

PLANNING DIVISION STAFF REPORT

September 17, 2025

PREPARED FOR THE URBAN DESIGN COMMISSION



Project Address: 305 N Frances Street + 533 Conklin Place
Application Type: New Multi-Family Residential Building in UMX Zoning
UDC is an Advisory Body
Legistar File ID #: [88527](#)
Prepared By: Jessica Vaughn, AICP, UDC Secretary

Background Information

Applicant | Contact: Brian Munson, Vandewalle & Associates | Doug Tichenor, CS Acquisitions Vehicle, LLC

Project Description: The applicant is proposing the construction of a 16-story multi-family residential building. The proposal includes ground floor retail, and resident amenities.

Project Timeline:

- The UDC received an Informational Presentation on June 11, 2025.
- The Plan Commission is scheduled to review this proposal on October 6, 2025.

Approval Standards: The Urban Design Commission (UDC) is an **advisory** body on this request. Section [28.076\(b\)](#) includes the related design review requirements which state that:

"All new buildings and additions to building with greater than six (6) stories shall obtain conditional use approval. In addition, the UDC shall review such projects for conformity to the design standards the [Downtown Urban Design Guidelines](#) and shall report its findings to the Plan Commission."

Related Zoning 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.

As noted in the Downtown Height Map, the maximum height allowed for the project site is 12 stories (172 feet). The Zoning Code also notes that buildings must meet both the maximum number of stories and the maximum height. In cases where applicants voluntarily enter into a contractual agreement to provide affordable housing, the maximum number of stories may be exceeded, provided the building remains at or below the maximum height (172 feet, as noted above). The applicant is exploring the possibility for additional stories (maximum 12 stories, where 16 are proposed) within the maximum allowed height (172 feet). Further discussions are in progress related to compliance with the provisions of the ordinance, including those that speak to affordability, floor area, etc.

Staff note that ultimately, the Zoning Administrator will determine compliance with the Zoning Code requirements, and any requests for additional height of stories will be addressed through the required conditional use review process by the Plan Commission.

Design-Related Plan Recommendations: The project site is located within the [Downtown Plan](#) planning area, within the Johnson Bend Neighborhood subarea. As such, development on the project site is subject to the [Downtown Urban Design Guidelines](#). The Plan recommendations for development in this area, this district should

continue as a primarily higher density student housing area with some new neighborhood service retail uses. Development on the project site is also subject to the Downtown Urban Design Guidelines as noted above.

Summary of Design Considerations

Staff recommends that the UDC provide feedback and make findings on the development proposal regarding the aforementioned standards as it relates to the design considerations noted below.

- **Building Design and Composition.** Staff requests the Commission's feedback and findings on the overall building design and composition as it relates to the Downtown Urban Design Guidelines, including those that generally speak to:

- Building Massing and Orientation. As proposed, the W Johnson Street elevation is 280 feet+/- in length with only one entry which is located at the corner of Johnson and Frances. Consideration should be given to maintaining a positive and more active orientation to W Johnson Street, including the location and orientation of active building entryways and maintaining an appropriately scaled, enhanced pedestrian environment.

In addition, as indicated on the site plan, the proposed development will closely surround three existing properties along W Conklin Place on three sides with minimal setbacks. As indicated on the elevation drawings, this side of the building (north elevation) is primarily lined with blank walls on the exterior (hallway corridor and garage on the interior). As a public street and an amenity space for both the subject site and adjacent development, consideration should be given to design alternatives to minimize the blank walls and increase permeability along the north elevation, i.e., incorporate glazing, garage door design, masonry detailing, landscape, etc.).

- Building Scale/Visual Interest. While articulation has been incorporated in the building form, a very consistent and dark material on all sides of the building, resulting in a "middle" component with little differentiation except for a thin horizontal band. Consideration should be given to the building proportions and articulation both vertical and horizontal, defining building components (top, middle, base), incorporating relief/changes in plane where materials transition, and creating positive termination at the top of the building, and providing a consistent level of design detailing across all components, especially at the top of the building, and elevations, etc.
- Building Materials, including minimizing blank walls and maintaining a consistent level of design and detailing at the ground level, especially where the proposed development interfaces with the backyards of adjacent parcels, and across the top of the building where the tan metal panel does not appear to carry across.

Generally, and in summary, the Commission's Informational Presentation comments noted that consideration should be given to:

- While the building mass and scale appeared to be broken up well, consideration should be given to articulating the wood tone material within the horizontal, making them thicker.
- Consideration should be given to the design of the "middle" component. It is a tall vertical volume, which lacks undulation; there does need to be some type of greater horizontal expression to tie this all together.
- Consideration should be given to incorporating a recess at the top, or a brow to put it in another plane.

- **Longviews and Sensitivity to Context.** Due to location of this site within the W Johnson Street view corridor, as well as mass/scale of the development, it will undoubtedly be experienced from multiple perspectives and vantage points. As such, consideration should be given to the overall composition of the building design and materials as part of the overall cityscape. As noted in the Downtown Plan and Downtown Urban Design Guidelines, consideration should be given to how buildings and their architectural designs anchor street corners and frame intersections, contribute to the overall composition of the cityscape, and incorporate a higher degree of architectural design.

For reference and current context information, staff refers the Commission to the recently completed multi-family residential development within the same block-face (Legistar File ID [67242](#)).

