



PREPARED FOR THE URBAN DESIGN COMMISSION

Project Address: 139 W Wilson Street

Application Type: New Multi-Family Residential Building in UMX Zoning
UDC is an Advisory Body

Legistar File ID #: [88479](#)

Prepared By: Jessica Vaughn, AICP, UDC Secretary

Background Information

Applicant | Contact: Douglas Pahl, Aro Eberle Architects

Project Description: The applicant is proposing the construction of a 16-story, multi-family residential building with 320-units.

Project Background: A similar development proposal was reviewed at the January 24, 2024, UDC meeting. At that time, the UDC made an advisory recommendation to the Plan Commission for denial of the proposal finding that the Downtown Urban Design Guidelines and some of the Conditional Use Standards related to building design, lighting, and site circulation were not met. Please refer to Legistar File ID [70108](#) for additional information.

Project Schedule:

- The UDC received an Informational Presentation on June 11, 2025.
- The Plan Commission is scheduled to review this proposal at the November 3, 2025, meeting.

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 buildings with greater than six (6) stories shall obtain conditional use approval. In addition, the UDC shall review such projects for conformity to 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. Staff notes that ultimately, the Zoning Administrator will determine Zoning Code compliance.

As noted in the Downtown Height Map, the maximum height allowed for the project site is the Capital View Preservation limit. As noted in the applicant's letter of intent, the elevator and stair tower overrun project into the Capitol View Preservation Limit. Such projections are required to obtain conditional use approval. While the Plan Commission is the approving body for such requests, the staff notes that the UDC should review such projections for consistency with the Downtown Urban Design Guidelines, including those guidelines that speak to the integration of rooftop equipment and design of building components creating positive termination at the top of the building. More specifically, the guidelines state:

"Large mechanical penthouses and elevator overrides should be fully integrated into the building architecture and be appropriately-scaled to serve as architectural features and avoid the appearance of being "plopped" on top."

Design-Related Plan Recommendations: The project site is located within the [Downtown Plan](#) planning area, within the Downtown Core subarea. As such, development on the project site is subject to the [Downtown Urban Design Guidelines](#). The Plan recommendations for development in this area generally speak to encouraging the highest intensity of development in this area and encouraging a mix of uses that will help to retain the area's vibrancy.

Summary of Design Considerations

Staff requests the Commission's feedback and findings on the development proposal regarding the aforementioned standards as it relates to the design considerations noted below.

- **Building Design and Composition.** The Downtown Urban Design Guidelines speak to utilizing building modulation and articulation to distinguish architectural components (top, middle, base), the appropriateness of setbacks/stepbacks to minimize perceived mass and scale, balancing proportions and horizontal and vertical datums with design details, including windows/window openings and incorporating articulation in transitions between materials, creating positive termination at the top of the building, and utilizing an enhanced level of design and detailing at the pedestrian level, etc.

Staff note that the building design has been revised to create a more cohesive top element, with the material and fenestration changes on the upper two stories. In addition, a true base course has also been incorporated into the building design with a gray precast panel material. While there have been a number of design improvements, staff request the Commission's feedback on the design of the lakeside of the building (south elevation) and west elevation where the ground floor design appears to be lacking architectural detailing or windows. Of particular concern is the lakeside of the building, which will be highly visible, as well as be utilized as an amenity space. As such, consideration should be given to incorporating a similar level of design/detailing and materials as the front (north) elevation.

Staff requests the Commission's feedback and findings on the overall building design and composition as it relates to the design guidelines, as well as the Commission's Informational Presentation comments noted below, provided generally and in summary:

- The Commission noted that while the design approach at the top of the building had been improved, the design of both sides needed to mimic each other because the building is so narrow; the two top ends of the building need to relate to each other better.
 - The articulated panel design is different, some of the organization with the windows helps a little but there is still work to be done to strengthen the overall composition.
 - The Commission noted that more detail, contextual detail, and datums were needed.
- **Projections into Capital View Height Limitation.** As noted above, the elevator and stair tower overrun project into the Capitol View Preservation Limit. As an advisory body to the Plan Commission, staff request the Commission's feedback and findings related the proposed projections for consistency with the Downtown Urban Design Guidelines, including those guidelines that speak to the integration of rooftop equipment and design of building components creating positive termination at the top of the building.
- **North Elevation Main Entrance Design Options.** As noted in the applicant's submittal materials there are two options being presented for the height of the main building entrance design on the north elevation; a four-story entry portal or a three-story entry portal. Staff request the Commission's feedback and findings related to the entry design and height. In addition, staff recommend that the Commission address whether a three-story, four-story, or alternative entry portal design/height is appropriate in the formal motion.

The Downtown Urban Design Guidelines note that consideration should be given to the proportions and relationships of architectural elements as it relates to the scale of other buildings in the vicinity, maintaining a human scale, as well as the other datum lines within the block face.

Generally, and in summary, the UDC's Informational Presentation comments related to the building entrance noted that:

- The five story entrance is out of scale; the proportions are off and don't relate to the datums of other buildings.
 - Maintain the punched openings, but look for a way to add more openings for more light.
 - The front façade entry piece may work better if it were brought down or brought up a little bit.
 - The smoothness against the textured panels works nicely.
 - The proportion of a five-story mass will be very different at the pedestrian level than what is being shown. Three stories may feel gigantic and colorful, noting that it would be interesting to see an exploration of a different proportion of that space.
- **Materials.** The Downtown Urban Design Guidelines generally speak to utilizing high quality materials, four-sided architecture, as well as using a palette that is simple, provides visual interest, and that is contextually appropriate. As noted in the elevation drawings, the material palette is comprised of primarily an articulated acid etched concrete panels system, flat precast concrete panels, both gray and off white, and a faux wood aluminum accent panel.

