

Downtown Plan: Urban Design Commission concerns

To members of the Urban Design Commission the draft Downtown Plan seemed tilted overall to the general status quo of Downtown. Members were concerned that creativity and flexibility seem not to be permitted much less encouraged. They expressed doubts whether recent major downtown projects such as Monona Terrace or the Edgewater could be encompassed in the future under such a plan should their likes come along. They asked is this really the intent?

My own observation is that when the Plan Commission did the Downtown Design districts we recognized that different goals might require flexible responses from the city so while we had goals of general height limits we permitted bonus stories for accomplishing other public goods than just the heights. This concern for flexibility was particularly noted by members in reviewing the proposed height limits in the draft plan for some areas.

Recently we saw such a tradeoff in the Tenny-Lapham area where the Johnson Street section 42 housing proposal was not the building form and mass or density that the neighborhood envisioned yet for the affordable housing goal also in the neighborhood plan they accepted a different design solution. We should ask ourselves is our crystal ball of the future really that good?

Another concern by Urban Design members was with the Mifflin Street Area concept. Members questioned whether the existing housing stock had seen it useful life and whether re-investment to preserve the single dwelling unit form was realistic. We visited this area in the draft plan twice. Members expressed concern if an overall housing analysis had been done of the effect of all the recently approved projects for student housing in the Langdon Street and Johnson Street areas and what impacts there might be for the future of Mifflin student housing? Members also expressed views that this might be an area for higher density. A question was if this is the desired housing form on Mifflin Street what are the necessary investments or policies to really make it happen as current market forces did not seem likely to produce anything but the existing substandard housing. Some questioned whether the nostalgia for the historic role of Mifflin Street could be better represented by new types of co-housing or cooperative apartments that would represent community housing forms associated with the community building character of the 1960s in new buildings than preserving the physical style of the old housing form. Other quipped that the spirit of Mifflin Street had long ago moved to Willy Street.

In the nearby W. Washington Street area members who had attended one of the major public events staged on these blocks wanted to make sure this sense of a public/civic theater space was not lost in any development plans. This was viewed as one of the great public places/spaces as worth continuation.

No specific recommendations were made but members hope the Plan Commission wisdom will weigh these with other concerns.