

From: Jeff Gaard [REDACTED]
Sent: Monday, February 28, 2011 7:40 AM
To: Scanlon, Amy
Subject: Landmarks Comm; Sager house proposal

Members of the Landmarks Commission,

I am writing in support of Matt and Julie Sager's proposed home design, on property recently subdivided from the Ely House property at 205 N. Prospect Avenue. Matt and Julie have carefully considered the special character of the University Heights neighborhood, and with their architects have designed a house that will contribute to the vitality of our eclectic mix of architectural styles. Indeed, decades from now it may itself be considered a neighborhood landmark.

The Sagers have been very generous of their time, and open with their communications, in sharing their ideas with interested neighbors. They have gone above and beyond the technical requirements, and have faithfully attempted to address concerns raised about their plans. At a recent neighborhood meeting (Thursday, February 24), concerns from the 2008 property subdivision continued to be raised; these concerns were veiled in the "public" portion of the meeting, but were voiced quite strongly in private conversations at the meeting's conclusion. At the time of the property subdivision, I wrote to the City Plan Commission in support, and attach that letter, dated April 7, 2008, for reference. In short, though, ideas expressed within are consistent with the current proposal before Landmarks Commission:

- The proposed design will contribute to the neighborhood vitality of having grown organically over time
- Design issues have been addressed, including stormwater runoff to neighboring properties and the preparation of a tree survey and tree preservation plan
- Respect for the richness of architectural diversity, as well as the grandeur of its immediate neighbors, has been addressed

I am confident that the Sager House will contribute to the character of University Heights, and fully encourage favorable consideration from the Commission.

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April 7, 2008

City Plan Commission
Dept. of Planning and Community & Economic Development
215 Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard
Madison, WI 53701-2985

RE: Item #09438 of Plan Commission Agenda for April 7, 2008
Barash CSM, 205 North Prospect Avenue
Proposal to divide property into two lots

I am writing to express support for the proposed division of the subject property, as requested by the current owner. When first learning of the proposal, in a letter from Mr. and Mrs. Barash describing their desires, it seemed to me an entirely reasonable course of action. Knowing their commitment to being good stewards of the neighborhood and the City of Madison in general, I fully supported their proposal. After careful consideration of the reasons stated in opposition, my support remains unchanged.

As stewards of the University Heights Historic District, we all recognize the tradeoffs involved, whether they are smaller lot size or ongoing maintenance of older homes. In the case of this year's record snowfall, the tradeoff between our picturesque streets and the difficulties of navigating our hills and curves was readily apparent! The charm of the neighborhood and its housing stock, though, more than offset these deficiencies. In my own maintenance and renovations to a Frank Riley house, at 1722 Summit Avenue, I have attempted to be respectful not only to the architecture of the dwelling, but to the character of the neighborhood as well.

It may be helpful to point out, though, that our historic neighborhood is not a set museum piece, but rather an organic entity that has evolved over its first century and more, and will continue to evolve for the next century and beyond. While I agree that "pockets" of private green space are attractive amenities, they are simply not part of the "grand design" of how the neighborhood should look; instead, they are more often the result of individual citizens purchasing a large lot and not subdividing it, or intentionally purchasing a second lot to have private green space. To prohibit this process from continuing is, I feel, an inappropriate infringement of owners' rights and contrary to the nature of cities and neighborhoods as entities that dynamically respond to a multitude of present day conditions.

As for the potential loss of green space, Frank Lloyd Wright's design of Taliesin provides a relevant example. Instead of orienting his house to the magnificent valley of the Wisconsin River, extending for miles, Wright designed prominent views to the much more modest, but still beautiful, Wyoming Valley to the east. Wright strongly maintained that one should "own his view", and he could not imagine acquiring control over the vast landscape of the Wisconsin River. Likewise, unless one takes the initiative to own private greenspace, it remains unfair to require others to maintain it for their enjoyment. For parkland owned by the public, on the other hand, the expectation that it be maintained as such is an entirely reasonable presumption. Furthermore, the creation of more urban greenspace in the public realm should be pursued; to that end I have volunteered literally hundreds of hours to Madison's proposed Central Park.

As correctly pointed out by others, though, land division approvals that potentially impact the historic character and integrity of the University Heights Historic District must be carefully considered. Even though the proposed division meets the requirements based on simple "number crunching", i.e. minimum lot area, lot widths, setbacks and sideyards, etc., the extraordinary specifics of this particular proposal suggest that more than the typical administrative

staff review should be required. I agree with the decision to refer this case to the Plan Commission for a public review. Planning Division staff has wisely recommended approval under two conditions that relate to the property's historic character and its natural features:

- “any new construction on proposed Lot 2 will be subject to the criteria and standards for alterations and new construction on landmark properties as set forth in the Landmarks Commission ordinance.” This is required for any exterior alteration in the District, but staff goes above and beyond this to state “any new structure on Lot 2 [should be] approved with careful consideration to the landmark Ely House...”
- “Staff also recommends that a tree survey and tree preservation plan be submitted for approval when plans are presented for Lot 2.” My interpretation of this statement is not that every single tree is to be preserved, but rather that the existing topography and landscaping be carefully considered when designing and orienting a new dwelling, subject for approval.

Based on a concern raised by the property owners at 211 North Prospect Avenue, which is downhill from the subject property, care should also be taken to address stormwater runoff onto adjacent properties. While confident the current owner will continue to cooperate with neighbors to alleviate problems associated with this, perhaps a grading and/or stormwater intervention easement should be required, in addition to the Landmarks Commission review and tree preservation plan described earlier.

Lastly, there has been much discussion in the neighborhood, some of it repeated in opposition to this proposed lot division, about the large addition at the corner of Lathrop Street and Kendall Avenue. This unfinished structure truly is an eyesore not only to the neighborhood, but to the city as well. The offense is particularly acute to the homeowners at 210 Lathrop Street, whose property squarely faces the abandoned construction site. While there are many opinions regarding its architectural quality, though, or lack thereof, I suspect that in approving the design Landmarks Commission took into account issues such as massing, roof lines and pitch, and material choices with respect to the original house. Attempts were clearly made by the designers to relate the structure to its context and preserve the streetscape by designing garages on the interior of the lot. The tragedy is not that it is a large addition (there are many very large houses in the neighborhood that are beloved landmarks), but rather that, like many homeowners now facing foreclosure, the owners were simply overextended financially and left the neighborhood with a “white elephant”. As a precedent for denying a very reasonable proposal to subdivide the property at 205 North Prospect Avenue, though, it simply does not apply as the issues are very different.

If you have further questions, you may contact me at (608) 238-3626.

Sincerely,

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Madison, WI 53726

Cc: Tim Parks (tparks@cityofmadison.com)
Harvey and Trudy Barash, 205 North Prospect Avenue