



Project Address: 425 N Frances Street and 450 W Gilman Street

Application Type: New Mixed-Use Building in DC Zoning
UDC is an Advisory Body

Legistar File ID #: [89583](#)

Prepared By: Jessica Vaughn, AICP, UDC Secretary

Background Information

Applicant | Contact: Brian Munson, Vandewalle & Associates | Brad Aycok, Villas Student Housing, LLC

Project Description: The applicant is proposing the construction of a 16-story mixed-use building comprised of 115 multi-family residential units and ground floor retail along N Frances Street. The development will be served by underground parking stalls and rooftop amenities.

Staff note that both a land division to combine parcels (Certified Survey Map or CSM) and rezoning of the project site from Urban Mixed Use (UMX) to Downtown Core (DC) are being pursued as part of a Land Use Application request.

Project Schedule:

- The Landmarks Commission reviewed an Informational Presentation on September 15, 2025 (Legistar File ID [90011](#)).
- UDC received an Informational Presentation on September 17, 2025.
- At the November 11, 2025 meeting, the Landmarks Commission made an advisory recommendation to the UDC and Plan Commission. The findings and advisory recommendation are included below.
- The Plan Commission is scheduled to review this proposal at their December 1, 2025, meeting (Legistar File IDs [90538](#) (Rezoning), [90470](#) (Demolition of 450 W Gilman Street), [90393](#) (CSM), and [90381](#) (Conditional Use).
- The Common Council is scheduled to review this proposal (rezoning and CSM only) at their December 9, 2025 meeting.

Approval Standards: The Urban Design Commission ("UDC") is an **advisory body** to the Plan Commission on this request. Pursuant to [Section 28.074\(4\)c](#):

All new buildings and additions greater than six (6) stories shall obtain conditional use approval. In addition, the Urban Design Commission shall review such projects for conformity to the design standards in the [Downtown Urban Design Guidelines](#) and shall report its findings to the Plan Commission.

As noted above, the UDC is an **advisory body** to the Plan Commission on this request. Staff recommend that as an advisory body, the UDC should structure a motion as a recommendation to the Plan Commission with or without specific findings and conditions. For example, such a motion may look like the following:

"The UDC finds, on balance, that the Downtown Urban Design Guidelines have been met, with the following conditions being met...and recommends that the Plan Commission approve the proposed development."

Adopted Plans: The project site is in the [Downtown Plan](#) planning area, in the State Street Neighborhood. Generally, the recommendations included in the Downtown Plan speak to encouraging a diverse mix of uses, and creating a unique sense of place, an enhanced design at the pedestrian level and human-scale development.

Zoning Related Information: While the project site is currently zoned Urban Mixed Use (UMX), the applicant is seeking a rezoning to Downtown Core (DC). The Zoning Code outlines design standards that are applicable to all new buildings in the Downtown and Urban Zoning Districts ([MGO 28.071\(3\)](#)), including, but not limited to those related to parking, building entrance orientation, façade articulation, design of street-facing facades, door and window openings, and building materials. Staff note that ultimately, the Zoning Administrator will determine compliance with Zoning Code requirements.

In addition, as noted in the Downtown Height Map, pursuant to MGO 28.071, the maximum permitted height for the project site is 12 stories/172 feet.

While the proposed building at its tallest is 16 stories (approx. 171 feet), which is in excess of the maximum height allowed in the Downtown Height Map in stories, staff note that additional stories may be requested when affordable housing units are provided and the applicant enters into a voluntary land use restriction agreement, as outlined in the Zoning Code, provided that the overall building height in feet (172 feet) is not exceeded. It is staff's understanding that the applicant is proposing to pursue the land use restriction agreement. With that, the applicant is encouraged to work with the Zoning Administrator to confirm that the proposed building will meet the height limitations in feet and that stories are being reported correctly.

Landmarks Commission Advisory Recommendation: The project site is adjacent to the Grimm Book Bindery at 454 W Gilman Street, which is a designated local landmark. The proposed development will trigger compliance with [MGO 28.144](#) for development adjacent to a landmark or landmark site.

As noted above, the Landmarks Commission made an advisory recommendation to the UDC and Plan Commission, that included:

- A finding that due to the side yard setback and substantial step back from the single-story wing of the building, the proposed building will not be so large as to adversely affect the historic character and integrity of the landmark, and
- A recommendation that **a less industrial and closed character of the exterior materials of the single-story wing be sought** to increase the street-level activation so that it is not so visually intrusive as to adversely affect the historic character and integrity of the adjacent landmark.

