

PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT SERVICES REPORT
CONDITIONAL USE PERMIT

PUBLIC HEARING
PZ-19-00233-03

DATE: **June 5, 2021**
MEETING DATE: **June 23, 2021**
REPORT BY: **Tiffany Antol, AICP**

REQUEST:

A Conditional Use Permit request from Lowell Observatory to allow the establishment of an approximately 39,969 square foot Astronomy Discovery Center (Observatory) with 7,851 square feet of additional roof top use area as part of a “Libraries, Museums” use pursuant to Section 10-40.30.030.B. of the *Flagstaff Zoning Code* at a site located at 1400 West Mars Hill Road in the Rural Residential (RR) and Public Facility (PF) Zones, and legally described as Coconino County Assessor parcel number 100-14-001C in the city of Flagstaff, Arizona.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

In accordance with the findings presented in this report, staff recommends approval of PZ-19-00233-03 with conditions.

PRESENT LAND USE:

This location is the site of the existing Lowell Observatory and associated facilities.

PROPOSED LAND USE:

The applicant proposes to construct an approximately 39,969 square foot Astronomy Discovery Center (Observatory) with 7,851 square feet of additional roof top use area.

NEIGHBORHOOD DEVELOPMENT:

North: Observatory Mesa Open Space and large lot residential lots, Open Space (OS) zone and Rural Residential (RR) Zone
East: Developed residential lots within the Flagstaff Townsite subdivision, Single-Family Residential Neighborhood (R1N) Zone
South: Lowell Observatory, Medium Density Residential (MR) Zone
West: Undeveloped land owned by Lowell Observatory, Rural Residential (RR) Zone

I. Project Introduction

A. Background/Introduction

Section 10-40.30.030.B of the Flagstaff Zoning Code (Page 10-40.30-3), *Allowed Uses*, identifies “Libraries, Museums” as an allowed land use in the Rural Residential Zone subject to the approval of a Conditional Use Permit (CUP) by the Planning Commission and as a permitted use in the Public Facility Zone. IDS approved a site plan application for the proposed building on this site on June 9, 2021. A copy of the Site Plan Approval Letter and Conditions of Approval are attached to this report.

The Astronomy Discover Center (ADC) is proposed to be located on currently vacant land directly west of the existing Putnam Collection Center at Lowell Observatory on Mars Hill in Flagstaff. The ADC will replace the existing Steele Visitor Center, which will be repurposed for conference and class uses once the ADC is completed. The ADC will serve

as a visitor center intended to attract and educate guests in the broad field of astronomy, in addition to the history of Lowell Observatory and its ongoing research projects. The center will include an immersive large screen theater, a roof top Dark Sky open air planetarium, a roof top terrace, a children's museum experience, a large exhibit hall, an atrium central exhibit area, a multifunction meeting/banquet area, a gift shop, and a café.

Site development will include extension of a service drive and public entry drive from the existing loop road, a large public parking lot, a drop off area to handle school buses, and a large plaza on the north side connecting the center to the large observatory development site. Extension of water, sewer, electric, gas, and communication lines will all be necessary to serve the new center. Stormwater facilities will also be provided in accordance with the campus hydrology plan.

II. Required Findings

The Planning Commission may approve the Conditional Use Permit only after making a finding that:

A. Finding #1:

The conditional use is consistent with the objectives of the Zoning Code and the purpose of the Zone in which the site is located.

"The Rural Residential (RR) Zone applies to areas of the City appropriate for both housing and limited agricultural uses that preserve the area's rural character. This zone is predominantly large lot single-family development. However, it does allow for cluster and planned residential developments, which provide opportunities for higher densities. The RR zone applies to those non-urban areas of the City that cannot be economically and efficiently provided with City services associated with urban living. As such, it is designed for the utilization and enjoyment of the City's unique mountain environment with a minimum amount of municipal services and improvements. This zone is also intended to be used to protect against premature development in areas on the fringe of the urban service area."

The property subject to the proposed ADC development has split zoning. Half of the development will be located within the Public Facility Zone which permits "Libraries, Museums," which includes Observatories. The bulk of the existing Lowell Observatory campus is located within this zoning district. The Rural Residential (RR) Zone allows "Libraries, Museums," which includes Observatories with the granting of a Conditional Use Permit. The Conditional Use Permit process allows for this type of use in the appropriate location and setting as the zoning category is focused on rural residential development. This Conditional Use will allow Lowell Observatory to expand and improve their campus onto a small portion of their overall property within the Rural Residential Zone. The impacts to other properties are minimized due to the location of the development within the overall land area owned by the Observatory.

B. Finding #2

That granting the conditional use will not be detrimental to the public health, safety, or welfare.

If the proposed project is developed in accordance with City codes, standards, and requirements, the project should not be detrimental to the public health, safety, or welfare. A secondary fire apparatus road is required for the development of this project. This secondary access has been a much-needed improvement and will provide greater safety to the overall Lowell Observatory campus.

C. Finding #3

The characteristics of the conditional use as proposed, and as it may be conditioned, are reasonably compatible

with the types of uses permitted in the surrounding area. The Conditional Use Permit shall be issued only when the Planning Commission finds that the Applicant has considered and adequately addressed the following to ensure that the proposed use will be compatible with the surrounding area (Flagstaff Zoning Code Section 10-20.40.050.E.3):

- Access, traffic, and pedestrian, bicycle, and vehicular circulation;
- Adequacy of site and open space provisions, including resource protection standards, where applicable;
- Noise, light, visual, and other pollutants;
- Proposed style and siting of structure(s), and relationship to the surrounding neighborhood;
- Landscaping and screening provisions, including additional landscaping in excess of otherwise applicable minimum requirements;
- Impact on public utilities;
- Signage and outdoor lighting;
- Dedication and development of streets adjoining the property; and
- Impacts on historical, prehistoric, or natural resources.

