



PLANNING DIVISION STAFF REPORT

March 30, 2022

PREPARED FOR THE URBAN DESIGN COMMISSION

Project Address: 504-524 W. Johnson Street, 312 N. Bassett Street, & 505-527 Conklin Place
Application Type: New Development in UMX District – Final Approval is Requested
Legistar File ID # [67242](#)
Prepared By: Kevin Firchow, AICP, Principal Planner

Background Information

Applicant | Contact: Neal Reardon, ESG Architecture and Design | Mitch Korte, Subtext Development

Project Description: The applicant is seeking final approval for the proposed development of a residential building containing approximately 140-150 units with 110-120 garage parking stalls and 281 bicycle stalls. Since the Urban Design Commission's (UDC) last review, the applicant has modified the ground floor design and programming and has also revised the western tower façade.

Project Schedule:

- The UDC received an informational presentation on October 6, 2021.
- The UDC granted initial approval on December 15, 2021.
- The Plan Commission conditionally approved this proposal on January 10, 2022
- The Common Council approved the proposed Certified Survey Map on January 18, 2022.

Approval Standards:

The UDC is an **advisory** body on this request. Section 28.076(c) states that "All new buildings and additions greater than twenty thousand (20,000) square feet or that have more than four (4) stories shall obtain conditional use approval. In addition, the Urban Design Commission shall review such projects for conformity to the design standards in [Sec. 28.071\(3\)](#) and the [Downtown Urban Design Guidelines](#) and shall report its findings to the Plan Commission.

Design-Related Plan Recommendations:

The [Downtown Plan](#) identifies the subject properties as a potential redevelopment area. The site is recommended for "Downtown Core Mixed-Uses" which is generally the most intensive development recommendation in Downtown. The development is within the "Johnson Street Bend" sub area which is characterized by larger-scale, high-density apartment buildings with the plan noting that this area should continue to be developed with higher-density student residential uses. The Plan recommends and the Zoning Code allows heights up to 12 stories in this location.

Summary of Design Considerations and Recommendations

The UDC is an advisory body on this request and should make its findings based on the aforementioned standards for the UMX Zoning District and Downtown Design Guidelines.

The Plan Commission is the approving body on this request, conditionally approving this item at their January 10, 2022 meeting. Related to the UDC, the Plan Commission specified the following condition:

Prior to the final sign-off by staff and issuance of permits for new construction, the proposal shall return to the UDC to receive a recommendation of final approval. The following changes shall be made for UDC approval, as conditioned by the Plan Commission:

- a. More subtle design elements added to the western tower at the southwest approach for pedestrian/vehicle experience, in the form of articulation or material changes;
- b. Inclusion of the original number of ground-floor walk-up dwelling units, either on Bassett Street or on Johnson Street as shown in the original submittal.

This condition modifies the UDC's original advisory recommendation. The primary difference is that the Plan Commission specified that ground floor "walk-up" units were required, and that they can *either* be located oriented to Bassett or Johnson Streets. While some members of the UDC expressed preference in orienting such units to the Bassett frontage and the original condition recommended "looking at" modifications to the ground level programming, the Planning Division believes that based on the action of the Plan Commission, the UDC cannot require that the walk-up units be relocated to the Bassett frontage, as part of their final approval action.

The UDC, however, can look to the remaining design items and design revisions and should provide their action on this request. Staff request the following specifically be considered:

- **Revised Western Tower Details.** As noted in the original UDC motion and subsequent PC action, the applicant was directed to revise the Western façade tower. Staff request the UDC make specific findings on that element, including its overall cohesion with the balance of the building and the composition of the upper levels and "long views," considering the overall prominence of that façade.
- **Review Design of Revised Ground Level Composition.** With the internal programmatic changes, staff requests that the UDC make findings related to the revised ground floor composition on both West Johnson and Bassett Streets, which has been revised since the Commission's previous review.

Staff refers the Commission to their comments from the October 6, 2021 informational presentation:

- The building form itself needs a little bit of excitement. It's not bad it's just very flat. The materials are fine.
- Seems like a great opportunity to improve the bike path through there, it's a critical juncture.
- It appears you're proposing nice high quality materials. All the buildings around this site are warm tone masonry, this building would stand out and seems much darker. Like the roof deck and appreciate that, appreciate the ambitions with the green roof, like the window treatments as well but do agree on the notions of taking some interest in the façade.
- It is nice to see that green roof type of amenity included not just for stormwater management but also as outdoor relief and people spaces, plants and birds. I would highly recommend that at least the second story roof space be more than just an extensive roof in a 4-inch sedum mat but have some substance and depth to it, a semi-intensive in 6-8 inches of depth for other plant species including native perennials.
- Like the relief as you wrap around on Johnson, that helps the pedestrian experience.
- Not opposed to the vertical-ness of that corner piece, it's a nice tailored element. I do think it could use flair especially where we have brick, the double soldier course at the base, there's an opportunity to do something more interesting at that level. Soldier course is too institutional.
- It is kind of dark, the James as it comes around Gorham is really dark too and I don't know if it's very successful because there's no relief. Think about adding something to this that would make it more interesting than a brown rectangle.
- I do like how you stepped it back at the pedestrian level and I really appreciate the drive-thru, this is a really highly trafficked corner, having that was a really good idea.

