

TO: Citizens Advisory Committee
 From: Dan Garber
 Date: April 9, 2016
 Subject: Palo Alto's 50 foot Height Limit:
 Recollections of Enid Pearson, Naphtali Knox & Larry Klein.

Coincidental to the CAC's recent discussion of how high buildings should be in Palo Alto, I had made an appointment with Enid Pearson to interview her for some thing else, unrelated. However, our discussion serendipitously included the topic. This prompted me to contact Larry Klein and Naphtali Knox to get a better understanding of how the current 50-foot height limit was arrived at. I asked all three and they each gave me permission to share our conversations with you.

As background Enid Pearson was elected and served on the City's Council from 1965 to 1974. In those days there were no term limits and Council members' terms spanned the calendar year so it may be more appropriate to think of her term being from 65/66 to 74/75. Naphtali Knox served as the City's Director of Planning from 1972 to 1981. Larry Klein had been appointed to the City's Planning Commission and served from 1970 to 1974. Of course, there were others that played a role in this and I do not mean to exclude them; these are just the three that I recently spoke to.

Enid Pearson, City Council	65	66	67	68	69	70	71	72	73	74							
Dick Rosenbaum, City Council							71	72	73	74							
Larry Klein, Planning Comm.						70	71	72	73	74							
Naphtali Knox, Planning Dir.								72	73	74	75	76	77	78	79	80	81

Enid credits Dick Rosenbaum, another City Council member who served from 71 to 74, of bringing the issue of creating a building height limit to a head in the community.¹ She describes that his motivation came from learning that Scott Carey, chairman of the real estate firm Cornish & Carey wanted to develop 240,000 square feet of commercial space in two 11-story office towers north of University Avenue, closing off Bryant Street and stretching from Florence to Ramona streets. The proposal was dubbed the "Superblock".²

Prior to the construction of 101 Alma (1958, 123 feet tall), the tallest buildings in Palo Alto, excluding those on the Stanford Campus, were the President Hotel (1929, 80 feet tall) and Casa Real (1930, 70 feet tall). After 101 Alma came Channing House (1962, 142 feet tall), The Marc (1965, 152 feet tall), 525 University (1966, 237 feet

¹ Enid Pearson & Dan Garber's discussion at Enid Pearson's home April 2, 2016.

² This description of the "Superblock" and its location comes from:
http://www.paloaltoonline.com/news_features/centennial/1970SA.php

tall), City Hall (1970, 122 feet tall), Palo Alto Square (1972, 132 feet tall) and finally Casa Olga (1975, 76 feet tall).³

⁴However, according to Naphtali, it was the completion of the 525 University and City Hall buildings in particular that created the context for many in Palo Alto in the early 1970's, to characterize Palo Alto as being on the brink of becoming "Manhattanized".⁵

In 1973, the City engaged a team of city planners headed by Livingston and Blayney (later John Blayney Associates) to prepare the comprehensive plan. In 1974, the planning commission was discussing the preliminary recommendations of the urban design consultant, Brown/Heldt Associates, for the downtown. These consultants recommended that the City limit and concentrate any tall buildings to areas near the two tall Downtown buildings; 525 University and City Hall, and that the City place a lower height limit on the rest of the downtown.

At that time, the properties within a half block of City Hall were limited to a 75-foot height limit so that buildings across the street from City Hall would visually support the one-story colonnade that Edward Durrell Stone had placed around the front and two sides of the city hall.

The study focused on the extent and nature of the areas that would be the locus of any tall buildings, and Staff suggested a blanket height limit for the downtown (in effect, a moratorium on taller buildings) until the commission and council came to a decision in the new comp plan.



City Hall 1970

from Palo Alto Historical Association Photo Archive

During the 1974 presentation and discussion, the prime consultant John Blayney and Naphtali were asked by the planning commission what temporary height limit

³ I have included at the end of this memo, a chart that I produced some years ago showing some of Palo Alto's buildings that exceed 50 feet from 1925 to 2018.

⁴ From this point on, the text is taken, nearly verbatim, from Naphtali Knox's April 5, 2016 emails to Dan Garber.

⁵ That the designs of 525 and Palo Alto Square, with their heavy and rough concrete elements, exhibited aspects of the brutalist architectural style likely supported this perception. From Wikipedia: "... "brutalism" has become used in popular discourse to refer to buildings of the late twentieth century that are large or unpopular – as a synonym for "brutal.""

they recommended. John and Naphtali conferred briefly and John stated between 40 to 60 feet. The commission cut the baby in half and zeroed in on 50 feet.

Naphtali has a pretty clear memory that no one had in mind limiting building heights to three stories and there was extensive discussion about whether 50' would be adequate to accommodate four stories. John recommended 52 or 54 feet because of the mechanical space needed between floors. He felt that would make it possible to build four stories without any problem.

The commission wanted (and decided on) 50 feet, but a majority articulated that four or five stories would be permitted as long as the buildings did not exceed 50 feet except for antennas and necessary rooftop mechanical equipment.

Naphtali continues:

"That recommendation of the planning commission, which the staff supported because of the 4- or 5-story flexibility, was incorporated in the 'Palo Alto Comprehensive Plan, First Draft,' published in the spring of 1975. In the Urban Design chapter, under Business Districts on page 9, you will find this, indicating we had already put a downtown height limit in place:

"... Palo Altans have said that they want downtown to retain its intimate scale and not to become a subregional office center. *The current 50 foot building-height limit of four or five stories carries out that intent.*" (Emphasis added by Naphtali.) "At the same time, the proposal that retail and office space be matched by residential space as part of the same development will discourage the one-story buildings that erode downtown's urban feeling..."

"That means the city council discussed and adopted, by ordinance, the '50 foot building-height limit of four or five stories' between mid-1974 and spring 1975.

"The 1975 First Draft of the comp plan was reviewed by the planning commission, and the commission then directed staff to prepare a Draft Plan, which the commission adopted May 14, 1976, and submitted to the city council. I have just skimmed through the commission-approved draft. The plan makes **no reference to height limits for the downtown** (Emphasis added by Naphtali.) To the best of my recollection (this was 40 years ago!), the city attorney and I both advised, and the planning commission agreed, that the matter of height limits belonged in the zoning ordinance and not in the comprehensive plan. And we were already funded to do a complete revision of the zoning ordinance in 1977-78, immediately after the comprehensive plan was adopted.

"Unfortunately, I don't have a copy of that first comprehensive rezoning of the city, so I can't check the various zones to see exactly what they allowed with respect to height; but I'm sure we had a height limit for each of the downtown zones.

“The only sentence that carries through from the urban design section of the 1975 First Draft Plan (indented paragraph quoted above) to the urban design section in both the 1976 draft plan adopted by the commission and the council-adopted 1977–1990 comprehensive plan is this sentence in the text on page 40 of the adopted plan:

"Reflecting the way Palo Altans feel about retaining the intimate scale and character of downtown was a rejection in 1971 of the high-rise 'superblock' proposal."

-----end-----

PALO ALTO BUILDINGS OVER 50 FEET

This list is not comprehensive; there are other buildings in Palo Alto that are over 50 feet

