

Landmarks Commission
Meeting of June 1, 2020
Legistar 59708, Agenda item #1, 817-821 Williamson St.

The undersigned seventeen residents of the Marquette neighborhood urge the Landmarks Commission to **deny the applicant's request** for a Certificate of Appropriateness for construction of a new principal structure in the Third Lake Ridge Historic District.

Key Points

1. South Williamson Street has a different character than the north side, particularly in the 700-800 blocks – buildings are smaller.
2. Gross volume of the front half of the project is over 4 times larger than the gross volume of the largest historic resource. The proposed design does not disguise the mass: it will be readily visible, and felt, as the setback from the sidewalk is minimal, because the driveway provides a full view of the front half of the project, and because the corner setbacks do not decrease the sense of mass.
3. The height of the proposed project would make it the tallest project on the block and at a mid-block location. The height would be readily apparent.
4. The proportion and rhythm of solids to voids in the setback garage section need to be addressed.
5. The design of the roof, a flat roof, is only compatible with one historic resource – 800 Williamson, on the north side of the block and on a corner. All other 22 historic resources have a peaked roof. Mid-block flat-roofed structures are rare on the entire south side of Williamson.
6. The rhythm of building masses and spaces would be disrupted by creation of a mass which more than doubles existing masses.
7. 801/803 Williamson should not serve as a precedent for this project. It is on a corner (corner properties were historically more prominent) and the Landmarks Commission was concerned about that project's height, limiting it to 33 feet.

"New construction in a historic district is an opportunity to reinforce the historic character of the district."

Or so said the Staff Report for 1139 Williamson, the most recently approved demolition/new construction in the Third Lake Ridge Historic District ("TLR").

Part of Williamson Street's character is that the street is not homogenous: there are differences between the north and south sides of Williamson, and changes from west to east. The north 700 and 800 blocks had larger, more commercial, buildings such as warehouses because of the railroad. Commercial on the south side of the 700 and 800 blocks consisted of dwelling units with first floor businesses, and various merchants.

- The 1908 Sanborn map reflects large buildings in terms of the building footprint, though not tall, on the north side of the 800 block: Schlitz Brewing; Barnard & Wilder Tobacco warehouse on the E. Wilson side of the block; a narrow wagon shed that ran the depth

of the lot; and the American Cigar Company leaf depot along E. Wilson. South side commercial was: 805-807, 20 feet in height, was a home/business, as was 817; 831, 22 feet in height, was a store; 851-853, 22 feet in height, was a store and salon. (By 1942, 811, 22 feet in height, had become a radiator repair shop. The north side had become more commercial, with an increase in the footprint of commercial buildings.)

- This trend of larger buildings on the north side of Williamson was even more pronounced in the 700 block: the north side had 1 store, 4 large commercial structures of 1-3 stories along Williamson, and 3 large buildings of 2-3 stories on the back of the block. The 4 commercial properties on the south side were 1-2 stories in height and consisted of 2 dwelling/stores and 2 stores.

The Landmarks Commission Staff Report for 740 Jenifer/739 (741) Williamson Street recognized this difference in character between the north and south sides of the street: "staff explained that the building would be better suited to the north side of the street than the south side given the different characters of the different sides of the street."

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That difference should continue to be recognized.

The south 800 block of Williamson is almost entirely intact. Of the 12 buildings, 10 are historic resources with facades that have not undergone substantial change over the intervening years. The two exceptions are this proposal, 817-821, and the applicant's new construction at 803. Attachment A is a panorama of the south 800 block which was done in connection with neighborhood planning. The added blue lines represent the area that would be filled by the proposed building.

Does the proposed project reinforce TLR's historic character?

MGO 41.23(6) provides:

Any new structures on parcels zoned for mixed-use and commercial use that are located within two hundred (200) feet of other historic resources shall be visually compatible with those historic resources in the following ways:

- (a) Gross Volume.
- (b) Height.
- (c) The proportion and rhythm of solids to voids in the street facade(s).
- (d) The materials used in the street facade(s).
- (e) The design of the roof.
- (f) The rhythm of buildings masses and spaces.

