

SEATTLE UNIVERSITY  
MAJOR INSTITUTIONS MASTER PLAN  
IMPLEMENTATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE

July 14, 2025

Carly Guillory  
Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections  
P.O. Box 34019  
Seattle, WA, 98124-4019

Lara Branigan,  
Director  
901 12th Avenue, Seattle, WA 98122-1090

**RE: Seattle University Major Institution Master Plan Implementation Advisory Committee (IAC) Comments and Recommendations Concerning the proposed Seattle University Art Museum (SUMA)**

Dear Ms. Guillory and Ms. Branigan,

In accordance with Seattle Municipal Code 23.69.032, the Seattle Central College Major Institutions Master Plan Implementation Advisory Committee (IAC or committee) submits the following comments on the proposed Seattle University Art Museum (SUMA) project.

The IAC is excited about the Seattle University Art Museum, and we look forward to its opening and contributing to the neighborhood and the City of Seattle by allowing us all to fully enjoy its collection. To ensure that the SUMA project is fully aligned with the goals of the Major Institution Master Plan (MIMP), we offer the following commentary. We hope the IAC and Seattle University can work together and move forward in a positive direction that benefits the community, the university, and is fully aligned with the MIMP.

The IAC focused its efforts on how SU's proposed Seattle University Art Museum (SUMA) would impact the neighborhood. We believe it is our role to try to balance the needs and desires of the University with the long-term compatibility with the surrounding neighborhoods. To that end we offer this comment letter for your consideration.

For the Committee,

John Feit,  
(Committee Chair)

## **IAC Scope**

The Implementation Advisory Committee (IAC) review should address the following three primary considerations.

1. Alignment of the proposed project with the spirit and intent of the Major Institution Master Plan (MIMP).
2. Whether this project appropriately qualifies as a minor or major amendment to the MIMP.
3. Assessment of whether the project represents a net improvement for the neighborhood (particularly given public concerns regarding the demolition involved).

Clarification of the Committee's scope from both the Department of Neighborhoods and Department of Construction and Inspections are welcome.

## **Project Schedule and Transparency**

When first announced in November to the IAC, the University stated that they had not selected a designer or a building site for the Seattle University Museum of Art (SUMA) . Given that, in the period between then and the first presentation by the University in late April, the University has been able to study multiple site options, select a site, engage consultants, and advance the design (while navigating intervening holidays). The release of a 'fundraising rendering' in March was a surprise and resulted in the IAC 's concern that the University has not been forthcoming. Subsequent discussion with University staff revealed that the project has been in the works, if even at an aspirational level, since 2013.

The IAC is disappointed that Seattle University waited so long to bring the SUMA project before the IAC and the community. Pointing out the many fundamental shortcomings the design has may appear hyper-critical, but that situation was created by the University's failure to be inclusive of the IAC in the first place. Please note there are two members of the IAC who do not support the suggestion that the University was not forthcoming with the information.

The comments below are a reflection of the fact that the design changed little from what was previously presented in April, was unresponsive to the Committee's

previous input, and that there is insufficient advancement of the schematic design to give the Committee confidence that it will form a credible starting point for design development.

### **Minor vs. Major Amendment**

In order for the proposed amendment not to be a major amendment it must be found to:

A. "[Be] consistent with the original intent of the adopted master plan" (SMC 23.69.035 D.) AND

B. "[N]ot result in significantly greater impacts than those contemplated in the adopted master plan."

1. Despite the University's assertion to the contrary, the IAC feels SAMU will lead to significantly greater impacts than those contemplated in the adopted master plan.
2. The proposed open space at the intersection of 12th Avenue and Marion Street in lieu of building frontage is contrary to the goals of street level activation of 12<sup>th</sup> Avenue and for creating a campus gateway.
3. The MIMP is very clear about the importance of activation and cited various examples that did not include open space. Although open space can be designed to be active, this most certainly requires programming and stewardship which constitute a major impact.
4. The proposal is potentially detrimental to the public welfare as a covered open space creates public safety concerns.
5. Sustainability is touted as a key aspect of Seattle University's approach yet, the removal of an existing asset (the Lee Center for the Arts) is detrimental to the public welfare in that it is a greater impact to the environment than the renovation and re-use of the structure. The University included a commitment "to become climate neutral in the near future" and stated that it is developing a Sustainability Master Plan "to guide strategic decisions for campus development." The University needs to share its Sustainability Master Plan and state how the plans for razing the Lee Center and developing the museum on the site is guided by that Sustainability Master Plan.

