

STATEMENT BY CITIZEN MEMBERS OF LANDMARKS COMMISSION

The Landmarks Commission applauds the Hammes Co. for its plans to renovate the original Edgewater and reduce the modern addition. We understand that a new Edgewater Hotel is needed to help fund those activities. And we acknowledge that many people strongly support this project.

Yet we voted 6-1 to deny both the Certificate of Appropriateness and a variance. Why?

Very simply, because the ordinance we were appointed to uphold required us to do so.

The Mansion Hill Historic District – the first local historic district in Wisconsin -- requires that the gross volume of new additions be compatible with the buildings and environment within 200 feet. If the gross volume is not compatible, the law simply does not allow us to approve a new addition.

The Edgewater addition we rejected last November was about 1.69 million cubic feet. The revised proposal is about 1.96 million cubic feet, with almost 1.5 million cubic feet above grade. Even with the National Guardian Life building in the calculation, all citizen members of the commission felt strongly that a building of this size and mass failed to satisfy the legal standard.

The legislative history clearly demonstrates that your predecessors unanimously created this historic district explicitly to prevent another huge, non-residential building like the National Guardian Life. Now, the NGL building itself is being used to justify an even bigger, even more intrusive building. We think not.

Make no mistake: stopping this project as currently proposed is exactly why the common council of 1976 unanimously – unanimously – enacted this ordinance.

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Some have said we should have looked to the larger public interest, and approve the project even though it didn't meet the explicit terms of the ordinance. But consider the implications of having your commissioners go beyond the terms of their charter and make decisions based on vague, personal notions of what's good for the city.

After we rejected the Certificate of Appropriateness, we passed another motion, also 6-1, stating that a new tower of about 850,000 cubic feet above Langdon St. would satisfy the terms of the ordinance. That would effectively double the existing Edgewater complex when viewed from Wisconsin Ave., plus give it the new below-grade addition.

If Bob Dunn had come to us in 2008 when he began work, we would have told him that his original 11-story building was way too big, and that he plan on a building that met the terms of the ordinance – such as the one we endorsed last week.

Would a new tower of 850,000 cubic feet above ground provide the revenue stream for the level of renovation as envisioned? Perhaps not. But under the ordinance, the site is simply not appropriate for a project of this size. But it is appropriate for a smaller project. And if that gets us a silver or even bronze level renovation of the old Edgewater, well, that's okay. A building should fit the site, not the bankroll. Remember – the failure to maximize profit is not a “substantial hardship.”

This has been a long and difficult process, with acrimony and accusations from all sides. But one thing is certain. The Landmarks Commission did its job, as the ordinance directed us to do it.

Now it is for the Common Council to do the same.