Historic resources

There are 23 historic resources in the visually related area. The applicant's list of historic resources requires a few modifications.

- 805 Williamson needs to be added: the building fronting Williamson and the back attached building were built in 1862 and 1872.

- MGO 41.03(5) provides that any improvements located on lots that fall within 200 feet of the proposal's lot line are deemed to be within 200 feet. Thus, 841 and 843, part of the Ridgeway Coop lot, need to be added.
- 807, 811, and 822 Jenifer, appear to fall outside the 200 feet and should be excluded.

Of these historic resources:

- 19 are homes;
- 3 are mixed-use (805 and 811 have a business on the first floor with an apartment above, and 831 is a business); and,
- 1 is an office (800 Williamson on the north corner)

(a) Gross volume

Mathematically compatible

The standard is "visually compatible" not "mathematically compatible" (as noted by staff comments with respect to 702 Williamson and other projects). Yet a mathematically compatible analysis can provide a sense of whether a structure would be visually compatible.

The gross volumes of the commercial buildings (800, 805, 811 and 831, not including the non-historic separate structures on 805 and 831), including attic space, range from about 27,000 cubic feet to 32,000 cubic feet.

- The proposed project is over 270,000 cubic feet (excluding the garage space). Even just including the front half of the proposed building, going back only as far as the garage entry, is over 125,000 cubic feet.

The footprints of the commercial buildings (800, 805, 811 and 831) range from about 1,200 to 1,500 square feet.

- The footprint of the proposed project is about 7,500 square feet, with the front half of the building being about 3,500 square feet.

The facades facing Williamson of the commercial buildings (800, 805, 811 and 831), including attics, range from about 670 to 825 square feet.

- The street facing façade of the proposed project is about 2,600 square feet, not including the setback garage area (about 700 square feet). Even just including the main part of the building (excluding the 10 feet of frontage set back 8 feet) has a façade of almost 2,200 square feet.

The largest building on the south 800 block is 853, a corner building, which is outside the visually related area. Just the front half of the proposed building would have over 2 times the volume of 853, a footprint increased by about 60%, and a façade that is double that of 853. Historically, corner commercial buildings have generally been larger than mid-block commercial buildings.

Visual Compatibility

The Staff Report states: "Most of the volume of the new building is nested into the back of the lot, which lessens the appearance of the volume on the street façade. The entrance to the garage in the back can read like a separate garage in the back of the lot, which is a feature of other historic resources in the vicinity."

Much of the project is *not* built into the hillside. Over half the depth of the project, 59.66 feet of 109.75 feet, is clearly visible from the east side of the project. Although the height may be about a foot less at the back of the 60 feet, the driveway wall (see page 18 of the applicant's materials) increases the perception of size.

Whether the entrance to the garage reads like a separate garage on the back of the lot is a matter of opinion. The building design does not even attempt to give the illusion of a separate building. Plus, no detached garages at the back of historic lots are over 41 feet high.

Little has changed in terms of massing since the revised plans dated March 11 were submitted. The western 9 ¼ feet is set back 2 feet. The eastern 10 feet is set back 8 feet rather than about 2-3 feet (in order to have the required vision angle for the driveway). These changes do little, if anything, to decrease the appearance of the building's mass.

The Staff Report asserts setting back the western corner an additional 6 feet would create a sense of less gross volume. It would not. Other than the 3 commercial/mixed-use properties on the south 800 block (805, 811, 831), this building would still be closer to the sidewalk than any of the homes and the mass will have prominence on the block face.

Pages 17-19 of the applicant's submission provide a sense of how the proposed structure would dominate the block. However, the angles used in these renderings can be misleading.

Attachment B compares Google street views to the applicant's renderings.

