be changed forever by high-rise development. (Barbara McIntyre/Portland Oregon Visitors Association)



Skidmore is often called "the heart of Portland," but parts of it have been rundown for decades. And with roughly 40 percent of its land vacant (mostly surface parking lots), no one questions that the area is ripe for infill and revitalization. That's why in the summer of 2005 the city created the Ankeny/Burnside Development Framework to establish "urban design and development goals for public and private investments over the next five years in the Ankeny Plaza/Burnside Bridge area" as well as throughout the rest of the district.



Skidmore (Portland Oregon Visitors Association/Edward Nugent)

A joint undertaking of the Portland Bureau of Planning and the Portland Development Commission (PDC), the Ankeny/Burnside Development Framework has a lengthy agenda. Its long-term goals for Skidmore intertwine with those of other City studies and agencies and include facilitating the design of a new fire station, creating a Portland Public Market, finding a permanent home for the area's popular Saturday Market, redeveloping the historic Globe Hotel, and encouraging private development of 1,000 units of residential infill development. And that's just a partial list.

But while the city is eager to help with planning and support, the actual hands-on redevelopment of Skidmore is largely beyond the city's budget, meaning it will take substantial private investment to bring the area back to life.

"It would be going too far to say there will be zoning changes [in Skidmore]," says Joe Zehnder, project co-manager in the bureau of planning. "[But MIG is suggesting] that allowing additional height is a way to make residential development more feasible."

The City wants 1,000 new residential units in Skidmore, and developers want projects that pencil out. For developers, one way to increase their return on investment is to construct taller buildings containing more housing units. MIG has also suggested developers could pay for increased height allowances, thus creating funds for historic preservation elsewhere in Skidmore.

Amy Miller Dowell, project co-manager, PDC, readily acknowledges that MIG's proposal is "controversial." She points out, however, that of 13 blocks targeted for redevelopment only six—at the very edges of the district—have been put forward as candidates for high rises. Even then, tall buildings would cover only portions of blocks, not entire blocks.

According to Miller Dowell, the city's consultants are saying that if new construction is held to a 75-foot limit, projects might not be financially viable. Miller Dowell says the PDC has certainly heard citizen concern over possible changes to the area's height restrictions. "What we're hearing is that the historic district was set out to protect that height, and there should be a strict demarcation," she says. "And we're going to be taking that message back to the consultants."

In the meantime, John Russell, who's also a member of the Ankeny/Burnside Development Framework stakeholders group, points out there's a solid preservationist network in Portland (the National Trust held its 2005 National Preservation Conference there). He says there's growing opposition to lifting height restrictions in any part of Skidmore, and, in any event, both the planning commission and the city council would first have to approve any zoning changes.



Skidmore (Portland Oregon Visitors Association/David Falconer)

"I was aghast that [high-rises] would ever be considered," says Russell. "There are a number of us who are united in a view that this would be a disaster. It would take the aspiration that the Landmarks Commission had years ago when it designated [Skidmore] as a district and completely dash that dream."

In putting together a plan for redeveloping Skidmore, the Ankeny/Burnside project is doggedly investigating all possibilities. Indeed, Miller Dowell says one alternative to high rises would be to simply "wait for the [real estate] market to mature—[eventually] you could build a 75-foot-high residential project and it pencils."

Either way, Miller Dowell makes it clear that while the suggestion of high rises in Skidmore remains on the table, "This is a proposal that has not been vetted. We haven't agreed to it in any way."

Jane Lotter is a freelance writer based in Seattle.