6. The University's presentation at the last IAC cast doubt on future development planned for the north part of the block between Marion and Spring. The height allowed in this block by the MIMP is 105 feet.
  - If the University does not take advantage of the allowed height there will be well over 100,000 square feet of potential development space that will not be used.
  - This could lead to a future justification for the development of an equivalent amount of space in some other area not currently identified.
7. The IAC recognizes that plans can change over the course of a twenty-year Master Plan, which is why the MIMP calls for periodic public meetings to discuss progress and potential changes. These meetings are different from the regular IAC meetings and are to be widely publicized. Such a meeting has not been held for this MIMP and it should be before the IAC is required to give its final opinion on the museum project.

### **Relevant MIMP Goals**

1. Create or maintain an "Outward-facing" campus perimeter that maximizes the potential positive impacts that come with growth and minimizes the potential negative impacts on surrounding neighborhoods.
2. Be a leader in sustainable practices—with a stated approach to reuse existing buildings.
3. That "Seattle University plans should include special provisions to activate the streetscape along 12th Avenue . . ."
4. Physical design that contributes to the vitality of place by providing students with a sense of belonging and community, where formal and informal spaces allow for interaction.
5. The "Goals, Mission and Objectives of the Master Plan", as outlined in the Director's Report, include the objective to "[a]ctivate 12th Avenue and other corridors to improve the University's physical connection to the neighborhood. The University will seek to improve all the edges of campus to facilitate better integration into the surrounding neighborhood areas and a positive interface with the community".

## **MIMP and Site Plan Comments**

1. The schematic design has too many open questions to give the Committee confidence that it will form a sound basis for the design development phase.
2. Neither the Near-Term nor Long-Term Campus Plan contemplate removal of the Lee Center. The Lee Center was not included in the list of buildings that may be demolished; instead, the MIMP indicated the continuation of the Student Life use at the Lee Center site.
3. IAC members wonder if a strategy to preserve the Lee Center, renovate it to serve the SUMA uses, and include in the new building's design an expansion to the west that meaningfully engages the Saint Ignatius Plaza included in the MIMP was sufficiently explored.
4. The IAC recognizes that access to the parking bisects a physical connection to the Chapel and that the parking lot will eventually be changed. In the interim, pedestrian connections to the North-South axis of the campus and the planned Saint Ignatius Plaza could be reinforced with new paving and hardscape and softscape features to make the link. At the very least, the architecture of that potential addition could engage to the west and the major north-south campus pedestrian axis, the existing plaza green, and the future plaza.
5. Recognizing that the future Saint Ignatius Plaza is part of the MIMP concerns the IAC about the creation of yet another plaza nearby (the covered open space at the intersection at Marion and 12th avenue proposed at SUMA), which could compete with it. What considerations were given to reinforcing the Saint Ignatius Plaza instead of perhaps diluting its importance with another, proximate plaza?
6. While the 12th and Marion open space does offer a view to the Chapel of Saint Ignatius, the view is compromised by the campus's largest surface parking lot - and will most likely be for decades to come.
7. The proposed museum design is contrary to the P-zone requirement that "blank segments of the street-facing facade ... may not exceed 20 feet in width" (SMC 23.47A.008). The expanse of the proposed void is overhung by

the second floor of the museum and exceeds 20 feet in length, resulting in a non-pedestrian-friendly, non-pedestrian-scale plaza.

8. Instead of facilitating better integration into the surrounding neighborhood, the proposed development is more in the nature of creating a wall and gate between the University and 12th Avenue.
9. The IAC would appreciate further clarity from the University regarding specific plans for public access and engagement within the museum itself (beyond the café). How will neighbors, passersby, and the general public be actively welcomed and encouraged to experience the museum's internal exhibitions and offerings?
10. What will be the hours of access to SUMA?
11. The IAC believes that SUMA must demonstrate sensitivity to the grain and scale of the existing surrounding development and should comply with the P-zone standards in which the surrounding development is held.
12. Outside of the IAC meetings, Committee members have heard community concerns about the impact of student transportation between the University and Cornish and any impact it might have on traffic and transportation. The University needs to address this issue and its impact on the MIMP.

### **Building and Landscape Design Comments**

1. The open corner is SUMA's most important urban design feature, yet surprisingly little - even schematic - information about its design has been presented. When next presented, the design of the corner should thoroughly address:
  - a. Public safety.
  - b. Building program and urban design function.
  - c. Accessibility and engagement with the adjacent sidewalks and how that will be achieved by SUMA's proposed, elevated open space and the system of ramps and stairs required to access the space.
  - d. Mitigating the views of the parking lot.

- e. How the corner plaza's programming and the University's commitment to curation meet the goals for creating a truly activated and vital open space.

## 2. Building and Landscape materials

- a. Aside from some concepts of glass storefront at the ground level and terracotta cladding on the upper portions, the intended materials have not been sufficiently developed to a point where the IAC can provide meaningful comments.
- b. Important elements of the corner plaza such as columns and the soffit will require further development in order for the IAC to provide substantive input.