Staff request the Commission's feedback and findings on the overall material palette.

- **Longviews.** Due to the prominence of this site from Lake Monona and John Nolen Drive, consideration should be given to the composition of the highly visible rear façade as part of the overall cityscape. In addition, the Downtown Urban Design Guidelines generally speak to buildings being designed to reflect the prominence of their locations, including giving consideration to roof forms, incorporating relief from the building façade or visual interest in the building form as it meets the sky, etc.

Staff requests the Commission's feedback and findings on the overall building design and detailing of the upper floors of the building, as well as the lakeside of the building.

- **Wall Packs.** As noted on the elevation drawings, HVAC louvers are included on both the longer east/west elevations. It has been the current practice to locate wall packs and their associated louvers so that they are not located on street-facing or on highly visible facades, although they have been approved in some situations when found to be well integrated into the façade's design. Staff requests the Commission's feedback and findings related to the design and finish details of the proposed wall packs.
- **Landscape.** 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, both internal to the site, but also in terms of creating an enhanced pedestrian environment. Staff request the Commission's feedback and findings on the overall landscape plan and plant schedule.
- **Lighting.** Staff note that while the proposed lighting appears to be generally consistent with the Downtown Urban Design Guidelines, especially those related to glare and architectural integration, Fixture OG1 does not appear to be full cutoff, which is required based on the delivered lumen rating, both by the guidelines and MGO 29.36. As such an alternate fixture may be required.

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 of the building is not shown and is therefore not part of this review nor subsequent action. If architectural lighting comes forward in the future, additional review and approval at the commission-level will be required.

Summary of UDC Informational Presentation Comments and Discussion

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

The Commission appreciated the contextualization of the presentation. The front entry is bold, but doesn't look like it provides any protection from the elements. The applicant noted the entry could be better protected from the rain. The Commission inquired about the southern end trees against railroad tracks, and if any thought was given to programming that space for views. The applicant noted there is a pergola in that space.

The Commission commented that in this part of the city it is feasible to not provide any parking.

The Commission noted issues with the site plan that still need work: the views and access through the site, the parking turning radius, delivery drop-off/pick-up needs to be accommodated on this site, the entry does not work at five stories and is out of scale, the proportions are off and don't relate to the datums of other buildings and should be revisited, the approach to the crown is getting better, but because the building is so narrow it has to mimic that on both sides. Those two top ends need to relate to each other better, they are undefined and off. The panel design is different, some of the organization with the windows helps a little but there is still work to be done to strengthen the overall composition.

The Commission noted a great opportunity to design something new for Madison. Function should follow form. The darker material meeting the ground makes it appear more structurally sound. This carries the rest of the lighter, taller building well. The applicant noted the elevator penthouse and tops of the north and south elevations will be all precast concrete panels. The walnut finish with aluminum accent is very strong, and is articulated on the longer elevations as well, but a horizontal cap of the same material would be stronger; include the actual wood color as part of the "A" at level fifteen.

Commissioner Mbilinyi commented that the entry is stunning and questioned why more glass should be incorporated. The entry proportions are very good, it's a very stunning mural. She suggested to maintain the punched openings, but look for a way to add more openings for more light, and to articulate that into the awning so it's more powerful.

Alder Mayer commented that the entry is bold in a unique way, and inquired about the light source. The applicant noted it is entirely lit and the whole surface would be illuminated. In the summer it will be a magnet for lake flies, and spiders under the overhang, a maintenance plan will be key. It's an interesting building in a narrow spot and a very good use of land. Not having parking is a risk the developer decides on; you either get tenants who find other ways to get around, or the building doesn't fill up.

The Commission commented that this building came through as purple metal panel the first time and how exciting that color choice was.

Commissioner Asad commented that they are not here to design the building for the developer, but there are guidelines they should refer to relative to magic packs, louvers and vents that are restricted and that will change the façade. There are considerations in the staff report that have been talked about before and are very important. The applicant will need to come back with more detail, contextual detail, and datums.

The Commission commented on the comparison to flat iron being so narrow and tall. The front façade entry piece may work better if it were brought down or brought up a little bit. The smoothness against the textured panels works nicely. Keep maturing the site development, it is nice to provide amenities for the residents instead of being building-locked.

The Commission talked about the previous color version, the bold move splash of color in the entry, and the proportion of a five-story mass being very different at the human scale than what is being shown. Three stories will feel gigantic and colorful, it would be interesting to see an exploration of a different proportion of that space. The backlighting piece is critical for adjacent neighbors.

The Commission inquired about introducing access to the lake and celebrating Madison lakes, which is key point #1 of the Downtown Plan. This corridor terminates awkwardly and doesn't frame the view but actually blocks the view from the street. There are opportunities within the design that were never fully realized or captured. The parking discussion had focused on a space that will be buzzing with drop-off activity, short term parking needs, as well as a pedestrian corridor; the hatched pathway through the site combined with vehicular turning in and out was never fully resolved nor well designed. There are code requirements for accessibility and aisles that need to be paid close attention to.

The Commission discussed the front glass, and the assumption it would be a subtle glow as opposed to a projection of light. Regarding views to the lake through the corridor, that is questionable as perhaps we don't want to draw people through the site as private property, it could be a safety concern. It seems more of an amenity for the residents of the building. There is a difference between access to the lake and to views of the lake.

The Commission mentioned CUNA on Mineral Point Road and the backlit glass as a glowing mass up rather high, which faces an open area that is not residential, but is still light pollution. In this location, the courthouse is directly across the street and won't be affected the light.