



Project Address: 1601-1617 Sherman Avenue
Application Type: Residential Building Complex
UDC is an Advisory Body
Legistar File ID #: [74227](#)
Prepared By: Jessica Vaughn, AICP, UDC Secretary

Background Information

Applicant | Contact: Darrin Jolas, Vermilion Development | Tenney Place Development, LLC

Project Description: The applicant is proposing the development of a Residential Building Complex consisting of two, five-story apartment buildings and three, two-story townhouse buildings to be located on both sides of a new east-west public street. The development will contain approximately 331 units between the five buildings. Parking for 364 automobiles will be provided within the buildings, with 36 off-street surface parking stalls; 365 bike parking stalls will also be provided. As part of the proposal, the applicant is proposing to rezone the project site from SE (Suburban Employment District) to TR-U2 (Traditional Residential–Urban 2 District) and demolish the existing two-story office building, the former “Filene House.”

Project Schedule:

- UDC received an Informational Presentation on October 26, 2022.
- Landmarks Commission reviewed this proposal on March 6, 2023.
- The UDC made an advisory recommendation to the Plan Commission on March 1, 2023.
- Plan Commission approved this proposal on March 13, 2023, with conditions including final review by the UDC prior to sign off.
- Common Council approved this proposal (rezoning) on March 21, 2023.
- The UDC Referred consideration of this item on April 26, 2023.

Approval Standards: Initially, the UDC was an **advisory body** on this request. [Section 33.24\(4\)\(c\)](#), MGO states that: *“The Urban Design Commission shall review the exterior design and appearance of all principal buildings or structures and the landscape plans of all proposed residential building complexes. It shall report its findings and recommendations to the Plan Commission.”*

The UDC’s initial action was an advisory recommendation to the Plan Commission for Initial Approval. That recommendation included various conditions and design related considerations, including the recommendation that the project return to UDC for final review and approval. As such, it is the UDC’s role to review the revised drawings for consistency with the Plan Commission’s conditions of approval. Staff advises that the UDC review the updated plans and confirm that the conditions of approval, as noted below, have been met. Additionally, since the last UDC meeting, staff was made aware that Building C has been modified related to its relationship to grade. In order to consider that alteration, staff had advised the applicant to also show modifications as part of this review.

Adopted Plans: The [2018 Comprehensive Plan](#) recommends that the subject site be developed in the Medium Residential (MR) category. The MR land use category generally allows a variety of relatively intense housing types, including rowhouses, small multi-family buildings, and large multi-family buildings at a density of 20-90 units per acre in two- to five-story buildings. The Plan recommends that *“...special attention must be paid to design within*

MR areas where the use adjoins less intense residential development – architectural features such as a stepback may be needed to transition MR development to less intense surrounding development.”

The project site is located within the [Emerson East-Eken Park-Yahara Neighborhood Plan](#) (the “Plan”) planning area. The Plan identifies the project site as being within Focus Area Four, the Sherman/Yahara Neighborhood Area. The Plan provides two potential conceptual redevelopment plans for the project site, both of which take into consideration the redevelopment guidelines and recommendations noted in the Plan, including the recommendation for a change in land use from employment to residential. The Plan also identifies design considerations for future redevelopment, including those that generally speak to encouraging a mix of residential land uses varying in height from two to five stories and creating a residential streetscape, utilizing classic design with some modern elements, designing parking areas to include innovative stormwater management features, preservation of wooded areas along property lines and lake views, and incorporating gateway features (public art, landscape, streetscape enhancements, etc.), enhanced pedestrian connectivity to the adjacent parklands and surrounding neighborhood, and gathering spaces into site redevelopment plans. The Plan also recommends a future street connection that would run through the project site to connect Sherman Avenue to Fordem Avenue.

