

Pioneer Square High Rise Clears Final Reviews, Will Bring Workforce Housing to Seattle's Core

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Courtesy of Skidmore Janette

By **Meghan Hall**

A rubble-filled pit at the heart of Seattle's Pioneer Square neighborhood is nearing its renaissance as plans for a brand-new apartment building take shape. Proposed by Urban Visions and Johnson & Carr, the new project will include 77 workforce housing units, a product type that is much needed in Seattle's densifying urban core.

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"It has been a 12-foot pit in the ground for the last almost 20 years. It's just kind of begging for redevelopment," explained Johnson & Carr Partner Tyler Carr. "We collaborated on the concept of doing more workforce housing because in Pioneer Square, there's such a big barrier to entry with any new development, but especially residential. We all agreed that a workforce housing project would be very viable here and a big benefit to the neighborhood."

Located at 165 S. Washington Street, Urban Visions first acquired the project site back in 2007. The units will be classified as small efficiency dwelling units (SEDUs), which by definition have a minimum size of 150 square feet and must include a full kitchen or kitchenette. Plans for the building also include 1,584 square feet of amenity space, as well as potential restaurant or retail space. Bike parking and a rooftop deck are also part of the plans.

Designed by Skidmore Janette Architecture, Planning & Design, the new building seeks to bring a modern twist to the historical architecture that is common to Pioneer Square. A horizontal gasket breaks up the lower and upper floors of the building, while large windows will seek to add fenestration to the façade. The exterior will be clad in a mix of light brick veneer, fiber cement panels and dark steel accents.

"Well, because of all of the character and history of Pioneer Square, and also the guidelines from the Board, we wanted to design something that was highly compatible with the neighborhood, the district, while also being a testament to today's architecture," stated Carr. "[We wanted] to bridge that gap. The ultimate result was I think a very handsome, brick building."

The project secured approval from the Pioneer Square Preservation Board just last week, and the project team hopes to have entitlements and building permits ready to go by the beginning of 2021. Construction is slated to start in the spring, but given how the market has fluctuated over the past several months, Urban Visions and Johnson & Carr will continue to monitor the fundamentals of the regional multifamily market as the development's groundbreaking nears.

"Obviously with the nature of COVID-19 and the market downturn, we're kind of weighing everything now on a daily basis and just really hoping that all of the metrics make sense to go forward," noted Carr.

Carr added that across Seattle, including in core downtown locations, concessions are up and rents are down. According to research done by Kidder Mathews, rents decreased by 11 percent in downtown Seattle as of August 25th, and the brokerage firm predicts that income collection for landlords will be volatile over the course of the next 12 to 24 months until the market fully stabilizes. Much of the development pipeline has slowed in recent months, added Kidder Mathews, as a concentration of new deliveries hit the market amid a decrease in demand, challenging the region's rate of absorption. And, for those who have multifamily projects in the pipeline, developers and investors may wait for more consistent rent growth and construction cost abatement.

However, Johnson & Carr is confident in the long-term outlook of the market, given its strong fundamentals prior to the outbreak of the pandemic.

"We have always been long-term owners, vested stakeholders in the communities we develop," said Carr. "In Pioneer Square, we're feeling it has so much potential and such a need for housing that's not otherwise being met. I'm not so worried about the next two years."