As noted in the staff report, while the height datum of the single-story wing aligns with the adjacent landmark, the closed nature of that volume and the industrial character of the materials for the garage door and metal paneling above it are an architectural disconnect. Ultimately, the Landmarks Commission recommendation is to utilize a door and design detailing that is more in keeping with the architectural character of a commercial storefront instead of a utilitarian, back of house function. The staff report indicated that glass panel door would be more appropriate, including those pictured below.



Summary of Design Considerations

Staff recommend that the UDC provide feedback and make findings on the development proposal regarding the aforementioned standards as it relates to the design considerations noted below.

- **Building Mass and Scale.** While the proposed building is adjacent to larger scale development, including the Hub Madison, it is also adjacent to the Grimm Book Bindery, a designated landmark, and several other buildings that are of a much smaller scale along both N Frances and W Gilman Streets. As such, consideration should be given the overall mass and scale, and the appropriateness of how the building mass is broken down and transitions to surrounding properties.

The Downtown Urban Design Guidelines generally speak to creating visual interest as a means of breaking down mass and scale, including 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, etc.

Please see the aforementioned advisory recommendation from the Landmarks Commission. Staff requests the UDC's feedback and findings related to the overall mass and scale.

- **Street Level Activation – W Gilman.** The project site has frontage on both N Frances Street and W Gilman Street. Staff note that while floor plan adjustments have been made to locate active uses on both the N Frances Street (residential lobby entrance) and W Gilman Street (commercial entrance) frontages, consideration should continue to be given to the design and detailing along the pedestrian level of both these streets.

Of particular concern is the design and detailing associated with the service-related elements that continue to be located along the W Gilman Street façade. This includes the garage door and louver that are located on this elevation and the design of these elements.

The Commission's Informational Presentation comments primarily focused on the building design and composition along W Gilman Street, including that of the garage door and louvers and their integration with the larger composition, in contributing to creating an active pedestrian environment, and in maintaining a human scale. In addition, the Commission noted that landscape opportunities should be explored, as well as other opportunities to create activity and movement along the street (i.e., art, etc.).

Related to this concern, the Landmarks Commission provided an advisory recommendation to incorporate a more open/opaque garage door, as well as making refinements to the detailing above the garage door (i.e., using an alternate material than the metal panel). Staff recommend that the UDC address the

Landmarks Commission's recommendation, specifically as it relates to the garage door and detailing above, in the Commission's formal action.

The Downtown Urban Design Guidelines generally note that how a building addresses the street and defines the public/private spaces along the public way is the primary factor in creating an active urban environment. Consideration should be given to incorporating a richer level of design detailing at the pedestrian level, minimizing the presence of service-oriented uses (i.e., utility rooms/doors, garage doors, etc.), utilizing architectural elements to identify main building entrances, as well as incorporating landscape elements to add interest, texture, and color, etc.

In addition, staff note that as part of the City's SafeGrowth Initiative a study was conducted for the 400 block of W Gilman Street. As part of the initiative, recommendations were made to enhance street lighting, incorporate public art and safety measures, many of which are currently being implemented. As W Gilman Street redevelops, consideration should continue to be given to incorporating design techniques that further the initiative's goals.

Staff request the Commission's feedback and findings on the overall building design and orientation along both street frontages, especially as it relates to creating an enhanced level of design at the pedestrian level, maintaining human-scale, and maintaining the architectural character of a commercial storefront.

- **Building Design and Composition.** As designed the building depicts a three- and four-story masonry base, on N Frances and W Gilman Streets, respectively, with a distinct upper-level design comprised of aluminum panels. Overall, the composition appears to have strong vertical lines.

The Downtown Urban Design Guidelines generally speak to size and rhythm of windows, building mass and scale and proportions and articulation (vertical/horizontal), utilizing building modulation and articulation to distinguish architectural components (top, middle, base), incorporating positive termination at the top of the building, incorporating articulation in transitions between materials, and utilizing richer level of design and detailing at the pedestrian level, etc.

Staff note that while the Commission's Informational Presentation comments focused on materials and their composition, proportions and massing, the applicant has made refinements to the overall building design and composition, including the material palette. Staff request the Commission's feedback and findings on the revised overall building design and composition as it relates to creating one cohesive architectural expression.

