

PLANNING DIVISION STAFF REPORT

June 11, 2025



PREPARED FOR THE URBAN DESIGN COMMISSION

Project Address: 501 E Washington Avenue
Application Type: New Multi-Family Residential Building in Urban Design District (UDD) 4
UDC is an Approving and Advisory Body
Legistar File ID #: [87243](#)
Prepared By: Jessica Vaughn, AICP, UDC Secretary

Background Information

Applicant | Contact: Nick Orthmann, Bear Development, LLC | The WMC Foundation, Inc.

Project Description: The applicant is proposing a seven-story residential building containing 223 dwelling units with below grade structured parking (68 stalls).

Project Schedule:

- The Landmarks Commission found that the proposed development was not so large or visually intrusive so as to adversely affect the adjacent landmark building.
- The UDC received an Informational Presentation on March 5, 2025.
- The Plan Commission is scheduled to review this item at the June 9, 2025, meeting.

Approval Standards: The UDC is both an **approving and advisory body** on this request. The site is located in Urban Design District 4 ("UDD 4"), which makes the Urban Design Commission an approving body related to the design standards and guidelines for that district in [MGO Section 33.24\(11\)](#).

In addition, per MGO Section 28.076(4)(c), *"All new buildings and additions greater than 20,000 square feet or that have more than four stories in UMX zoning shall obtain conditional use approval from the Plan Commission following review by the Urban Design Commission for conformity to the design standards in Section 28.071(3) of the Zoning Code and the [Downtown Urban Design Guidelines](#) and report its findings to the Plan Commission."*

Zoning Related Information: The project site is zoned Urban Mixed Use (UMX). The Zoning Code outlines design standards that are applicable to all new buildings in both the UMX and DC zoning districts ([MGO 28.071](#)), including, but not limited to those related to building entrance orientation, façade articulation, height, fenestration, and materials. Staff notes that while the UDC is tasked with evaluating the development proposal for general consistency with the design-related standards in the Zoning Code, ultimately, the Zoning Administrator will determine compliance.

As noted in the Downtown Height Map, the maximum height allowed for the project site is eight stories/116 feet. As noted in the Zoning Code, buildings must meet both the maximum number of stories and the maximum height. As proposed, while an accurate height in feet was not indicated on the elevation drawings, the development **appears to be consistent** with the maximum height limitations at eight stories S Blair Street.

Design-Related Plan Recommendations: The project site is located within the [Downtown Plan](#) planning area, within the Downtown Core subarea. As such, development on the project site is subject to the [Downtown Urban Design Guidelines](#). The Plan recommendations for development in this area generally speak to encouraging the highest intensity of development in this area and encouraging a mix of uses that will help to retain the area's vibrancy.

Historic Preservation Related Information: The project site is located adjacent to the Mattermore-Malaney House (512 Main Street), a designated landmark site. Pursuant to MGO 28.144, any development adjacent to a landmark or landmark site for which Plan Commission or Urban Design Commission review is required, the Landmark Commission shall also review the development proposal. As part of their review, the Landmark Commission evaluates whether a development proposal is so large or visually intrusive as to adversely affect the historic character of the adjacent landmark or landmark site and makes an advisory recommendation to the Urban Design Commission and Plan Commission.

At their June 2, 2025, meeting, the Landmark Commission reviewed this development proposal and made an advisory finding that the development proposal was not so large or visually intrusive so as to adversely affect the adjacent landmark.

Summary of Design Considerations

Staff recommends that the UDC provide feedback and make findings on the development proposal regarding the aforementioned standards as it relates to the design considerations noted below.

- **Building Design, Massing, and Composition.** The project site wraps around a new development currently under construction at the corner of E Washington Avenue and S Blair Street. The proposed building occupies much of the site and has frontage on three streets. Along its southern boundary, the building is over 240 feet long, broken up only by a small courtyard.

The building is located at two highly visible and prominent intersections near the Capitol Square, including the intersection of S Franklin and E Washington Avenue, as well as in near proximity to the corner of E Washington Avenue and S Blair Street. In addition, staff note that the Downtown Plan also identifies East Washington Avenue as a “Premier Corridor” as one of eight major streets that frame views to and from the Capitol. Due to the site’s topography, prominence, and scale of the proposed building and surrounding context, all four facades of the proposed building will be highly visible.

UDD 4 Building Design guidelines and requirements generally speak to designing with a sensitivity to context, avoiding large unbroken facades, utilizing four-sided architecture, etc. The building design guidelines also speak to the architecture and design of new in-fill buildings being compatible with adjacent buildings.

In addition, the Downtown Urban Design Guidelines speak to utilizing building modulation and articulation to distinguish architectural components (top, middle, base), the appropriateness of setbacks/stepbacks to minimize perceived mass and scale, balancing proportions and horizontal and vertical datums with design details, including windows/window openings and incorporating articulation in transitions between materials, utilizing a strong architectural corner element at street corners, creating positive termination at the top of the building, and utilizing an enhanced level of design and detailing at the pedestrian level, etc.

