



Date: December 2, 2013

To: Madison Plan Commission

From: Rocky Bluff Neighborhood Association: BJ Haman, President; Anthony Lathrop, Vice President

Re: Hoyt Park Area Joint Neighborhood Plan

The Rocky Bluff Neighborhood Association has enjoyed participating in the Hoyt Park Area Joint Neighborhood Plan process and has appreciated the opportunity to join together with surrounding neighborhoods to help guide the future of the area we all cherish. Thank you to Jason Valerius and Jean MacCubbin for co-chairing the Steering Committee, and to Jule Stroick for her assistance and coordination in this process.

Overall, this Plan represents the collective vision of the participating neighborhoods. Rocky Bluff's primary concerns over the course of the planning process were finding an appropriate future density on University Avenue, and finding a creative solution to the need for sidewalks. In the planning process, the resolutions of these issues, as well as each other important decision, involved much compromise with other Steering Committee members, and consideration of a host of competing factors involving quality of life, economics, and design.

Some of the staff comments recommend increasing density on University beyond the density increases already provided for in the Plan. However, density concerns have already been addressed by these very careful Steering Committee compromises. Density along University was one of the two or three most discussed issues in writing the Plan. The increases already provided for in the Plan are not modest or insignificant: the Plan allows a potential increase of up to 300% of many current uses, and in almost all cases allows a potential increase in height of 100% at the very least. These are very significant increases, especially over the short-term time frame for which this Plan is designed.

Much of the neighborhood is content with current 1-2 story uses along University, but we compromised to reach a recommended limit of 4 stories. In this compromise, the Steering Committee balanced concerns about density and sprawl with livability, walkability, viewsheds, pollution, aesthetics, parking, traffic, noise, safety, transit, runoff issues, neighborhood character, neighborhood diversity, and neighborhood cohesion. The Steering Committee's 4 story limit is also consistent with the two most recent developments near the area: the 4 story development on Marshall Court in Shorewood Hills, and the 2 story Scooter U redevelopment. To increase density in the Plan beyond the Steering Committee's provision would require in-depth consideration of the

broader ramifications of density: for example, how will density affect the already untenable parking and traffic problems on Harvey Street. Or how using existing resources could we get better busing for the area: many Rocky Bluff residents are unable to get seats on crowded routes; greater density would inevitably worsen this growing problem. Even more, solutions to the existing University Avenue traffic difficulties need to be funded, implemented and evaluated before increasing such problems through density.

Rocky Bluff is an area largely nestled among two parks: Hoyt and Quarry, and it is surrounded also by parks across University Avenue in Shorewood Hills, and is home to numerous mature trees. Many of its streets are without sidewalks: a vestige of its longer status as part of the Town of Madison. These features give the area an astonishing, rural, park-like character. And the viewsheds of these parks and trees both within and from outside the neighborhood can be stunning, especially considering the locale's proximity and convenience to central Madison. From the Shorewood bike path, the view of Quarry Park hovering above Whole Foods is a splendid illustration of such viewsheds. Obviously Rocky Bluff's residents have chosen to locate here because these characteristics are appealing, but from a broader perspective, these are unique assets which benefit the city generally and which deserve protection. For example, as Madison residents and visitors approach campus and downtown, they are welcomed with these parks and trees, which line adjacent streets both to the North and South of University, and are visible above existing development. Too much density would obscure these features and thus rob the University Avenue gateway of its inviting natural character. It is important that Madison continue to present itself as this welcoming place in which to live, and do business.

The Steering Committee also carefully balanced issues of safety, sidewalk cost, drainage and engineering concerns, aesthetics, and citizen investment in existing landscaping when it arrived at its solution of pedestrian pathways for the Rocky Bluff area. One comment on the Plan recommended using sidewalks to make the area's streets inviting to walk on. However, Rocky Bluff's streets are already very enthusiastically trod on by residents, visitors, and dogs alike. The Committee supported non-traditional sidewalk alternatives as flexible, creative solutions which better address the existing features and needed uses of the area.

To alter the Steering Committee's careful compromises without as much consideration of quality-of-life issues would undo the Committee's balancing, and could diminish the very intent of having a neighborhood plan at all.

Indeed, what is most important here is that the neighborhood plan remain the neighborhood plan. Most people feel that they have no role in government decisions and feel disenfranchised. And most people do not participate at all. A neighborhood plan appears to open up a possibility for true, ongoing input at a ground level of decisionmaking. This not only enfranchises our communities, but it renews a neighborhood's commitment to its area and reinforces a resident's connection with their neighbors. But after participating on such grounds in a Plan which has lasted

three years for neighbors working in a volunteer capacity, to find ourselves with a Plan which may be altered on many of its key issues and rewritten not as the neighbors intend, but to still be called a “Neighborhood Plan,” could become yet more disenfranchising than if there had never been a Plan.

Some comments recommend that the Plan language duplicate the zoning code’s upper limits on University Avenue heights. If this Plan were to re-state existing codes and policies from the beginning, there wouldn’t have needed to be so many meetings and discussions and memos. If it was paramount to make our Plan consistent with zoning, the Steering Committee, or the Committee’s planning consultant would never have needed to address density, but simply would have made written reference to the zoning code. Moreover, no neighborhood plan would ever need to address density at all. This has not been the process of Madison’s neighborhood plans, however.

Our Plan does not rezone anything: the zoning code will always exist side-by-side with the Plan. Our Plan is also not inconsistent with zoning: it is simply more specific, which is allowable in a neighborhood plan. Zoning limits are permissive, not prescriptive. Neither is this Plan inconsistent with the Comprehensive Plan: the Comp Plan does not get into specific heights, and our Plan generally allows for infill and density increase. Moreover, the Comp Plan has a policy under Objective 34 in Land Use that calls for residents’ preferences to be balanced with other interests when making land-use decisions. This Plan is the best opportunity for overall resident preferences to be heard, and noted by future developers.

That notion has been highlighted this year in several local newspaper articles on the new zoning code. These articles point out an increasing sense that the new zoning code may inadvertently shut out neighborhood participation. Thus, there is even greater reason to allow the neighborhood plan to be a representation of neighborhood wishes. Our Plan will not be the last word on University Avenue density, nor on sidewalks – other voices will surely be heard on these issues in specific, future decisions: developers, planners, the market, the zoning code, as well as city policy, boards, and commissions, will each also play a role.

At this time it is important to let the Steering Committee’s much-discussed compromises on density and sidewalks stand as a lasting document of the neighborhood’s voice and vision, civic participation and concern, and as a reflection of the Steering Committee’s hard work over the last few years. This Plan is the neighborhood’s opportunity to be heard. Aldo Leopold, a Madisonian who once lived just to the east of this planning area, famously said, “The true problem of agriculture and all other land use is to achieve both utility and beauty – and thus permanence.” Please allow the Steering Committee’s carefully considered balances of these objectives to remain. If this is to genuinely be a neighborhood plan, please honor the work of the Steering Committee and allow the Plan to stand as drafted by the neighbors.