Summary of Design Considerations

It is the role of the UDC to review the revised drawings for consistency with the Plan Commission’s conditions of approval, specifically Conditions No. 1 and No. 2, as outlined below. Please note that as Plan Commission conditions of approval, they are required to be met. The UDC’s role is to ensure these conditions are met, however they cannot waive or change these requirements. Staff requests the UDC’s final action to reflect the following:

1. More development of the townhouses. Revisit the material choices on the smaller structures, especially Building B2, to limit the boxy appearance of the townhouses. The lap siding should be replaced with an alternate material.

With regard to this condition, the Commission noted that “...the design of the townhouses shall be refined with similar concerns about privacy issues of the front porches, but also consideration of materials and colors to lend a more traditionally residential feel.”

2. How the Buildings A and C address the new street. The architecture of Buildings A and C shall be revised to activate the new proposed street more by whatever means appropriate.

First, with regard to this condition, staff note that a design progression that has occurred related to the street activation of Building C along the new public street. The applicant has indicated to staff that as a result of soils issues, Building C has been raised further out of the ground (approximately 1.5 feet), which resulted in the loss of active units entries along the street, as well as the relocation of the common building entrance. In order to consider this Alteration to the Plan Commission approved plans, staff requests that the Commission provide specific feedback related to proposed revisions to Building C.

In addition, with regard to this condition, the Commission noted that “...resolving privacy issues with Building A porches facing Sherman Avenue, either by landscaping, architecture or both.”

Summary of April 26, 2023 UDC Discussion and Action

Staff refers the Commission to the comments from the April 26, 2023, meeting:

- Are those patios facing Sherman Avenue private to a certain unit, or are they for everybody that lives in that building? The ones that are closer to grade.
 - Those are all individual units on the ground floor.
- They feel very exposed. You're going to see grills, personal effects, it feels like maybe those walls or something need to be taller around there to give the occupants more privacy. I think I have the exact same comment on the townhouses.
- The townhouses still really look commercial, the scale of the windows, there's something about them, a lot of gray, flat; the pattern of the mullions reminds me of an office building downtown. And again those patios are very exposed, you're seeing not only the patio but all the way into the units. I like to see a lot of natural sunlight going in there, but they're still really exposed and the materials feel very commercial still, it's very cold.
- I agree 100 percent on the townhouses, it almost looks like a government building, nothing about this says residential, I don't know if it's the scale or materials, or a combination of both. I don't think it's a match to the multi-family buildings but they're so far away from those in design that it's just a huge disconnect. I'm not getting anything residential from these buildings, I feel like they were closer last time. I agree with the privacy issue on the patios. Otherwise the other buildings look good. My main concerns are about the design and materials of the townhomes. On Sherman, where are the doors to these patios? Can somebody just walk right up to that patio, there's no protection or barrier?
 - These two are open, the ones at the other wing, because the grade falls away they do have walls in the front, these two don't.
- Even if it was a gate with a shorter wall or something that gives you a "this is my space" type feel would be better.
- Has this gone to Plan Commission and been sent back to us? I'm confused on what we should be commenting on and would like a little help.
- (Secretary) We have seen this and did make an advisory recommendation to the Plan Commission with a number of conditions. Ultimately the Plan Commission adopted those as formal conditions of approval and our review purview tonight is limited to those items. I'm hearing discussion on #1, the townhomes, and #5, which is more activation of Building A on Sherman. Tonight we'd just be running through that list and checking those boxes.
- Looking at the staff report there are eight bullet points, but they are really focused on landscaping, green roofs, and of course the design of the townhouses.
- Going through the townhouse drawings...I think the backs are a little less successful because of the amount of building above the windows. It almost looks like there is a huge parapet there. The street facing ones, I'm not sure what the concern is from Lois and Rafeeq exactly, but I do think the scale of those buildings is residential. It might be the colors or the way the materials are detailed. Looking at the street elevation, because of the rhythm, the height and the clear delineate of units along the façade, I definitely think they come off as residential townhouses and I certainly don't advocate the designers making them look like they were designed at different times by different architects. If there is more work to be done it should be rather clear as to what that is, what changes need to be done because we signed off on the basic massing and siting of the buildings. It could very well be a matter of bringing a railing on top of the low wall to delineate private space, and adding some landscaping up there to make it more protected and soften it.
- I don't think it's the scale of the building, I think it's everything else.
- Could it be maybe the sort of a cornice at the top that makes it look a little commercial? Could it be some of those design cues making it look like more of a commercial building?

