



PREPARED FOR THE URBAN DESIGN COMMISSION

Project Address: 521 E Washington Avenue
Application Type: New Mixed-Use Building in Urban Design District 4
UDC is an Approving and Advisory Body
Legistar File ID #: [83068](#)
Prepared By: Jessica Vaughn, AICP, UDC Secretary

Background Information

Applicant | Contact: Duane Johnson, Knothe & Bruce Architects, LLC | John Leja, LZ Ventures

Project Description: The applicant is proposing an eight-story mixed-use building containing a first-floor office use, and 70 multi-family residential units above the first floor. There will be eight surface parking stalls accessed from Blair Street.

Project Schedule:

- UDC received an Informational Presentation on May 8, 2024.
- The Plan Commission is scheduled to review this item at their July 8, 2024, 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, the development **appears to be consistent** with the maximum height limitations.

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.

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 and Composition.** Due to the site's topography and prominence at the intersection of E Washington Avenue and S Blair Street, the proposed development will be highly visible. Staff notes that the Downtown Plan also specifically identifies East Washington Avenue as a "Premier Corridor" as one of eight major streets that frame views to and from the Capitol. As such, staff believes it is very important to consider how the building is perceived from various long views, including those of the Capitol and other prominent structures.

As noted by the Commission in their Informational Presentation comments, further refinements were necessary to create a more cohesive composition, including simplification in the materials and their application, minimizing material transitions/undulation, etc., relating each elevation to each other and maintaining a consistent level of design across all elevations, including bringing the red down to the bottom, limiting the masonry to the base, below the MCM panel, lightening up the bottom piece as much as possible at the corner, etc.

UDD 4 Building Design guidelines and requirements generally speak to designing with a sensitivity to context, utilizing four-sided architecture, etc. In addition, the Downtown Urban Design Guidelines address 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, maintaining building entry orientation toward the street and utilizing an architectural corner element on highly visible corners, utilizing an enhanced level of design and detailing at the pedestrian level, etc.

Although various improvements have been made to the overall building design and composition that appear to be consistent with the Commission's initial feedback, staff continues to have concerns related to providing a strong corner element at this prominent location. Staff requests that the UDC provide feedback and make findings on the overall building design and composition.

- **Materials.** The exterior material palette is primarily comprised of metal panels, both flat and corrugated and masonry veneer and accents. 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. Staff continues to have concerns with the use of standing seam vertical metal siding at this location and its consistency with both the Downtown Urban Design Guidelines and UDD 4 guidelines.

In concert with the above comments on Building Design and Composition, 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, incorporating articulation in material transitions, etc.

- **Wall Packs/HVAC Louvers.** As noted on the elevations, wall pack units are proposed on all elevations, including along the prominent S Blair and E Washington fronting façades. While it has been the current practice to not locate wall packs so that louvers are not street-facing or on highly visible façades, they have been approved in some cases when found to be well integrated into the façade's design, including

the use of perforated metal panels to screen louvers or utilizing a louver system that is consistent with the window opening size. As noted by the UDC in their Informational Presentation comments, additional detail and development is necessary to determine whether the wall packs are fully integrated into the overall design.

Staff requests the Commission's feedback and on the integration of the wall packs with the overall building design and materials, especially as it relates to the aforementioned standards, including those guidelines that speak to door and window openings, as well as materials.

- **Long Views.** Due to the prominence of this site, very careful consideration should be given to the building's overall design impact relative to the surrounding context and viewsheds, especially as it relates to creating a strong corner element. Staff requests the UDC's feedback and findings on the long views, especially as it relates to those guidelines that speak to highly visible corners and the design of such structures reflecting the prominence of the site, including utilizing architectural features to hold the corner locations and define the street intersection.
- **Site Amenities.** As noted in the Zoning Code, a minimum of 10 square-feet of open space per bedroom is required (700 square-feet). While an at-grade open space is reflected on the site plan along the south side of the building, limited details were provided related to the programming of this space or how it relates to the adjacent site, which sits higher than the subject property. As noted in the Downtown Urban Design Guidelines, "*Project designs should provide attractive, safe, and creatively designed yards, courtyards, plaza, sitting areas, or other open spaces for building residents.*" As noted by the Commission in their Informational Presentation comments, some sort of design treatment is needed in this area.

Staff requests the UDC's feedback and findings as it pertains to the successful planting and programming for this space, as well as the proposed concrete retaining wall.

Summary of UDC Informational Presentation Discussion

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

- Commissioner Asad asked the UDC if the louver examples shown are considered acceptable? This still looks utilitarian; we have seen these things more integrated on other projects. Looks like further development and detail is needed. The louver and window jamb are in the same plane and are one jamb.
- The Commission noted that further refinements are necessary to create a more cohesive composition noting that exploring options for simplification in the materials and their application, minimizing materials and material transitions/undulation, colors, etc., relating each elevation to each other and maintaining a consistent level of design across all elevations, including bringing the red down to the bottom, limiting the masonry to the base, below the MCM panel, lightening up the bottom piece as much as possible at the corner. Overall, the Commission felt that the west elevation was the most successful, balanced elevation.
- The Commission noted that they would like to see the design progressions of the E Washington/Blair corner, with the blank wall comprised of metal panels. Further exploration is necessary there, including another bay of windows, art, etc.
- The Commission acknowledged that this project did not look like affordable housing.

- The Commission noted that the building height and siting seem fine. The nature of the project being an infill project on an empty corner – engagement with the street, position of the building to hold the urban edge, and the bike parking on both street facing sides were all positives.
- The Commission noted that some sort of treatment is needed to protect the patio from adjacent parking lot.
- With regard to street trees, the Commission noted that it would be great to see some street trees where possible to bring down the scale.