

August 23, 2013

Dear Plan Commission Members and Planning Staff,

I am writing to express my grave concern regarding the proposed development of the Longfellow School and adjacent property on 210 South Brooks Street by Meriter Hospital and the Alexander Company (Item #18 on the Plan Commission agenda for August 26, 2013). My husband and I are homeowners of 1150 Emerald Street, 3 blocks south of the proposed project. Although the proposed project is not in our immediate backyard, it will greatly harm the quality of our Greenbush neighborhood. While I applaud the renovation of the historic Longfellow School, I am strongly opposed to the proposed structure of a 64-unit "big box" apartment complex adjacent to the historic school. The big box design of the proposed structure is completely out of scale for the limited space of the site and goes against current zoning for the site.

Furthermore, while the city Comprehensive Plan indicates that neighborhood plans should guide decisions regarding city planning, the Meriter / Alexander proposal contradicts the Greenbush Neighborhood Plan (approved by the City Council in 2008) in numerous regards. What is the point of the city investing time and money in neighborhood plans if they are only to be ignored in the development process?

My concerns and recommendations for improvement regarding the project include the following:

**Appropriateness of the structure for the neighborhood and site:**

- This proposal will add a total of 104 new rental units to the block south of Mound St and North of Chandler St. This equates to 61 units per acre, which, according to definitions obtained from the City Comprehensive Plan, would be defined as High Density Residential (41-60 units per acre).
- Such high density housing contradicts the recommendations in the Greenbush Neighborhood Plan to limit density in the area south of Mound Street to 0-15 units per acre. **In other words, the proposal would increase density by 25% over the amount recommended** in the plan.
- The Greenbush Neighborhood worked as a willing partner with Meriter Hospital to develop Meriter's General Development Plan which was approved in 2009. The GDP calls for an additional Meriter office building at this location, which changed the zoning of the site from low density residential to business zoning. Now Alexander is requesting to change the zoning to *high density residential*. City planning staff have stated in their report that high density residential zoning would have less of an impact on neighborhood density than an office building, but their assessment does not take into consideration the fact that **density issues created by an office building would occur at times of day when neighbors are not present. However, a 104-unit apartment project would contribute to congestion, noise and other density issues at times of day (mornings, evenings and weekends) when residents are present.** If the hospital no longer intends to use the site for administrative purposes, shouldn't the parcel revert to the low density residential zoning as specified prior to establishment of the Meriter GDP?
- City staff also state that the proposal is consistent with the Greenbush Neighborhood Plan's objectives of introducing a broader range of housing into the area, but their assessment disregards **two essential themes of the neighborhood plan: promoting owner-occupied housing in order to establish a more stable and vibrant neighborhood; and creating an environment that is pedestrian friendly and allows for human interaction between its residents.** The function and "big-box" design of the new structure do not promote either objective.
  - In terms of owner occupied housing, the apartments will worsen our neighborhood's dearth of such units. According to the neighborhood plan, only 46.7% of Greenbush's units are owner occupied as compared to 68.4% city-wide.

- In terms of creating an interactive and pedestrian friendly environment, the lack of any street-facing entrances or stoops/porches on the new structure does not allow for apartment residents to easily mingle with their other Greenbush neighbors.
- The so-called “tan” masonry block (which, if you look at the material sample, is actually an ugly concrete gray that undermines the integrity of the historic Longfellow school) above the ground level parking will be a 10’ high eyesore and will certainly not be welcoming or interesting for pedestrians.
- In their presentation to neighborhood residents, the developers constantly referred to ways in which they will hide this masonry block. My response is why would anyone ever construct a building which has a façade you want to camouflage? The Greenbush Neighborhood Plan states that new constructions should be of high quality building design with materials and landscaping that are reflective of the historic, architectural features of the neighborhood. **An easy way that the developers could improve upon the design and better integrate it into the neighborhood is to face the masonry block with the same brick materials that are used on the rest of the building. Or better yet, why not use a limestone veneer which would complement the limestone accents of Longfellow School? I recommend that they take cues from the newly constructed Brown Loft Apartments on University Avenue which have avoided a big box feel by incorporating stone and brick rather than sterile concrete masonry into their lower level façade.**
- Furthermore, the landscaping proposed to hide the masonry block does not take into consideration the fact that Wisconsin winters last for five months. In addition to the proposed deciduous trees and clematis-filled trellises, **the landscape design should integrate conifers to provide for greenery during the winter months** when the cold concrete block will certainly feel like an intimidating fortress to neighbors and pedestrians.
- Regarding the design, the city planning department has recommended the following changes to the south side of the new structure: more transparency to be added to the four-story tall stair tower and larger windows for the trash room. **I caution against such changes as more transparency will increase the constant light glaring on residents living on the south side of Chandler.**

