

PLANNING DIVISION STAFF REPORT

July 17, 2024

PREPARED FOR THE URBAN DESIGN COMMISSION



Project Address: 3535 & 3553 University Avenue
Application Type: New Mixed-Use Building in Urban Design District 6
UDC is an Approving Body
Legistar File ID #: [83067](#)
Prepared By: Jessica Vaughn, AICP, UDC Secretary

Background Information

Applicant | Contact: Randy Christianson, Walter Wayne Development | Patrick Terry, JLA Architects + Planners

Project Description: The applicant is proposing a five-story building containing 985 square-feet of first floor commercial space, 84 residential units and two levels of underground parking.

Staff notes that the project site is currently zoned Planned Development. A request to rezone the project site to Commercial Corridor-Transitional (CC-T) has been submitted as part of the Land Use Application. In addition, as part of the Land Use Application, a Conditional Use was also submitted for more than 60 units in a mixed-use building, as well as a request to exceed the height transition request, both of which are the jurisdiction of the Plan Commission.

Project Schedule:

- UDC received an Informational Presentation on May 8, 2024.
- Plan Commission is scheduled to review this project at their July 29, 2024, meeting.

Approval Standards: The UDC is an **approving body** on this request. The site is located in Urban Design District 6 ("UDD 6"), which requires that the Urban Design Commission review the proposed project using the design standards and guidelines for that district in [MGO Section 33.24](#)(13).

Zoning Related Requirements: Staff understands that the applicant will be seeking to rezone the property to the Commercial Corridor-Transitional (CC-T) zoning district. Within the mixed-use and commercial zoning districts there are general provisions related to building and site design that are intended to foster high-quality building and site design. Such standards are in [Section 28.060](#), and include requirements that speak to building and entrance orientation, façade articulation, door and window openings, and building materials, etc. Ultimately, the Zoning Administrator will determine compliance with all applicable Zoning requirements.

Staff notes that in the CC-T zoning district five stories in height is allowed. A height transition is also required where the CC-T district abuts a residential zoning district, which in this case is on both the south and west sides of the project site. As proposed, the development **does not** appear to meet this transition requirement and the aforementioned conditional use is being sought to waive that transition request. At this time, Planning Division staff continues to have concerns on that aspect of the request.

Design-Related Adopted Plan Recommendations: The City's [Comprehensive Plan](#) recommends "Community Mixed Use" uses for the subject property, which generally include two to six story building forms, with more residential units and commercial space compared with development in Neighborhood Mixed Use (70-130 dwelling units per acre). Generally, the recommendation specifies that development and design within CMU areas should enhance walkability, maintain positive building orientation to the street, be transit-oriented, and well connected to adjacent development.

The project site is also located in the [Hoyt Park Area Joint Neighborhood Plan](#) study area. As noted in this plan, the project site is designated as Focus Area E, University Avenue Commercial. Development in this area is recommended to maintain the commercial focus along the University Avenue frontage with a variety of neighborhood commercial, retail, professional services, and offices. Building heights are recommended to be one to four stories.

The plan also outlines additional recommendations that speak to enhancing and expanding the buffers between mixed use and single-family development and encouraging pedestrian access from Bruce Street.

Summary of Design Considerations

Staff recommends that the UDC provides makes findings on the development proposal regarding the aforementioned standards including feedback related to the items noted below.

- **Building Design and Composition.** UDD 6 Building Design requirements and guidelines generally speak to designing with a sensitivity to context, avoiding large unbroken wall expanses, and designing with a consistent level of design across all elevations. Staff notes that while UDD 6 does not delineate more prescriptive standards related to setback, height, or bulk requirements, as a guideline, UDD 6 does recommend that *“The architecture of new infill buildings, additions to existing buildings and major exterior remodelings should be compatible with but not necessarily similar to that of existing adjacent buildings.”*

While staff believes that improvements have been incorporated into the overall building design and composition, especially related to ground floor activation and providing the same level of design across all four elevations, for reference, the Commission’s Informational Presentation comments, are noted below, provided in summary and generally consideration should be given to:

- Refining the main building entry design to be more prominent,
- Incorporating more design details along the ground floor street facing façade to better activate/orient the building to the street,
- Creating more separation from the street by refining the building modulation to include elements that are recessed versus protruding,
- Recessing hanging balconies along the street,
- Refining the window opening size and proportions, as well as
- Minimizing the garage entry and
- Overall simplification of materials and design.