## 3. Building Plan

- a. The definition of the "main" entrance is not clearly articulated and there is confusion between the two elements that touch down to the ground. Is the art studio and the gallery portion on the north the primary entrance to the museum? How do the various entries relate to each other? How will a visitor know the difference?
- b. The art studio and gallery on the north side of the plaza is a potentially powerful connection and point of activation but how will this be developed as a permanent element?
- c. Transparency of the ground level spaces is indicated but activation of both 12th Avenue and the covered plaza is unconvincing until the design and programming of those interior spaces is understood.
- d. The café location is good for the street but does not appear to enhance activation of the plaza. Will yet another coffee shop be viable when there are at least two within a block plus the one in the Sinegal Center (which, in presentations to the IAC, was touted as a connection to the neighboring community - but is difficult to access).

## 4. Landscape Plan

- a. No information about the landscape design, other than a raised plaza and its access via stairs and ramps, was presented. This is insufficient given the primacy of these elements.
- b. There is the potential of creating a “plaza to nowhere” from the corner to the northwest. By raising the plaza to block views of the parking lot, where does it go when one reaches its northern edge?
- c. The juxtaposition of service areas on the north side of the plaza is not clear and potentially in conflict with the plaza’s intended function.
- d. Access to the building from the parking is not clear.

### **In Conclusion**

Even if the Director was to find that the proposed amendment is "minor" and not "major" many of the Committee's comments are entitled to consideration by the Director and the Institution. Some of the facts and opinions stated by the Committee and included in the Chair's initial summary are ones that demonstrate that the proposal is not consistent with the original intent of the MIMP, and that the proposal will result in significantly greater impacts than those contemplated in the MIMP. However, other facts and opinions may not rise to that level but are, in any case, reasons the proposed project should be modified in order to comply with the spirit and intent of the MIMP. Even after the Director makes a decision on the “major-ness” of the proposal, there will need to be a lot of work done. A schedule needs to be developed in order to clarify the steps in the process.

One of the things that the Committee is concerned about is that the University has proceeded so far down the road without looking closely at the ways in which its proposal is inconsistent with the MIMP and, frankly, treating the role of the IAC as an afterthought. Communication from the Committee to the Director and the Institution needs to emphasize that we think the MIMP requires significant changes before the University goes further.

### **Land Use Code References**

**D. Minor Amendments** A proposed change to an adopted master plan shall be considered and approved as a minor amendment when it is not an exempt change according to subsection B of this section, when it is consistent with the original intent of the adopted master plan, and when it meets at least one of the following criteria:

1. The amendment will not result in significantly greater impacts than those contemplated in the adopted master plan; or,
2. The amendment is a waiver from a development standard or master plan condition, or a change in the location or decrease in size of designated open space, and the proposal does not go beyond the minimum necessary to afford relief and will not be materially detrimental to the public welfare or injurious to the property or improvements in the vicinity in which the Major Institution is located; or,
3. The amendment is a proposal by the Major Institution to lease space or otherwise locate a use at street level in a commercial zone outside an MIO District, and within two thousand five hundred feet (2,500') of the MIO District boundary, and the use is allowed in the zone for but not permitted pursuant to [Section 23.69.022](#). In making the determination whether the amendment is minor, the Director shall consider the following factors:
  - a. Whether an adequate supply of commercially zoned land for business serving neighborhood residents will continue to exist; and,
  - b. Whether the use will maintain or enhance the viability or long term potential of the neighborhood-serving character of the area; and,
  - c. Whether the use will displace existing neighborhood-serving commercial uses at street level or disrupt a continuous commercial street front, particularly of personal and household retail sales and service uses; and,

- d. Whether the use supports neighborhood planning goals and objectives as provided in a Council-approved neighborhood plan.

**E. Major Amendments** A proposed change to an adopted master plan shall be considered a major amendment when it is not an exempt change according to subsection B of this section or a minor amendment according to subsection D of this section. In addition, any of the following shall be considered a major amendment:

1. An increase in a height designation or the expansion of the boundary of the MIO District; or,
2. Any change to a development standard that is less restrictive; or,
3. A reduction in housing stock outside the boundary but within two thousand five hundred feet (2,500') of the MIO District, other than within a Downtown zone, that exceeds the level approved in an adopted master plan; or,
4. A change to the single-occupancy vehicle goal of an approved transportation management program that increases the percentage of people traveling by single-occupancy vehicle; or,
5. A use that requires Council Conditional Use approval, including but not limited to a helistop or a major communication utility, that was not described in an adopted master plan; or,
6. The update of an entire development program component of a master plan that was adopted under Code provisions prior to the 1996 Major Institutions Ordinance where the institution proposes an increase to the total amount of gross floor area allowed or the total number of parking spaces allowed under the institution's existing development program component within the MIO District.