**Traffic, Parking and Safety Issues Related to Proposed Design:**

- The neighborhood plan states that “parking is one of the most important issues in the neighborhood. There is a deficiency of residential, visitor and employee parking in the neighborhood both during the week and on weekends.” As a property owner who must park on the street, I wholeheartedly concur. The current proposal makes the south side of the new structure on Chandler Street into an aesthetic and traffic/parking nightmare. In addition to the 10’ high concrete masonry block barrier, the design incorporates a loading pad and dual garage doors for a parking entrance. Currently, 2-way traffic on narrow Chandler Street is difficult in the summer and impossible in the winter. The street is full at all times with parked cars, making it very difficult to navigate. The addition of delivery, trash and moving trucks accessing the loading pad will worsen the situation.
- The new building’s parking entrance and loading dock will reduce the number of parking spaces on the north side of Chandler Street and will increase parking pressure on neighboring streets. Longfellow project residents and their visitors will compete for limited parking spaces with those who currently live in the neighborhood.
- **Recommendation: Some of the adverse effects on Chandler Street could be alleviated if the loading dock were moved north to the Mound Street side. Moving or adding an additional residential parking exit to Mound Street will also help. As Mound Street dead-**

**ends at Meriter Hospital, and is populated by administrative and commercial buildings rather than single and 2- family residences as on Chandler Street, it makes sense to have the additional parking entrance and loading dock moved to this side where hospital valet and apartment dwellers would be the main participants in the traffic flow. It will also prevent Chandler Street from becoming an unsightly back-alley for a very large 104 unit apartment complex.**

**Global Picture for Planning:**

- Sound city planning requires that projects not be reviewed in isolation. The proposal for the Longfellow project should be examined within the larger context of other recent developments in the neighborhood. One block over on S. Mills Street, Gallina Company has planned a 74-unit 4 and ½ story apartment complex. The nearby Lanes and Ideal developments have already been approved for a total of 97 apartment units. If the 104 units proposed for the Longfellow project go through, the neighborhood will have **added 275 rental units within a quarter mile. Given that there are roughly 1200 total units (according to the 2010 neighborhood plan) in the entire Greenbush neighborhood, these projects combined will result in a roughly 25% increase in neighborhood units in 1-2 years time!** Certainly, related issues of noise, traffic congestion, parking, and stresses to city services will follow.
- All four of the above apartment complexes include an overwhelming majority of 1-bedroom units, with only a few two-bedroom units scattered throughout. This type of small apartment unit is aimed at attracting transient 20-somethings, rather than families who are more likely to become long-term, contributing residents of the neighborhood.
- Such rapid growth of rental units in “the Bush” will make our neighborhood less attractive to home buyers, and even to long-term renters, such as families. **The Greenbush Neighborhood Plan emphasizes repeatedly that increased owner occupancy is key to creating a more stable and vibrant central city.**
- The city council agreed to such a philosophy when it approved the neighborhood plan. If the city truly wants to stimulate and support its unique and historic urban neighborhoods, it should trust the residents of these neighborhoods, rather than large, for-profit developers, to guide the direction of their communities. Please respect the efforts of those who contributed to the development process inherent in the Greenbush Neighborhood Plan and the Meriter General Development Plan. Failure to do so will undermine any faith that residents have in the Neighborhood Plan Process. I ask that you review these documents before making your decision.

Respectfully,

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