- Page 1 of Attachment B shows the view looking east. The applicant's rendering of the house on the right faces west (one can see the east side of the porch steps), yet one can also see the west side of the proposed building – a view that is not possible with only a 12 foot gap between the buildings. And the house appears much closer to the sidewalk in the applicant's renderings.
- Page 2 of Attachment B is the view looking west. Of particular note is the massive size of 831's back warehouse as compared to the Goggle view. Or look at the steps of 813 on page 2 – the entire set of steps is visible despite the steps being set back about 8 feet from the sidewalk.

What could be of value in assessing visual compatibility of gross volume is a massing elevation such as what was done for 1139 Williamson. See Attachment C. If a massing elevation is done, it should include all properties along the south 800 block that are within the visually related area. (And, if done, all structure should contain a comparable amount of detail – empty boxes appear larger than boxes that are filled with details.)

(b) Height

The applicant's March 11 version of the plans included measurements to the top of nearby buildings, measurements which have been removed from the most recent submission.

813 Williamson: 44.77' (home)

825 Williamson: 40.17' (home)

831 Williamson: 38.36' (commercial, the height of the building is 24 feet, plus the roof – the roof is much less than half the height of the main building)

Although elevations have been removed from the plans, the introductory letter still compares the height of the project to homes on Williamson that are set back into the hillside and to homes on the Jenifer Street ridge. Elevation is not the same as height and the ordinance addresses height.

Williamson homes are set back from the sidewalk and built into the hillside, lessening the visual impact of the height, as do the gabled roofs on residential and mixed-use buildings. Commercial and mixed-use properties in the visually related area are set close to the sidewalk and have lower heights:

- 800: 28 feet (corner property on the north side)
- 805: 20 feet, plus the gabled roof (about 28-30 feet)
- 811: 24 feet, plus gabled roof (comparable overall height to 805)
- 831: 24 feet, plus the peaked roof (total perhaps 32 feet)

The proposed building will only have a 2 foot set back from the sidewalk and be about 43 feet in height. This will certainly create an appearance that the building is much taller than its historic neighbors.

The Staff Report asserts the setbacks at each corner makes the height visually compatible. The corner setbacks do not provide a visual impression of reduced height. The entire front of the 61 foot expanse along Williamson remains at 43 feet, and a mere 8 foot setback is not enough to reduce the visual impression of the height.

803 Williamson, formerly 801, also built in 2018 by the applicant, was limited to a height of 33 feet. Even at that height, and being a corner property, Landmarks Commission members raised concerns about 801's height and scale.

(c) The proportion and rhythm of solids to voids in the street facade(s).

The first floor facades of commercial building vary, one of which, 831, is almost entirely glass. The applicant's updated plans have a more appropriate proportion of rhythm of solids and voids.

However, no other historic resource has windows going to the bottom of the building – there is, at a minimum, a kick plate at the bottom of the glass. And all doors are a feature of historic buildings, whether inset or wood.

The setback portion, the garage entry, is not visually compatible with historic resources. The garage portion, 20 feet, is set back 59 2/3 feet from the sidewalk and will be clearly visible from the street.

The Landmarks Commission has required TLR garages to meet ordinance standards. For example, in May, a proposal for a Spaight Street garage was approved, Legistar 60137. This garage was set back 85 feet from the sidewalk and only 7 feet of the garage was visible from the driveway. Yet the Commission required that final siding, garage door, and pedestrian door be approved by staff (and the view of the pedestrian door was fully shielded from view by the home). The garage area does not meet TLR standards in the following ways.

- Sliding glass doors are not historic and have not been approved in TLR (except for one that was approved after installation, Legistar 19449, which was significantly hidden by a solid balustrade). The proportion and rhythm of solids to voids is not visually compatible.
- The balconies are inset into the building. Balconies are not inset into historic buildings, rather they project from the building. See, for example, a three-tiered porch at 1036 and 1042 Spaight. This adversely impacts the perception of the proportion and rhythm of solids to voids.
- Aluminum railings are not materials historic to TLR. It appears, though not specified, that there will be top and bottom railings.
- Columns were required to have capital and base details on a new porch at 1014½ Williamson, Legistar 43682. (This porch was on a house tucked at the back of a lot with a 2½ story historic resource on the front of the lot, and the porch was set back about 99 feet from the sidewalk at the end of a driveway.) The closest the rendering comes to having column details (and these are columns as the balconies are open on both the east and north sides) is composite siding, and composite siding on columns is not a material visually compatible with historic resources.