- I think it's that, it's the rhythm of the large openings, the materials, everything else. When you go super modern, this little thin profile for the entry canopy, it's hard to get residential with modern, with this kind of monochromatic material selection.
- Perhaps it is the huge expanses of glass that make it so exposed and less private.
- This looks not like a townhome I associate in an urban setting, maybe that's the modernistic quality of the design. I'm trying to imagine living there, would I want to hang out in the front yard? No. Fencing or a wall, or a little divider set back so you feel like you have your own space. It looks like a commercial retail thing but it's not. This is a really important design for this street to have that kind of street-facing residential, and it's just not quite there yet.
- Sometimes that privacy is augmented by them being elevated a little bit, so you are not looking right in. Maybe the ones down the street have a bit more of a walk up, but these are pretty flat to the ground.
- I'm trying to put my finger on it. This elevation we're seeing, the way it appears that the two units on the ends have the slightly lower roofline then it pops up for the next four. Maybe it could be that that just reads as a building with two wings on the side, maybe it needs more vertical distinguishing of each unit, which is how I think of a townhouse, repetition in there together. I kept going back to the old version, you had one level roofline but popped out the three. There's not a lot of difference, you still have the panels and battens, it could be the scale of those and the material. The material doesn't have a lot of interest or pedestrian scale there. I think it's a scale issue with the size of the windows, the punched big window with where the mullions are and the large expanses of hardiboard or panel, then the massing overall where it's one big thing that's divided into essentially three pieces.
- All of it being kind of monochromatic doesn't help much.
- I want to point out when you look at the landscape there are ornamental trees and vegetation that really anchors this in the landscape, unlike what we're viewing on the screen right now. In particular those corners are just begging for an ornamental tree to anchor them and that's what is on the landscape plan. I think the cornice and raised area, being what appears to be centered is one of the bigger problems, it looks very asymmetrical even though so much about it is symmetrical, that gives it the institutional vibe that if it was offset, might be better. I do think the landscape designed, not as rendered, is helpful and is good. Otherwise I think just to comment on the site in general, I think it's very approvable, looking at the checklist. Street activation I'm still pretty happy with, other than maybe our first discussion about the walls containing those patios, from a site perspective that would be the only condition I have. I think the activation is there, the articulation is there, the detail in renderings and green roof is there. I think the planting adjustments were made, it was mentioned some of the planting was saved, I'm still not sure if we have a full understanding of what mature trees may be lost by the project, but otherwise I think we're checking most of the boxes.
- Overall the changes are appreciated. I had some problems downloading full packages and did not come across the arborist report and tree saving plan, but it appears it was addressed. I know they were working with Bruce Alison on that, so I'm keeping my fingers crossed that efforts were made to preserve as many mature trees as possible. Appreciate swapping out honey locusts with some oak trees for future generations. There was interesting work done on the green roof areas with some more non-traditional type of plants we usually see in there. The activation of Building A to the street goes a long way towards doing exactly that and makes a more vibrant and dynamic streetscape. Addressing these townhomes, I don't think I have as much problem with them as some of the Commissioners. Last time people were mainly concerned with material issues, comments about lap siding on the back half of these. Everybody is right, these do not read as residential, but people are thinking of residential in pretty traditional terms. Clearly this is not that. This would be appealing to myself and a lot of people would like the look of it, the large windows and general feel of the building. It certainly is different. I can't think of any other projects we've seen with this type of townhouse. Viva la difference, not for everybody but fairly attractive. The trouble with some of these renderings are that they don't really accurately show the planting designs, and that goes a long way to allaying some of the concerns people had. The front patios regardless are very exposed, if those low walls can come up another eighteen inches or so would be very welcome and would make them feel much more private. If there was a fairly open and airy pergola, it

would make it look less commercial and have a more residential feel, and give shelter from a very exposed area to the sun and south. Nothing says institutional or commercial like a lot of taupe and beige colors. I don't see any reason why the panel parts of those couldn't be something with a little bit more color, or more than one color stretching the span of the building to differentiate one unit from another.