Staff requests the UDC’s feedback and findings on the following design considerations as it relates to the UDD 6 guidelines and requirements.

Note: Agencies have provided comments and concerns regarding encroachments into the right-of-way and no-build easement. These comments will be provided to the Plan Commission and may result in plan changes being necessary to meet conditions.

- **Building Materials.** As reflected in the materials board, the exterior material schedule includes a composition of composite siding, masonry, both brick and stone veneer, and metal accent panels. UDD 6 Building Design requirements, *“Exterior building materials shall be low maintenance and harmonious with those used on other buildings in the area.”* As noted by the UDC in their Informational Presentation comments, consideration should be given to utilizing a lighter base material.

Staff requests UDC's feedback and findings on the overall material palette, as well as ornamentation and detailing.

- **Landscape and Open Space.** UDD 6 Landscaping guidelines and requirements generally speak to designing landscaping that is both *"...functional and decorative, including framing views, screening unattractive features and views along the roadway, screening different uses from each other, and complementing the architecture of the building."*

As indicated by the site and utility plans, at grade open space amenity areas are primarily limited to the south side of the project site, while most landscape improvements are located on the north side along the street. Consideration should be given to incorporating landscape on the south side of the building, as well as the design and programming of this yard scape to provide an at grade open space for residents.

Staff requests the UDC's feedback and findings related to landscape as it pertains the UDD 6 guidelines and requirements.

Summary of Informational Presentation Comments

As a reference, the Commission's discussion and comments from the May 8, 2024, Informational Presentation are provided below.

The Commission requested confirmation of the setbacks and the contextual setbacks, expressing concerns related to the building being too close to the street.

The Commission inquired about the number of street trees proposed to be removed and what is driving the tree removal. They are nice looking mature honey locust trees. Generally, the trees should be treated as a public utility and benefit. The removal of such should not be taken lightly.

The UDC noted that there are misgivings about this project. This is a commercial corridor and there is such a minimal commercial ground floor presence. The residential units on the first floor with the ramps and stoops are undesirable being so close to the sidewalk. Maybe reprogram that with amenity space or commercial. This building should be on a plinth to create separation from the street. There is a big gaping hole for the garage entrance in the middle of the ground floor and the pedestrian lobby entrance is minimized. The ground floor closest to the west corner of the building is not well activated or presented at the street. There is a lot of back-of-house stuff and parking behind the spandrel glass.

The Commission acknowledged how difficult this site is to put a building like this on. The Commission noted that the hanging balconies were problematic along this huge commercial corridor; the building needs to be moved back and some of the features need to be recessed versus protruding.

The proportion of solid wall to windows, there is something off about it. It seems like the punched openings and hanging balconies are fighting the building's inherent horizontality.

The University Avenue elevation is not aesthetically pleasing; it seems like a heavy masonry mass that is way too close to the sidewalk. Broad expanses of not enough or too small of windows. The ground floor seems disjointed.

The Commission noted that there is no pedestrian experience here - the car has been celebrated with centering the garage door and aligning it with the street grid. The main building entry is tucked around the corner and looks like a cave making it non-visible. It doesn't seem very welcoming; it is not being celebrated enough.

The Commission noted that there are a lot of good things about this site and project, it is on a BRT line, a major corridor, it is needed housing – but in exchange for that, a building that comes across as more aesthetically pleasing is necessary.

Overall, the Commission noted that the whole ground floor needed to be rethought and reworked. Consideration should be given to removing the ground floor apartments or recessing them back; using a plinth, something to soften the edge right along the sidewalk. It is not too tall, but it seems too tall because of how close it is to the sidewalk. It really needs some ground floor relief. Given the context, a more modern, less dour, long and sweeping and streamlined design would be appropriate, not brown and beige and grey.