(e) Design of the roof

A flat roof is not visually compatible with the historic resources. Of the 23 historic resources, 22 have some sort of a peaked roof. The only flat roof in the visually compatible area is at the corner, on the north side of the street, 800 Williamson. (A flat roof was permitted for 803 Williamson, also at a corner.)

Having a mid-block historic resource with a flat roof is rare on the south side of Williamson: 937 is a 2-flat, and 1019 is Nature's Bakery which is 2 stories with partially exposed basement, both of which are narrow, have a vertical expression and appear under 30 feet in height.

(f) Rhythm of buildings masses and spaces

The frontage along the south 800 Williamson block is substantially intact. Newer additions have been made at the back of a few properties, and two homes in Ridge Side Coop had the approximate 6-foot gap between the homes filled in (but only at the first floor level). Thus, the historic rhythm of masses/spaces is relatively intact. No building is wider than 30 feet (except the two homes joined at the first floor at 841). Gaps may be relatively narrow (perhaps 10 feet) to relatively wide (perhaps 30 feet).

This proposal disrupts that rhythm with a building that is 80 feet wide. Even if one views the concrete drive as a "space" with a back building, the mass is 61 feet wide.

But no structure is as wide as the proposal, with a façade along Williamson of 51 to 61 feet. The façade width depends upon whether one believes an 8-foot setback is enough differentiation. (The 2 foot setback has no effect on the rhythm.)

It is possible to design a building that creates the illusion of space. See, for example, Baldwin Corners.



Photo, Google Maps, 2018.

Use of 801 (803) Williamson approval as a precedent

The Staff Report states: "At the corner of the block, the non-historic building at 803 Williamson St. is a three-story commercial building that comes up to the front of the property and is adjacent to a two-and-a-half story historic building. It is taller, but visually compatible."

801/803 was approved by Landmarks by a motion that specifically limited the height to 33 feet. Part of the rationale discussed for this height was that the building was a corner property, which often have more prominence along Williamson. The meeting reports reflect discussions about ways to reduce the height, along with various Commissioners making statements such as the building was "too big," that a smaller building would be better, that the scale may not be appropriate, that the building is dissimilar to the historic resources, that the building seems too large.

In short, it would seem that 801 barely scraped by as being visually compatible - and 801 was only about 5 feet more in height than its two historic neighbors to the east.

Yet the 801 approval it is being used as precedent for the 817 proposal, a mid-block building which is 10 feet more in height, more than double the width, and double the depth.

Instead of looking to 801/803, a more appropriate precedent would be 739 Williamson, a mid-block infill project. Landmarks Commission members expressed many concerns about 739, a project which included the rehab of a historic resource on Jenifer. One of the comments made was that the "project is pushing the limits." And that was for a project with: a maximum height about 3 feet higher than neighbors (not 20 feet higher than the historic resources that also are sited near the sidewalk); a building footprint less than half of what is being proposed; a street width of about 2/3 of what is being proposed; a partial third-story setback; only about 12 feet abutting the sidewalk (not 42 feet); with a modulated façade in terms of both materials and space; and, with a living wall near the center of the building. (This living wall was a condition of Landmarks approval, and was intended to create the illusion of space. However, the living wall does not exist.)

MGO 41.18, Public Interest

In addition to meeting TLR standards, new construction must also meet MGO 41.18(1)(d), which requires that the proposed work "will not frustrate the public interest expressed in this ordinance for protecting, promoting, conserving, and using the City's historic resources."

This standard was used as the rationale for requiring original windows.

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What features of this proposed structure could frustrate the public interest, in addition to the TLR standards?