- I'm looking for a motion that addresses the eight points in the staff report. We have to give them definite direction, the Plan Commission had put this back in our lap at our request. Other than the building and the privacy concerns about the individual unit terraces, are there any concerns about the wayfinding, site connectivity, landscaping, green roofs? That was like three, four or five of the bullet points. Item #7 was more renderings and details, which we have. Traffic calming, pedestrian connectivity, landscape plan, and roof terraces.
- I admittedly never look at landscape plans, Shane and Christian do a very good job of that, so I focus on the architecture. In looking at the streetscape in front of the townhomes, I agree more trees here would help with the scale. Colors could help, differentiating where one unit ends and one begins, whether in color variation of material change or even plane change, some of those would help this image. Based on Shane's comments the plans look pretty good but it's just not coming through in the rendering. I don't have an issue with those other bullets regarding wayfinding and things like that.
- I missed the point about traffic calming. I would mention to potentially narrow the street as it hits Sherman, similar to how they have it on Johnson Street where it comes in at the corners to protect where cars are parked, then you don't have cars parking too close to the intersection. I would say to narrow the street as it approaches Sherman Avenue as a traffic calming possibility.
- (Secretary) We need to be careful about designing the public right-of-way, ultimately that is up to Public Works and City Engineering. I think we can make suggestions and recommendations on refining the design or narrowing it, but we absolutely cannot require anything having to do with street design.
- It asks us to include traffic calming on the new street, so I did.
- They flare those corners out all the time.
- So it looks like there was still concern on Item #1, the development of the townhouses and how A and C address the new street. There is concern on how A addresses the street, C is ok. That's conditions 1 and 2. Lois had a suggestion on street calming. That's 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8, would those be considered successfully addressed?
- Yes and one more, we did mention connectivity of all the buildings to the dog park. I would also recommend to the City, if we can, make a raised tabletop or something in one or two locations where pedestrians are most likely to cross that new city street just because there are bends in it and there is parking on both sides and if we are wanting people from Buildings A and C to use the dog park, we should provide a safe place for them to cross, maybe the site plan image is enough, maybe that's all it takes, crosswalks in strategic locations.
- Looking for a motion that gives a direction of items of the 8 that are ok, that do not need other consideration and those that might. And those that might, it would help staff and the applicant to be as specific as possible as to what shortcomings there might be.
- A motion noting we feel the items that have been brought back have been addressed, with exception of delving into increasing privacy with Building A porches facing Sherman Avenue, either by architecture or landscaping or both (Condition 2), and that the design of the townhouses (Condition 1), specifically the two facing the public street be refined addressing similar concerns about privacy issues of the front porches, but also considerations of materials and colors to lend a more traditionally residential feel to them. The applicant can take previous comments on how to tweak it a little more.
- Is this motion for referral?
- I guess from a procedural standpoint that would be what it would be.
- Does the motion find items 3, 5, 6, 7 and 8 accepted and item 4 is traffic calming, which there were some suggestions made?

- I don't have the printed list of all those numbers, I'm not sure exactly what those are. I thought that going through them all we felt they had largely been addressed other than the items I mentioned (Conditions 1 and 2).

Action

On a motion by Harper, seconded by Braun-Oddo, the Urban Design Commission **REFERRED** consideration of this item. The motion was passed on a unanimous vote of (6-0). The motion provided for the following conditions:

- The motion finds that conditions 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 have been addressed.
- With regard to Condition 1, the design of the townhouses shall be refined with similar concerns about privacy issues of the front porches, but also consideration of materials and colors to lend a more traditionally residential feel.
- With regard to Condition 2, delving into resolving privacy issues with Building A porches facing Sherman Avenue, either by landscaping, architecture or both.