- There are some more fundamental issues with this design that really should be addressed at this level. I don't think it adequately acknowledges or celebrates the curve. It's foreign to the smoothness of the curve. I like and appreciate taking the sidewalk off the curve and bringing it in-board. The walk-up units belong facing Bassett Street and the bike path. The storefront and sign should be on the curve where people are zooming by, not having your walk-up apartment right there. It's a highway there in the morning.
- I agree on the dark panels, a punch of color, something other than beige or brown would be a nice counterpoint to a lot of other things we see there. Take a look particularly at the ground plane on how that's programmed and expressed along those two corners.
- Maybe the walk-ups belong on Conklin? It's really tight back there, plus here's a little house there compared to this building. Agree about the dark storefront on the base, maybe at least the storefront framing system could be lighter in color.
- My first reaction was that the curve isn't celebrated. Perhaps the idea of moving those walk-ups is one option that should be explored. Those units feel heavy, a lot of masonry, closed in and not in keeping with the rest of the building. I do appreciate the setback and moving the sidewalk in very much. The westernmost tower appears to be all clad in that same brown material, it needs additional relief.
- We're not seeing how car traffic is going to experience this. We're looking for views of the building from further out and how it's going to be experienced. The dog run seems like you're making the best use of that dead corner, it's an interesting choice for that space.
- Reiterate you don't have to use the colors or materials you see around town, really think outside the box.

Staff further refers the Commission to their comments from the 12/15/21 initial approval:

- There's not much to that mass as a first impression coming around that curve. Thought to materials, corner highlights? There's a lot of metal panel, character in the window and layouts, it's the design of the massing as you come around.
- You put a lot of detail in the elevator core, which is beautiful, but as you come around I'm concerned that this elevation doesn't have much design. By the time you get around and celebrate that curve, the pop of the building is missed.
- I agree, the right is more successful than the left side. You see the change in materials, how it's announced. It's not bad, it's so similar in pattern but you may want more articulation, material change or plane change on that tower. I like the improvements but it needs a little bit more refinement in material selection.
- Question the units that open off W. Johnson Street along the curve. That's so very different from the towers around it, it's the only curved part. A curvaceous element all through the project may be stronger while adding more of a connection with the towers.
- What is the daylight into those curved units? They look spacious.
- I made that point last time, the lobby space should be there and bring the walk-up units to Bassett Street where you have a wider sidewalk and less traffic.
- This is like a highway, that special element reads to me as 'here's the entrance to the building.' It doesn't seem to fit just individual entry points. Wondering if that curved element should continue around and embrace as a base towards Bassett Street. Give serious thought to taking those walk-ups, moving them around the corner to Bassett Street and making the main entrance if not centered, at least adjacent as part of that curve that comes around. It feels flat and inappropriate to have apartments right there.
- Strongly confirm and reiterate the comments on the imbalance between the two towers. It needs more, it is too blank.

- When I say the left tower needs more articulation it does not mean equal to the right. Don't go all out and do as much as on the other tower.
- I hear the comments about the middle curve, I definitely agree. Are we giving feedback on that or just the exterior massing, plan changes too?
- We are looking at how it works as a piece of urban design, for residents, considering what we know about the curve and the traffic there. What says "residence" and what says "this is where the lobby should be?" Why would you not put the entrance to two towers right in the middle vs. around the corner? Any of us who have obeyed the speed limit around that corner knows it's not the best place for the front door to your house. That is an urban design issue, how the building addresses the street.
- The UDC's review on this project is advisory, with findings based on the design standards for Downtown Design Guidelines and in the code.
- Could be translucent to amenity space. The curve becomes the feature where the entrance to the building could still be in the corner of Bassett and W. Johnson Streets. It makes sense to have that as the 'hub' of those two towers, continue that element around to Bassett Street to the actual doors.
- The effect the dark paneling has on the streetscape and as you're walking by, I would be supportive of reconsidering so much dark color.
- The planting plans are lovely.
- Above the pie shaped section was a response to comments Shane made, he advocated for a deeper system for perennials rather than a routine application of sedum. They obviously took his advice, I'm disappointed he's not here to see and comment on it. It's a substantial amount of the footprint of the second floor area, the way it's done in a crazy quilt pattern is unusual but I'm not averse to it. Sedums take care of themselves, these require regular work done on them. The one on the roof is interesting, it's more free flowing drifts. These are assets to birds and butterflies and a beautiful way to help absorb rain water.
- Regarding the curve, appreciate the protection with substantial terrace and beds in-bound in those residences. Agree with other comments about the darkness of the building, appreciate they are reflective to a certain extent.