

Statement of Dick Wagner  
Regarding Acacia Foundation/Alexander Co.  
Rezoning of 201-229 West Lakelawn Pl.  
January 30, 2009

Per your request I will try to recap my statements and judgments from the recent Urban Design Commission where the Commission approved the Acacia project. As you know we had rather complete deliberations on the project thru at least four meetings with many iterations in design before we approved the project and rather thoroughly examined many issues.

We were asked near the end to make actual findings regarding the design standards and our motion did make such a statement about the city design guidelines. Personally, I have more background than some of the other commissioners because I had chaired the Plan Commission at the time the Downtown Design Zones were established.

At that particular time the Plan Commission was struggling with several very large and tall projects in the near campus area. The Commission felt some need to have a cohesive vision in making judgments about these and other expected projects that might come forward rather than do ad hoc approvals thus creating standards by precedent rather than by plan. An intensive six month period with much field work in the near campus area followed (it was not winter). The Commission thru noticed gatherings walked the several areas of the near campus and noted the characteristics of the existing built environment as part of the process.

The presumptions behind the zones were several. One was that the height of newer buildings should have context in the existing built environment as most of the existing buildings were presumed to continue rather than be removed thru a clear-cutting demolition and that the highs and lows of the Isthmus topography of the areas should be a factor not to be lost through a level building up to one set height, such as the capital view preservation limit.

Another presumption was that newer city redevelopment in the near campus area was an overall good. This was in line with new urbanism expectations that denser development benefited the community through use of existing roads, sewers, water service, fire stations, etc. Yet another presumption was that newer developments would be at densities that exceeded the older densities both due to our contemporary urban expectations and that the economics of 1920s or 1950s construction were no longer operative. Some such redevelopment had already occurred successfully enough to see that it could happen. Indeed it turned out some of the most unfortunate structures we saw had met older 1970s zoning but had bad design.

As for the Acacia project it appeared to me just the sort of proposal expected for redevelopment. It was going to replace a gravel parking lot. It was massed similar to the older fraternity structures and indeed was much smaller than several other newer infill projects occupying larger parcels in the near area. The proposal was designed for a current urban context in an area where the leafy 19<sup>th</sup> Century form has been long gone.

Regarding the finding that the guidelines in the design criteria were met was the decision of the urban design commission. These are matters of judgment that the Urban Design Commission repeatedly reviewed before coming to its motion. Below are my own thoughts most of which I expressed at the meeting.

#### First under exterior design

1. Regarding the massing, the staff report comments were that it was slightly out of scale. The Commission members felt its relation to the existing Acacia House was appropriate and did not expect a contemporary building to necessarily use hipped or gabled roofs.
2. Orientation was a factor in many of the urban design discussions, with most members feeling the entrance closer to Langdon Street was appropriate rather than a central entrance on West Lakelawn Place. However, the façade presentation to Lakelawn Place while not a front entrance required much reworking before the Commission was comfortable with it as a secondary entrance and an appropriate street appearance rather than just the back of the building. The most change in design occurred here.
3. After changes the building achieved a base (of stone), middle and top. All EFS was banished.
4. Architectural interest was improved through added balconies (some decorative and some functional) and the use of brick with some articulation for vertical and horizontal interest. More might have been done but changes did improve under this guideline.
5. Openings, as noted in the staff report, such as windows did respect the adjacent building and had variety. The Urban Design Commission had most difficulty with the originally presented openings on the Lakelawn Place frontage. Revisions greatly improved this façade.
6. Materials changed since the original proposal to the now primarily brick and stone which are consistent with much of fraternity row.
7. Entry treatment was subject to much discussion and both revised entrances give prominence to the Langdon Street main entrance and the Lakelawn Place new doorway. Most urban design members did not argue for a centrally placed door on West Lakelawn which would seldom be seen straight on except in a drawing presentation.
8. The Commission did not feel the site tucked behind the existing building was a terminal view or a highly visible corner and made reference to such in its motion regarding the "non-prominent thoroughfare."

### Next under Site Design

1. The semi public spaces are what they are on this constrained site. Though seating and plantings were improved through the design discussions.
2. Suggested changes in the plantings were made by urban design and accepted by the proposal.
3. Lighting details are still to be reviewed. I cannot recall a project where lighting design has prevented it from occurring.

Interior Design is not a subject for the Urban Design Commission, though parking issues as they related to exterior design were reviewed

Overall the proposal attempts to do an infill project and meets a number of the guidelines for the design district. The Urban Design Commission labored long and hard to improve the project in many ways to its betterment within those criteria for its site. Design is always a particular judgment but the motion adopted reflected the Commission's judgment as so charged.