- **Building Materials.** The building material palette is primarily comprised of slate blue flat and corrugated metal panel with flat tan metal accents and masonry base. Staff requests UDC provide feedback on the proposed material palette, giving consideration to the Downtown Urban Design Guidelines, including those that generally speak to utilizing high quality, durable building materials and appropriate scale, color, texture, architectural detailing to create an enhanced pedestrian environment, as well as providing continuity in the finish and detailing across all elevations.
- **Landscape and Screening.** Staff request the UDC's feedback and findings related to the landscape planting plan and plant schedule giving consideration to the Downtown Urban Design Guidelines, which generally speak to utilizing context appropriate plant selections and site amenities, softening hard edges, providing year-round color, texture and interest, minimizing blank walls and screening, etc.

Of particular concern are the proposed screening for the two areas where larger-scale utilities are anticipated, one at the corner of N Frances and W Conklin Place and one along W Johnson Street frontage, the planting plan along the north elevation in terms of minimizing blank walls, and the landscape proposed along the W Johnson Street frontage in terms of creating an enhanced pedestrian environment.

If possible, and as previously indicated by the Commission, consideration should be given to exploring alternative locations for these utilities that are less prominent, located behind the building edge, underground or internal to the building. Staff encourage the applicant to continue to collaborate with MG&E early and often to confirm the required utility services, as well as explore potential alternative locations.

- **Lighting.** The Downtown Urban Design Guidelines speak lighting, including as it relates to minimizing glare for those fixtures mounted on the rooftop or higher on the building at grade, utilizing full cutoff fixtures, as well as the overall integration of lighting with the building design, etc. Staff have concerns related to some of the average light levels and uniformity ratios shown on the photometric plan as it relates to both the Downtown Design Guidelines and those requirements in MGO 29.36. In addition, staff have concerns related to fixtures HX02, HX06, HX07, HX09, HX10, HX12, HX13, HX14, and HX21 and whether they meet full cutoff requirements, as well as needing additional information, including mounting details and fixture specifications (i.e., frosted bulbs vs clear, lumen ratings, etc.) to fully evaluate the fixtures for consistency with the Downtown Urban Design Guidelines, especially those related to glare and architectural integration.

Staff recommend that the Commission address lighting in their formal action, including whether further review can be completed administratively.

In addition, staff note that Building Inspection Division staff will review lighting for compliance with MGO 29.36, which will be completed administratively as part of the Site Plan Review process.

Staff note that architectural lighting mounted high on the exterior building walls is not shown and is not part of this application. If architectural lighting comes forward in the future, additional review and approval at the commission-level will be required.

Summary of UDC Informational Presentation Discussion & Questions

As a reference, the Commission's discussion and questions from the June 11, 2025, Informational Presentation are provided below.

- The Commission discussed building height, with 12 being the maximum allowed but also 172 feet, and the floor-to-floor heights. The applicant noted they typically use a 9'8" ratio, which allows for floor thickness and ceiling heights in bedrooms being 8' and over.
- The Commission commented the building is broken up well with great articulation. The wood tone at the entry corner and roof is powerful, but it would be more powerful in articulating those materials within the horizontal if they were thicker.
- The Commission noted this is a great use of a site with some tired buildings and surface parking. They inquired about the three remaining houses abutting the site; the applicant responded that they did try to acquire them but were unsuccessful. The Commission talked about context and what may be developed on those parcels in the future.
- It is hard to picture that as a long-term reality and it seems like it would affect the design someday. The applicant is focusing more on the space between the two with landscaping, the façades of the buildings and the utility boxes, etc. These have been there since the Saxony was built and will remain. They will be limited in what can be redeveloped there by the size of the lots.
- The Commission inquired about the corner of Johnson and Frances, the corner lobby, and the first floor Johnson Street uses. The applicant noted the space contains a lobby, co-working spaces for students, seating groupings, and fitness. The Commission asked if any thought was given to another entrance on Johnson. The applicant noted it was discussed, but that sometimes multiple entries become a security risk. They have created openings through a nano wall or operable windows.
- The Commission talked about traffic on Conklin, garbage pick-up and retail deliveries, snow and pedestrians, inquiring about discussions with Traffic Engineering, as Conklin is really more of an alley. The applicant noted the idea of a drop-off lane, and trash staging, which is what several adjoining buildings do. They are not expecting to see a lot of traffic with these residents as they can walk to campus and the BRT. The transformer in the southeast corner is being worked on in terms of scale, configuration and location. The applicant is encouraged to push it back and add landscaping in front of it, and make sure the walkway to the left of it is well lit and safety is paid attention to.
- The Commission inquired about the Johnson streetscape, with a lot of congested traffic, vehicular pedestrian conflicts, and the line of mature trees, which will likely be removed as part of this project. The applicant noted they are talking about expanding the streetscape for an expanded terrace and sidewalk, and that the trees are actually on this site. They are looking at an urban paver system with tree grates, a more urban cross section. The Commission responded that they should really consider soil vaults to provide root volumes for those trees for a healthy canopy along that streetscape. This is an opportunity to make it a safer space and better element of urban design in the city.

- The Commission commented on the very dynamic base, the wood layer, the dimension, and the top as being successful, but the middle is struggling. The tall vertical volume, even with joints is still very flat. Without undulation in those vertical pieces there does need to be some type of greater horizontal expression to tie this all together. The wood entry works very well and the top is starting to work very well. Consider recessing the top a little bit, or a brow to put it in another plane.