Staff requests that the UDC provide feedback and make findings on the overall building design and composition, including as it relates to:

- Creating a cohesive architectural expression and maintaining the same level of design and detailing across all the elevations, including the design and detailing of the upper floors as viewed from S Blair and E Washington Avenue, as well as the internal north and east elevations as view from adjacent neighboring developments. Consideration should be given to minimizing blank

walls, especially at the base, consistent application of materials across all elevations and in differentiating the top, middle, base, incorporating articulation in material transitions, etc.

- Utilizing a richer level of design details at the pedestrian level along E Washington Avenue, S Franklin Street, as well as S Blair Street, including minimizing blank walls (including retaining walls), the design and detailing of the individual walk-up units, and integration/design details of the garage and utility doors along S Franklin Street.

For reference, and in summary, the Commission's Informational Presentation comments are noted below:

Overall, the Commission noted that there was a strong corner element, but that additional refinements should be considered, including:

- Continuing to explore ways to create interest along the building base along E Washington Avenue and S Blair Street frontages, breaking down blank walls and looking at the type of glazing,
 - Utilizing architectural detailing and articulation to respond/transition to surrounding contextual character and scale, especially along S Franklin Street,
 - The Commission referenced the Continental Building, which incorporates setbacks and stepbacks as the building transitions away from E Washington Avenue, as well as significant landscape treatments and changes in materials,
 - Incorporating material transitions, especially in the expanses of horizontal lap siding, and
 - The Commission requested additional information related to the non-street facing elevations and courtyard space.
- **Materials.** UDD 4 Building Design guidelines and requirements state that exterior materials shall be low maintenance and harmonious with those used on other buildings in the area. In addition, the Downtown Urban Design Guidelines generally speak to utilizing high quality materials and four-sided architecture, as well as using a palette that is simple.

The exterior material palette is primarily comprised of a masonry base material, and either a fiber cement (horizontal lap siding or panel) or metal panel materials on the upper stories, as well as corrugated metal panel accents.

Staff note that the materials that are shown in Bone White and Charcoal Grey are indicated as being either a metal panel or a fiber cement material. In addition, while architectural precast lintels and sills and banding is shown, limited information was provided regarding the detailing/profile of these materials and other materials and material transitions (i.e., masonry insets on the southwest elevation, the finish at the top of the building, material transition at the seventh floor, canopies, columns, railings, etc.). Staff also note concerns where some material changes and colors appear to occur in the same plane, such as the southwest elevation, and question whether simplifying or limiting some of these transitions would result in a more cohesive expression.

Generally, the Commission's Informational Presentation comments noted that additional consideration should be given to the materiality of the building better relating to context, as well as incorporating more defined transitions and complexity where materials transition.

Staff requests the Commission provide feedback and make findings related to the proposed material palette, especially as it relates to the surrounding context, utilizing a consistent level of design detailing across all elevations, including those walls that are adjacent to existing development, incorporating articulation in material transitions, and the appropriateness of the horizontal lap siding given the scale and context of the building.

In addition, staff requests the Commission address those materials that are noted as having multiple options in their formal motion.

- **Long Views.** Due to the prominence of this site near the Capitol Building, very careful consideration should be given to the building's overall design impact relative to the surrounding context and viewsheds, especially as to how the upper levels are viewed from longer distances.

Staff requests the Commission's feedback and findings as it relates to the long views, especially those views of the upper floors as viewed from S Blair and E Washington Avenue.

- **Wall Packs.** Staff notes that while wall packs are not indicated on the elevations, they are commonly associated with residential units. It has been the current practice to locate wall packs and their associated louvers so that they are not located on street-facing or on highly visible facades, although they have been approved in some situations when found to be well integrated into the façade's design.

Staff recommends the Commission address the potential use wall packs and the preferred location, as well as it relates to the design detailing and their overall integration with architecture in the Commission's formal action.

- **Landscape.** UDD 4 Landscape guidelines and requirements generally speak to landscape being both functional as well as decorative, including framing views, screening uses and unattractive features, complementing architecture, plantings should provide year-round color and texture, all beds should be edged and mulched, landscape berms should be used to screen the view of parking areas, etc. In addition, the Downtown Urban Design Guidelines note that design consideration should be given to creating context appropriate landscapes and site amenities, including softening hard edges, providing color, texture and interest, including linear planting beds, seat walls, street furniture, public art, lighting, etc.

As indicated by the Landscape Plan, there is roughly ten feet of grade change across project site from the high point at the corner of E Washington Avenue and S Franklin Street and the low point along S Blair Street. In addition, the project site is located in an area that transitions from a high intensity urban environment to much lower intensity residential neighborhood. As such, consideration should be given to a landscape design and planting plan that responds to the transitioning environment, including providing adequate year-round screening, color and texture, minimizing blank wall expanses, softening hardscape edges, especially those along E Washington Avenue and S Blair Street, utilizing contextually appropriate plant species giving consideration to shade and urbaneness of the site, as well as breaking down mass and scale of the building itself.

Staff requests the Commission's feedback and findings as it relates to the proposed landscape plan and plan list as it pertains to the considerations noted above, as well as the applicable guidelines and requirements.

