

DATE: August 5, 2013

TO: City of Madison Urban Design Commission (UDC)

FROM: James Matson, Greenbush Neighborhood Resident (1022 Vilas Ave.),  
Small Business Co-Owner (636 S. Park St.)

**SUBJECT: "Longfellow School" High-Density Residential Development;  
August 7 UDC Meeting, Agenda Item 7 (#29811)**

I am writing to express my concerns related to the Meriter Hospital-Alexander Company proposal to convert nearly an entire block of the Meriter Hospital campus to high-density rental housing. The Meriter-Alexander proposal would convert the existing Longfellow School building, a designated historic landmark, into rental housing (41 rental units). Of greater concern, the proposal would also create a new "big box" rental housing complex immediately adjacent to the current Longfellow building (64 rental units).

If this project is added to other projects currently proposed or approved for construction, there will be a total of 273 new high-density rental units added to the Greenbush neighborhood in *this year alone*. The current pace of high-density rental development threatens to undermine the Greenbush neighborhood plan, which emphasizes the importance of owner-occupancy for the stability and vibrancy of this unique and historic neighborhood.

On July 29, the Madison Landmarks Commission tentatively approved the exterior façade of the proposed new building, subject to certain conditions. I understand that the Landmarks Commission review was essentially limited to the exterior façade, and that the Urban Design Commission is free to consider other aspects of the building design at its meeting on August 7.

The Greenbush Neighborhood Association has gone on record in opposition to the proposed development (see July 1 letter attached). Neighbors are especially concerned about the size and density of this development, which goes well beyond what might be considered a moderate-density "transition" development on the fringe of the Meriter campus.

Neighbors wonder how nearly an entire block of land could be suddenly rezoned for high-density residential development without any prior planning basis or documentation, contrary to both the City of Madison Comprehensive Plan (which plans the entire Meriter campus as an "employment area") and the city's Meriter Hospital General Development Plan (adopted only 4 years ago in 2009).

The 2009 Meriter GDP rezoned the Longfellow block out of *low-density* residential use, ostensibly because Meriter needed the block for hospital development. If that rationale no longer exists, the block should arguably be returned to low or moderate-density residential use consistent with the Greenbush neighborhood plan. Meriter and the developer stand to reap a substantial windfall if the city now approves the block for *high-density* residential development unrelated to hospital needs.

We understand that planning and zoning issues are largely under the jurisdiction of the Planning Commission, rather than the Urban Design Commission. But the proposed “big box” also presents a number of serious architectural problems that the UDC should address. These are not merely cosmetic problems related to the building’s color scheme; rather, they affect the building’s fundamental relationship to the surrounding neighborhood and the historic landmark. The architectural problems are troublesome, precisely because the developer has chosen to shoe-horn as many dwelling units as possible into a limited space.

For example, the proposed new building presents a decidedly “unfriendly” face to the Greenbush neighborhood, and particularly to Chandler Street, as detailed in the attached letter from Chandler Street resident Eric Shusta. Chandler Street residents will see a monolithic stairwell façade, a problematic loading and waste disposal area, an unsightly garage door, and a hazardous parking lot exit onto a narrow (and already difficult) street that is currently parked on both sides. The proposal will, in effect, turn Chandler Street into a “back alley” for the “big box” residential development. It will aggravate existing traffic and pedestrian hazards cited in the 2009 Meriter GDP. These problems cannot be resolved by changes to the color scheme, or by growing ivy on a few walls.

If the proposed new building had a more modest scale and footprint, and fewer rental units, these and other architectural problems would be more manageable. Instead of a “big box” shoe-horned into a problematic space, one could imagine a truly graceful building that would do justice to its neighbors and to its landmark companion building. There would be an opportunity cost to the developer, of course. But that cost is one that the developer should reasonably be asked to bear, with help from Meriter, given the unprecedented zoning change that those parties are seeking from the city – a zoning change that (if approved) will give Meriter and the developer a substantial financial windfall.

We understand that the developer has scaled back the original bloated building design by one story, and has expanded the interior “courtyard” between the new building and its landmark neighbor (all at the sensible insistence of federal landmark authorities, in return for special federal tax treatment sought by the developer). Unfortunately, the expanded interior “courtyard” will now be used as a surface parking lot rather than as an attractive green space that might enhance the historic landmark. This unfortunate use of the “courtyard” is a direct result of the fact that the proposed building is still too big, and still has too many rental units that must be served with parking.

In conclusion, I hope that the Urban Design Commission will take the time needed to do a credible, in-depth review of this project. The project will have a major impact on the strategically important Meriter campus, as well as on the Greenbush neighborhood. If the city wishes to maintain the credibility of its planning and zoning process, it should not just rubber-stamp this flawed proposal. Although I am writing on my own behalf, I am confident that many neighbors share my concerns.

#### Attachments

Cc: Al Martin, UDC Staff  
Alder Sue Ellingson