

TO: Members of the Urban Design Commission and Planning Staff

FROM: Nan Fey

RE: North Central Group's Hotel (revised) Project on the Lamp House Block
Legistar #36335

DATE: January 14, 2015

It was good news when the North Central Group placed this project on "indefinite hold" after receiving split votes at both the Urban Design Commission and Plan Commissions last fall. There were clearly a number of unresolved issues back then, some of which may have been addressed in its revisions to the project in 2015, but there is one very important aspect of the design that has not been changed – the height of the building, especially on Webster Street.

The design being proposed is still a full 10 stories on the entire footprint, in spite of an approved height map for Webster Street that sets a maximum of 6 stories to preserve the residential character of that blockface by retaining the scale and feel of its buildings. Nowhere in any adopted plan was it envisioned, or intended, that a large commercial building could extend down the Webster Street side of this block at a height of ten stories. Addressing the previous 10-story proposal in his staff report to the Plan Commission on September 22, 2014, Mr. Firchow concluded, "[the] proposal is consistent with many, but not all of the recommendations in adopted plans. The most significant difference is the height recommendation in the Downtown Plan and the recently completed Report of the Lamp House Block Ad Hoc Plan Committee, which confirmed the six-story limit that applies today. Approval of the proposal would reflect a departure from these recently adopted plans." My comments to the Plan Commission on that occasion focused generally on the need for policy-making bodies to respect the land use plans that have been created and adopted by the City lest their integrity and the entire process be undermined. Given the lack of adjustment to the building height in the current proposal, the Urban Design Commission can also send that message, and I hope it will take this opportunity to do so.

The Lamp House Block Plan, which was created by an ad hoc committee that I chaired, was very clear about its intentions regarding building heights on this heritage block. On page 19 there is a diagram indicating how a building on this south-facing corner could meet the requirement that "meaningful light" reach the Lamp House rooftop garden; page 20 contains a list of recommendations that reflect the committee's findings and vision, especially the first three and the last as they apply to this site. The diagrams at the bottom of page 20 were taken into account by a development proposal for the remainder of the Webster Street face of this block last year; that project sailed through the approval process and is under construction today. Including an outside seating area with views of the Lamp House may provide a heritage tourism opportunity for hotel guests, but the building's mass interferes significantly with

meaningful sunlight falling on the rooftop garden and cannot be said to “facilitate the redevelopment goals” of the Lamp House Block Plan as required by the PD standards. I hope you will review this Special Area Plan carefully before making any “initial” and/or “final” recommendations on this project, as it contains the most detailed analysis of perhaps any block in the City of Madison and should be foundational to your consideration.

I’m confident the North Central team is creative enough to design a building that respects the height limits of adopted plans on this site, but they haven’t done it yet. Stepping down along Webster Street has the potential to create even more opportunities for green roofs and terraces on this building with spectacular views, while meeting the requirements of our adopted plans; such a design might truly be “exemplary” and qualify for bonus stories on the East Washington Avenue parcel while still honoring the intent of those plans. But the removal of ugly “wallpack” units and reworking façades is not improvement enough to approve the current monolith when it continues to ignore the requirement that the building’s height be reduced along Webster Street as shown on the zoning map and supported in adopted City plans.

I urge the Urban Design Commission to review Mr. Firchow’s thorough analysis of the standards that must be applied to this project, and require the developer to return with designs that comply with the City’s adopted plans for another informational presentation before any discussion of potential approvals from this body begins.