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SMART GROWTH GREATER MADISON

To: Plan Commission, All Council
From: Carole Schaeffer, Executive Director, Smart Growth Greater Madison
CC: Curt Brink, Steve Cover, Tim Parks, Katherine Cornwell, Mayor Paul Soglin
Date: 9/16/2013
Re: Lamp House Block Study

Smart Growth Greater Madison opposes the creation of a special committee to study the block containing the Frank Lloyd Wright "Lamp House." Several of our members are property owners on this block, and we are deeply concerned about the implications and effect this will have on the ability to redevelop their properties.

Smart Growth Greater Madison was involved with the four year process that was the Downtown Plan from the very beginning. I attended almost every one of the Plan Commission working sessions on the Downtown Plan, and the meetings of many of the myriad of committees and commissions that considered the plan. The Lamp House block was discussed in detail on multiple occasions at the Plan Commission work groups and at the Landmarks Commission. This block was originally identified as an area that was appropriate for even greater density than the current height map demonstrates however there was a constituency that felt that encouraging the additional "bonus stories" could be detrimental to the Lamp House, so the language was removed during Plan Commission work groups. At no point was there a recommendation that a special area plan was necessary to address any deficiency that existed for the treatment of the Lamp House block beyond not including the block as an additional story carve out area. There were other areas, however, that were specifically delineated for special area or block plans, including the 400 and 500 blocks of West Washington, Langdon Street, and the Mifflin Neighborhood. Several projects I have been involved with took a lot of criticism because of differing opinions of how to interpret language in the Downtown Plan that the Council adopted just last July. At the crux of the debate, was the intent of the language in the plan. No one disputed that we should honor the plan. What is before you, another special area plan, had copious opportunities for introduction during the 4-year downtown plan process.

The Lamp House block is considered part of the Downtown Core and the Lamp House is a landmark, which requires Landmarks Commission recommendations for surrounding development as defined in the criteria for development on properties adjacent to a landmark. There are 85 landmarked properties according to the Downtown Plan. The argument has been made that because this is Frank Lloyd Wright house, it is somehow different than the other landmarks. This may be true to the Frank Lloyd Wright proponents, but the other landmarks have their champions too, and if we say one landmark deserves a special area block study, why not another? There are blocks with

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multiple landmarks that have not warranted a study. That is perhaps because we already have an ordinance to deal with properties that have a visual and contextual impact on landmarks. The list of considerations is in the appendix to this memo. There are some pretty clear guidelines for the Landmarks Commission to consider when making a recommendation on a project that is adjacent to a landmark. Although a certificate of appropriateness is not necessary for adjacent properties, it has been made clear that this block study is only advisory to the Plan Commission and Council, similar to the Landmarks Commission findings for the non-landmark buildings. We already have tools in place to utilize when making redevelopment decisions for this block and landmarks.

In summary, our concerns with the creation of this committee and the proposed block study are three fold.

- 1) We have a newly adopted Downtown Plan that addressed this block in specificity and did not recommend a special area plan, despite multiple other areas being designated as appropriate for special area plans. The fact that this suddenly became a “necessity” when several development proposals are on the table is concerning. It also bumps the other area studies in staff time and effort, despite their presence in the Downtown Plan.
- 2) We have a Landmarks ordinance that clearly spells out criteria for dealing with Landmarks and adjacent properties to landmarks.
- 3) The property owners are not supportive of this proposal, and under the current language have no representation on the committee. It is viewed as “death by delay.” Unless it is made very clear that this is advisory only body and the current Zoning Code, Downtown Plan, and Landmarks ordinance are sufficient to handle any of the current proposals while this study would look at the remainder of the block and include developer representation, we cannot support this proposal.

Alternatively, we would ask the Plan Commission and Council to consider having an internal staff report that would further flesh out the language already available from the efforts during the Downtown Plan, which had originally stated “Accentuate the Lamp House and enhance its setting by ensuring that the placement, scale, massing and design of new buildings create a pleasing visual relationship with it and provide views to it from several vantage points on the adjacent streets.” Just as a side note, here is a quote from Wisconsin Magazine of History, Winter 1988-89, in an article specifically covering Robie Lamp and the history of the Lamp House, “Wright and Lamp placed the house at the center of the block with the knowledge that it would be secluded by surrounding dwellings.” They didn’t even wait for the Downtown Plan; they planned for this to be a hidden gem over 100 years ago.

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APPENDIX

Criteria to consider under existing landmark language

- a. *Whether the building or structure is of such architectural or historic significance that its demolition would be detrimental to the public interest and contrary to the general welfare of the people of the City and the State;*
- b. *Whether the building or structure, although not itself a landmark building, contributes to the distinctive architectural or historic character of the District as a whole and, therefore, should be preserved for the benefit of the people of the City and the State;*
- c. *Whether demolition of the subject property would be contrary to the purpose and intent of this chapter as set forth in Sec. 33.01 [the Landmarks Commission ordinance] and to the objectives of the historic preservation plan for the applicable district as duly adopted by the Common Council;*
- d. *Whether the building or structure is of such old and unusual or uncommon design, texture and/or material that it could not be reproduced or be reproduced only with great difficulty and/or expense;*
- e. *Whether retention of the building or structure would promote the general welfare of the people of the City and the State by encouraging study of American history, architecture and design or by developing an understanding of American culture and heritage;*
- f. *Whether the building or structure is in such a deteriorated condition that it is not structurally or economically feasible to preserve or restore it, provided that any hardship or difficulty claimed by the owner which is self-created or which is the result of any failure to maintain the property in good repair cannot qualify as a basis for the issuance of a Certificate of Appropriateness;*
- g. *Whether any new structure proposed to be constructed or change in use proposed to be made is compatible with the buildings and environment of the district in which the subject property is located.*

Original Downtown Plan Language:

This transition area is adjacent on the west to the Downtown Core, where buildings may be built to the capitol view height preservation limit, adjacent to the north and south to areas where 8-10 story building heights may be possible, and adjacent on the east to the 4-story James Madison Park Neighborhood. The Lamp House, a local landmark, sits in the center of the block. Within Bonus Area g, up to two bonus stories may be considered for projects that:

- 1). *Incorporate the restoration of landmark or potential landmark buildings into the project to ensure their preservation; and*
- 2). *Accentuate the Lamp House and enhance its setting by ensuring that the placement, scale, massing and design of new buildings create a pleasing*

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visual relationship with it and provide view to it from several vantage points on the adjacent streets; and

- 3). *Maintain a rhythm, scale and massing of new buildings along East Mifflin St and North Butler St that reflects the character of James Madison park Neighborhood, including providing exterior entrances to individual ground floor units*