1. Mechanicals.
 - Will there be a rooftop elevator overrun? If so, what are the dimensions? Any rooftop overrun would only be set back about 10 feet from the front façade, further increasing the impression of mass and height.
 - At the P&D meeting it was said that there would be 10-12 units on the roof.
 - Will there be any need for individual apartment venting (e.g., 902 Williamson has lots of white, unpainted, exhaust vents)?
 - Where will the fan(s) be placed to exhaust the underground parking? As has been discovered by neighbors of 902 Williamson, this can be quite loud, plus it is hardly a historic feature that deserves prominence. At the P&D meeting this question could not be answered, but a possible place was near the sidewalk, behind the bike racks on the west side of the property.
2. The building will be built into a hillside and there is a retaining wall. At the P&D meeting it was said the retaining wall was an existing wall and that the existing trees on the property line would not be disturbed.
 - The plans submitted to the Plan Commission reflect construction of a new retaining wall (page 11). The existing retaining wall runs along about 55 feet of the eastern end of the property. Of that 55 feet, about 1/3 of the new wall will be closer to the building than the existing wall. About 2/3 of the new wall will necessitate disruption of the tree roots, whether due to making the wall several feet closer to the trees, or due to reconstruction of the wall in its existing location.
 - The applicant proposes to bury overhead utility lines (phone lines?) that run from the back of the property to 825 Williamson. Per page 9 of the Plan Commission plans, the end point is about 5 feet from one tree trunk (labeled a 14" tree) and about 15 feet from the other trunk (labeled a 48" tree). This could also damage the tree roots.
 - How much of the tree canopy will need to be cut? Satellite views of the property show the canopy extending about 50 feet into the property, and the Plan Commission plans show the canopy overhanging the building. Unless the lowest branches are 35 feet off the ground, pruning of lower branches will be needed. What will be done to protect these trees?
3. Does having inset balconies on side facades, with patio doors and aluminum railings, frustrate the public intent? In particular, the ones on the east side will be highly visible. To what extent does a modern feature on a new building detract from the historic

character of a district? Balconies with aluminum railings, whether inset or hanging, are not a historic feature. (There are balconies on new buildings on the north side of Williamson, and at 739 Williamson, but these were approved prior to the adoption of Chapter 41 and this ordinance section that prohibits frustrating the public interest.) Along the back would be 3 sliding glass doors at ground level, 3 inset balconies on the second floor with sliding glass doors, and the third level would have a continuous balcony running the width of the building with 2 sliding glass doors. Less consideration is paid to the backs of buildings, but the back of this building will be visible from Jenifer, in particular from the approximate 30' drive/parking gap at 814 Jenifer.

Respectfully Submitted,
Linda Lehnertz

Additional Signatories, all residents of the Marquette Neighborhood,

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Attachment A
Williamson Street, 800 block , south side
May 15, 2002



Other than 801 Williamson, now 803 (the applicant's project), the block face remains unchanged other than for façade upgrades.

All of the properties except for 853, are within the visually related area. All, except for 803, are historic resources.

All of the buildings are of a comparable height, approximately 28-33 feet. (The perspectives are somewhat skewed, but all photos have the sidewalk in approximately the same location, which shows the relative sizes of the buildings are comparably represented.)

The added blue outline reflects the size of the proposed project (though the streetscape does not allow for the full height to be reflected).

Attachment B
Perspective



Google Maps, Street View, July 2019



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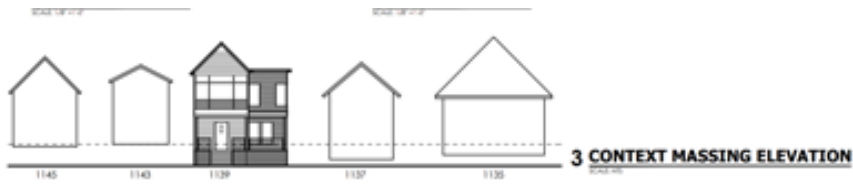


Google Maps, Street View, August 2018



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ATTACHMENT C
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