Staff note that limited details were provided regarding the modular planter boxes, or overall planter wall height. In addition, the planter wall detail in the Landscape Plan notes a poured-in-place concrete wall with a Halquist stone veneer and cap, however the architectural elevations and renderings indicate a concrete planter. Staff recommend that the UDC address the planter details in their formal motion.

For reference, and in summary, the Commission's Informational Presentation comments are noted below:

- Giving consideration to the size and scale of the landscape planters as well as the rhythm along the street as a contributing factor in creating an aesthetic streetscape and maintaining a pedestrian scale,
 - Utilizing a mix of perennials, shrubs, and ornamental trees rather than lawn along building foundation walls, especially along Franklin Street.
- **Lighting.** Staff note that a lighting plan and fixture cutsheets were submitted for light levels along the ground floor street frontages. As shown, these light levels appear to be consistent with UDD 4 guidelines and requirements related to lighting, including those that generally speak to maintaining adequate, but not excessive light levels and fixtures relating to function.

Staff note that lighting information **was not** provided for the individual balconies, nor architectural lighting or lighting high on the building. Staff request the UDC address lighting in their formal action, noting whether the future review of such can be completed administratively.

Staff also note that while the site lighting appears to be compliant with UDD 6 guidelines and requirements, the Building Inspection Division will review the proposed lighting for compliance with MGO 29.36, “Outdoor Lighting”, will occur as part of the Site Plan Review process.

Summary of UDC Informational Presentation Discussion and Comments

As a reference, a summary of the Commission’s March 5, 2025, Informational Presentation discussion and comments are provided below.

The Commission encouraged the applicant to keep working on improving the design. The corner is strong, but it is not a handsome building yet.

The Commission liked the use of planters as plinths to help transition from the large building mass to the sidewalk and streetscape. On Blair Street, there are some areas where the planters get a little small. They suggested looking at how the rhythm of the planters contributes to the aesthetically pleasing streetscape. They also suggested that any foundation landscape spaces be planted with a mix of perennials, shrubs, and ornamental trees rather than lawn, especially along Franklin.

The Commission asked if there were any zoning requirements to transition as you move down Franklin Street, pointing out that there is a historic single-family residential property next door. The applicant said there was not a zoning requirement aside from the setback, which was currently 10 feet. The applicant also noted that they are looking into continuing the direct-access units on Franklin to wrap the corner, which might help with the transition.

The Commission said the narrow courtyard will be an interesting challenge. They asked if it is intended as usable open space. The applicant said that aside from the patios for first-floor units at the courtyard level, this will not be an activated space and will be used for green roof and stormwater needs. The Commission suggested they create a vegetative courtyard space if they are using it for stormwater.

The Commission asked about the choice to use lap siding. The applicant said that a key piece of feedback they received was the need to pay attention to the adjacent First Settlement historic district and to look at the material palette and colors to try to blend in as seamlessly as they can. The houses along Franklin have lap siding, which was the main driver of that material choice.

The Commission pointed out that this is a large building with some significant streetscape frontages, and it is an important gateway into our city. The corner of the building on E Washington will be in the foreground as people

move toward the Capitol, so the applicant needs to make sure that base has interest without larger blank expanses. They liked the detailing on the two end bays, but the surfaces with lap siding were looking flat in comparison and could use more interest and complexity.

The Commission asked about the glass on the first floor and whether it was the parking level or if parking was below. The applicant said the parking is below, so the E Washington side looks into active use spaces on the first floor and the Blair side has transom height windows looking into the parking.

The Commission said that the massing makes it feel like a continuous, big building and it isn't broken down as much. The rhythm is nice vertically, so they suggested doing more with the massing because it is surrounded by lower buildings.

The Commission said that it was important to see the materiality and massing break down on Franklin, which is a smaller scale, more residential street that has a different character than E Washington or Blair. The architecture, materiality, and landscape need to address the character of that streetscape and public realm. Others thought that given where the building is in the city, the massing wasn't a huge problem. There was reference to the nearby Continental building, which steps down in the back and has significant landscape treatments and setbacks; it also takes on a different materiality and form to transition into the residential neighborhood.

The Commission said they would like to better understand the void space between the building on the corner of Blair and E Washington and this building, as well as the scale of the courtyard. They asked if this should have been two buildings instead of one.

The Commission discussed the important context of the adjacent First Settlement historic district, noting that those smaller buildings are likely to remain. It will impact their judgment on how this project and its sheer scale fit into the neighborhood, even if not part of the requirements.

The Commission returned to discussion on the purpose and intention of the narrow courtyard. The applicant said it would be a space for green roof and stormwater retention, provide additional façade to line that portion of the building with units, and let light into those units. An earlier design had this opening facing E Washington, and after conversations with the City's Preservation Planner, they decided it was better to flip the opening to where it is now to provide more relief to the First Settlement Historic District. They also stepped back a portion of the upper floors toward Blair Street and placed balconies inboard within the units in order to add more space between this building and the neighboring houses.

The Commission requested that future presentations include details on all sides of the building and interstitial spaces.