

PLANNING DIVISION STAFF REPORT

August 14, 2024



PREPARED FOR THE URBAN DESIGN COMMISSION

Project Address: 521 E Washington Avenue
Application Type: New Mixed-Use Building in Urban Design District (UDD) 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.
- UDC granted Initial Approval of this item at the June 26, 2024, meeting. The Commission's approval included conditions of approval as noted below.
- The Plan Commission reviewed and subsequently approved 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."*

As noted above, at the June 26, 2024, meeting, the Commission granted Initial Approval of this item with conditions that generally spoke to the design of the building corner element, as well as the at-grade amenity space. The Commission's subsequent review and continued evaluation of this item should focus on whether those conditions have been addressed.

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

As noted above, it is the role of the UDC to review the revised drawings for consistency with the conditions of approval as outlined below. Please note that as conditions of approval, they are required to be met. The UDC's role is to ensure these previously established conditions are met, however they cannot waive or change these requirements. Staff requests the UDC's continued evaluation and findings related to the following:

- The applicant shall provide additional information related to the landscape design and details of the "seating area" shown on the site plan, including providing a screen fence and/or landscaping.

As noted in the applicant's Letter of Intent, the outdoor amenity space has been further developed, including landscape consisting of ground and raised planters with trellis and climbing vines, bench seating, lighting, etc. Staff believes this condition has been met.

- Revise the corner element to include a more defined building corner that is more cohesive with the other building corners, and with a higher level of design at the pedestrian level. Consideration should be given to including a canopy feature, removal of the white frame, or relocating the accent color at the corner, etc. for example.

The Letter of Intent indicates that various modifications have been made to the building design and corner element, including incorporating more glazing at the ground level and similar vertical articulation and materials on all sides of the building.

Above the ground floor, the visually prominent E Washington Avenue corner was previously designed so that the façade wrapped the corner, with the top floor offset in another color/material. Other building corners had a similar pattern. The revised plans reconfigure the E Washington corner element and introduce a relatively narrow, vertical element that extends between floors 2-8. This element is recessed and framed by the darker material, creating an additional vertical element and upper-level modulation at this corner, which is different from the other building corners. Staff continues to have concerns on the overall cohesion of this element and requests the UDC's feedback and findings related to meeting the Commission's condition, including careful consideration related to the stated language to make this corner more cohesive with other corners, as well as a more defined building corner.

Summary of UDC Initial Approval Discussion and Action

As a reference, a summary of the Commission's discussion and questions from the June 26, 2024, Initial Approval are provided below.

Summary of Commission Discussion and Questions:

- Overall, the Commission noted that the design has been much improved from the Informational Presentation, noting that the composition is now more unified.

- The Commission discussed the use of color and materials to emphasize the building corner. Nothing in the plan suggests that the corner is more prominent, it is mostly emphasized higher up on the building, and the entrance isn't emphasized enough at the street level.
- The Commission inquired about the useable open space being limited to the outdoor seating area and whether consideration was given to other opportunities for rooftop spaces.
- The applicant noted that the addition of rooftop space would trigger compliance with high-rise building code requirements, triggering the requirements for fire command centers, etc. raising construction costs significantly. In addition, the street tree requirements and sidewalk requirements along Blair Street also create additional constraints with regard to open space.
- The horizontal lines versus vertical lines were discussed. The applicant noted that the proposed mixing of the horizontal and vertical lines and reveals will result in noticeable shade/shadow effects.
- The Commission expressed concern about the long views and the building corner. A pop of color at street level where the entrance is would help to emphasize it. The white frame element that goes up and around the parapet that abruptly ends could be done away with and would save money. Why not make the east and west ends of the building mimic each other? The ¾ of the building is awesome, if the one corner was just brought into compliance with the rest of the design, wouldn't it still be a good design? Make the corner like the other sides of the building. The special emphasis at the entrance could be at the entrance on the ground floor.
- These renderings don't really do justice to how the building will really pop with those actual materials, with reflectivity and orientation change, nice subtle, ins and outs of materials is nice subtle design that doesn't really need the distraction of a red and white band going all the way up to the top.
- The applicant noted that their design reflects a unique corner and importance of the corner. It's a prominent corner – the uniqueness in the architecture is to address the importance of the corner and having it be unique.
- The Commission noted that if the corner was redesigned to reflect more of the other corners, adding a canopy may be a way to utilize color and emphasize the entrance. Something is off about the proportions; it is a symmetrical building in every other corner except for this one because of the proportions of the red and white elements. Simplification should be considered. It needs some color and excitement. With regard to the long views, it needs something unique that you can see from a distance and not fade into the background.
- The Commission discussed reducing the number of parking stalls to provide for more open space. The applicant stated that they are already struggling with parking. The ground floor accessible entrance orientation was explained. The ground floor windows will be clear with views into office spaces.
- The Commission discussed the wall pack louvers, which will be located under the windows, as part of the window system, in the darker color, integrated into the window system. The louvers were removed from the units located in the red element.
- The back patio area needs something more; some creative energy needs to be put into what that edge could be including a screen fence, vines, etc. to give you a little protection from that parking lot. Something I would like the applicant to look at.
- The white band that dies as it turns the corner seems like it could go away with maybe a canopy that wraps the corner at the entrance in its place. At the street level may be as equally an effective place for a pop of color. This is really a nice improvement.

A motion was made by Asad, seconded by Knudson, to grant Initial Approval with conditions.

Discussion on the motion:

- Expression at the entrance, the ground floor is where it is not symmetrical and repetition is happening.
- Taking the red and moving it to the center bay along E Washington and making the design more cohesive with the rest of the corners. Keeping some element of color, but not making that color fight

what is happening. The swath of red should go to the ground in place of the dark gray. Keep color in it somewhere, making the sides symmetrical, and then doing something more dramatic or design intensive at the lower level.

- Commissioner Knudson recognized the importance of this project, noting that he has learned from colleagues about design and the importance of beautiful architecture for the City's residents. The white piece makes us look up. Remembering the Informational Presentation discussion, reflecting on who is operating this building, there is something nice about having something to aspire and look up to in this architecture.

UDC Initial Approval Action

On a motion by Asad, seconded by Knudson, the Urban Design Commission **GRANTED INITIAL APPROVAL**. The motion provided for the following conditions:

- The applicant shall provide additional information related to the landscape design and details of the "seating area" shown on the site plan, including providing a screen fence and/or landscaping.
- Revise the corner element to include a more defined building corner that is more cohesive with the other building corners, and with a higher level of design at the pedestrian level. Consideration should be given to including a canopy feature, removal of the white frame, or relocating the accent color at the corner, etc. for example.

The motion was passed on a unanimous vote of (5-0).