1. Access and Traffic; Pedestrian, Bicycle, and Vehicular Circulation

The applicant completed a traffic impact analysis in conjunction with the site plan application. No new off-site improvements are required for the new ADC building. Primary access to the site remains Mars Hill Road. No new improvements to this roadway are anticipated with this proposal. Pedestrian and bicycle access to Lowell Observatory is available via the city's FUTS trail including other social trails on the Observatory's property.

The ADC project will include the construction of a new public parking lot with 296 parking spaces. This exceeds the requirements for the ADC building but allows Lowell to reconfigure public parking throughout the entire campus. Bicycle parking will be added in accordance with the Zoning Code.

2. Adequacy of Site/Open Space/Resource Provisions

The subject property is significant in size providing ample space for the proposed ADC development to comply with all the standards of both the Rural Residential and Public Facility zones. Approximately 20 acres of Section 17 are utilized to complete the ADC development. Lowell Observatory owns this property with the stipulation that is for Observatory use. Open space areas are not specifically required, but the proposed development provides ample open space. The entire campus is park-like with many opportunities for the public to explore and enjoy the outdoors.

This subject property (the portion located in the Rural Residential Zone) is located within the Resource Protection Overlay. The remaining portion of the development site that is located in the Public Facility Zone is not located in the Resource Protection Overlay. A natural resource protection plan was required and reviewed in conjunction with the site plan for this development. The primary resource identified is the Forest canopy which consists of native Ponderosa Pine and Gambel Oak. The plan identifies exceeding the 50% minimum preservation requirement for the development site.

3. Noise, Light, Visual, and Other Pollutants

It is not anticipated that the proposed Astronomy Discovery Center will create any noise, visual, or other pollutants into the area. All exterior lighting will be required to comply with the City of Flagstaff's strict outdoor lighting requirements which support and maintain our designation as an International Dark Sky City.

4. Style and Siting of Structure(s) and Relationship to Surrounding Neighborhood

The new building has been placed in an area that has previously been disturbed for a reclaimed water line. The building has been designed to fit into the existing topography to limit disturbance to surrounding areas. The architecture as described by the architect is meant to be a visual representation of the sense of light and dark, expansion and knowledge, and the unknown, which are all important in the science of astronomy. Staff could not have described it any better.

5. Landscaping and Screening

The site is proposed to be landscaped in accordance with the requirements of the Zoning Code. The natural topography is used to create natural screening.

6. Impact on Public Utilities

The Observatory has adequate private water distribution and fire water storage to meet the needs of the new ADC. Sewer lines are private throughout the campus and tie into existing city systems at the foot of the mesa, with adequate capacity remaining.

7. Signage and Outdoor Lighting

No new signage visible from the exterior of the project is proposed as part of this request. The lighting on site is expected to exceed the City's current very strict standards. Any new signage or lighting will have to comply with the relevant Zoning Code requirements and necessary permit requirements.

8. Dedication and Development of Streets

No new street dedications are required as part of this development. A new access easements has been acquired over existing private road improvements to fulfill the requirement for secondary fire apparatus access.

9. Impacts on Resources

A portion of the subject site is located within the Resource Protection Overlay. A resource plan was provided showing compliance with these standards as previously addressed. A cultural resource study has been completed for the proposed development site which has been previously disturbed for reclaimed water lines that serve the Snowbowl Ski Resort. No historic structures are affected by the ADC construction and no archaeological sites are indicated.

Conditions of approval will only be imposed if they are necessary to ensure the intent and purpose of the Zoning Code are met; to ensure compatible and complementary development of the property; and to ensure the provision of appropriate off-site improvements will be fulfilled.

III. Citizen Participation

The applicant held the required neighborhood meeting to discuss the proposed Conditional Use Permit application on October 15, 2020, using a YouTube live stream event. The applicant posted a sign on the property regarding the meeting and sent letters to neighboring property owners within 1,000 feet of the boundaries of the development site, in addition to the City Registry of Interested Persons. Fifteen members of the public attended the meeting. A summary of the meeting is attached to this report. The applicant requested to have the second meeting waived, which was approved by the Planning Director. Since that meeting staff has not had contact from property owners in the area requesting information or voicing a concern.

June 5, 2021

IV. Recommendation:

The Inter-Division Staff (IDS) team approved the site plan for this project on June 9, 2021 (conditions attached). Staff recommends that the request for the CUP be granted by the Planning Commission with the requirements included in Conditional Use Permit No. PZ-19-00233-03 and as follows:

1. The development of the site shall substantially conform to the plans as presented with the Conditional Use Permit application and with the Site Plan as approved by the Inter-Division Staff on June 9, 2021. Modifications to the approved site plan shall require additional review by the IDS team.
2. A recorded easement for secondary emergency apparatus access shall be provided prior to the issuance of civil construction permits.

V. Attachments:

The draft documents have been prepared in accordance with the staff recommendation and do not indicate the Commission's final decision. These documents will be updated after the public hearing on this case to reflect the Commission's decision.

- Draft Conditional Use Permit No. PZ-19-00233-03
- Draft Notice of Decision
- Proposition 207 waiver
- Site Plan Conditions of Approval
- Conditional Use Permit Application
 - Narrative
 - Public Participation Plan
 - Site Plan