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To: Members of the Urban Design Commission

At your meeting on October 19<sup>th</sup>, you will have presented for your consideration a building proposal at **425 W. Washington Ave.** As a resident of the Bassett District living within three blocks of this proposed project, I have attended several neighborhood meetings on the project and have voiced my concerns to the developer's representatives and to the neighborhood steering committee. I wish to share with you my thoughts and concerns.

I think that any infill development needs to be considered not as a stand-alone project, but within the context of its surroundings. It should also be judged on how well it conforms to the Bassett Neighborhood Master Plan. While I have no quarrel with the general design and function of the proposed building, I do have strong reservations about how well this 8-story project conforms both to the existing architectural context and to the Plan. The key question, to my mind, is whether or not a case can be made to build an 8-story building in the middle of a block face comprised of, with one exception, 2- to 3-story homes. I suggest that the case cannot be made, since there is ample evidence in the Plan to support maintaining the existing scale in this block of the West Washington corridor.

The site for the proposed development falls within what the Master Plan calls the "Bassett Residential District", an area between S. Bedford St. and S. Broom St. which is "recommended for residential rehabilitation and new infill development *in scale with the existing neighborhood*" (Plan, p. 20, italics added). Further in the Plan, there is discussion regarding density in different parts of the Neighborhood. For the above-mentioned Residential Zone (26-40 DU/AC), this is what the Plan has to say:

*The existing residential zone is recommended as an area where existing density will not significantly change. Generally, a decrease in density brought about by the conversion of higher density student housing to lower density owner-occupied or long-term rental housing will be balanced by additional housing created through selective infill. . . . New construction should complement the existing neighborhood scale which is predominantly 2 and 3 story. (p. 28)*

The Plan goes on to provide recommended design guidelines for new construction (p. 29). There are several guidelines which the proposed building does not adequately address, notably:

- *High quality architecture.* Its “green” principles aside, there is nothing remarkable about this building’s design which would make it an outstanding addition to the very visible West Washington Ave. corridor.
- *Compatibility with the scale and character of adjoining buildings.* All existing buildings on the block save one—the unfortunate “AAA Building”—are no taller than 3 stories. With the exception of the AAA Building, the homes on both sides of the 400 block are good examples of the Victorian period, giving the block a distinctive historic character that is worth preserving.
- *Building and parking design that maintains the continuity of the blockface.* As mentioned above, the design of the proposed building would be a striking departure from the other structures on the blockface and could set the precedent for more low- to high-rise proposals in the future.
- *Architectural form and character that breaks up the building mass and minimizes shadow and viewshed impacts on adjoining properties.* If built at 8 stories, this building would have significant negative shadowing impacts on its smaller neighbors to the east.

Finally, the Plan gets very specific in discussing the character of West Washington Avenue, “a gracious and attractive entrance to the State Capitol and the Bassett Neighborhood. This corridor is distinctive with its mix of commercial and residential uses, the historic scale and character of existing buildings, broad terraces and large canopy trees. Preservation and enhancement of West Washington Avenue is important to the character of the Bassett Neighborhood and the downtown.” (p.31) As the Plan points out on p. 32, “The area between S. Bedford Street and Broom Street has a strong residential character with 2-3 story buildings set back from the street. *The character and scale of the existing residential street frontage should be preserved to maintain the integrity of the residential neighborhoods that occur on both sides of West Washington Avenue. Building rehabilitation of existing structures should be encouraged. While selective demolition and infill may be appropriate, new buildings should be designed with a character and scale that compliments the existing block face*” (my italics).

At the neighborhood forum to discuss this project just this past week, I asked the development team why, given the opportunity to design a new building from the ground up, they had chosen to disregard several key provisions in the neighborhood’s Plan. There was an attempt to hold up the AAA Building as some type of precedent for the height—a misguided attempt since it is 1) a building utterly lacking in architectural character, and 2) the lone example of a building—on both sides of the 400 block—which is taller than 3 stories. Another team member cited the economics of the project as necessary for the height. In my opinion, economics should never be cited as a justification for overriding provisions in a formally adopted Neighborhood Plan.

When this project comes up for discussion on Wednesday evening, I hope you will give serious consideration to the massing and scale in relation to surrounding homes and in the context of the historic West Washington corridor. I do not oppose infill on this site, but I do oppose this developer's vision of what is appropriate infill. The Bassett Neighborhood deserves a better project for this prominent location, a project which will take into account the Master Plan's principles from the very start.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my views with you.

Sincerely,

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