- **Materials.** The Downtown Urban Design Guidelines generally speak to utilizing a simple, high-quality palette of materials and maintaining a consistent level of design and detailing across all sides of the building. As proposed, the material palette is primarily comprised of masonry brick and burnished concrete block and painted aluminum panels in various colors.

Staff note that while the Commission's Informational Presentation comments primarily focused on the materials and composition, the applicant has made significant revisions to the material palette and composition. Staff request the Commission provide feedback and findings related to the revised material palette, especially as it relates to utilizing a consistent level of design detailing across all elevations, incorporating articulation in material transitions, etc.

*Staff note, and the applicant is advised, that while metal panels are an acceptable exterior material, pursuant to MGO 28.071(3)f, metal panel shall be used in conjunction with a palette of materials; shall be a heavy gauge, and non-reflective. While the Zoning Administrator will determine whether the proposed metal panel complies with the Zoning Code **additional information** will be required to do so.

- **Longviews.** While the project site is not located at a prominent street corner or vista, as one of the taller buildings in the area it will nonetheless be visible from a distance, including likely as viewed from the major intersections nearby (i.e., W Johnson/N Frances, W Gilman/University Avenue, University Avenue/N Frances). Consideration should be given to the overall composition of the building as part of the overall cityscape and how it will read from a distance. The Downtown Urban Design Guidelines generally speak to utilizing a similar design composition and quality of materials on all sides of the building, incorporating positive termination at the top of the building, and utilizing articulation in materials and detailing as a means of creating visual interest.

Staff request the Commission's feedback and findings on the proposed materials and detailing of the upper levels and finish at the top of the building.

- **Lighting.** Staff note that while a photometric plan was provided for the roof top amenity space, additional information is needed to fully evaluate the proposed lighting for consistency with the Downtown Urban Design Guidelines, including those that speak to lighting being adequate, but not excessive, and limiting glare. To complete the evaluation of lighting a light level calculation summary is needed that provides the average maximum and minimum light levels of the roof, as well as the uniformity ratios.

Staff note that a photometric plan was not provided for the ground floor, and the applicant has indicated that lighting is not proposed on the ground floor. In addition, architectural lighting is not indicated on the drawings. The applicant is advised the if architectural lighting or lighting on the ground floor should be proposed in the future, additional review and approval will be required.

Staff recommend the UDC address lighting in their formal action.

Summary of Informational Presentation Discussion & Questions

As a reference, a summary of the Commission's discussion and questions from the September 17, 2025, Informational Presentation are provided below.

The Commission commented on maintaining mass and scale and with the historic Grimm Book Bindery with a new, modern building. The applicant noted this was well received at the recent Landmarks Commission meeting. They also agreed to take a look at other elements to draw across and give space to that building.

The Commission noted that thought needed to be given to the buildings and how they will impact the future built environment and pedestrian environments.

The Commission commented that the massing and base of project design is there, but the application of the materials, which are fine, is not working and the building could become dated because of that. As a modern structure built in 2025, the materials could be better applied to look like 2025 versus 1970. The language fights itself a little bit.

The Commission commented that the swimming pool and basketball court at the top are great, but there is a lot going on here that is worth taking a look at in terms of materials and proportions, i.e. the angular piece is abrupt, the metal panel, and the masonry. The applicant did confirm this top deck has views of the Capitol and Lake Monona.

The Commission asked about blocking daylight into the Hub building. The applicant noted this building is pulled off from both adjacencies to allow continued light into those spaces. The applicant noted that those

windows adjacent are duplicative windows – they are additional windows that were added at the request of the UDC. Most go into bathrooms, and are secondary windows, not primary for those units.

The Commission inquired as to what is happening on the first floor where the fence is located on the Gilman street side; beyond the fence is access panels to the below grade vault, and exterior court.

The Commission commented the detailing around the very unadorned garage door is somewhat jarring, abrupt in the language there between the buildings and could use some refinement.

The Commission talked about concerns with W Gilman Street and the lack of activation; it needs to be activated being so close to State Street and the core of the City, and yet it feels like a passthrough. Redevelopment needs to be sensitive to not perpetuating that, not the design or materiality, the fact that the space is mechanical and parking, and is never going to be occupied or activated, right next to a very blank section of the Hub. Gilman Street can be so much more; it could be nearly as activated as State Street. The Frances side is more successful because of the programming to activate the streetscape.

The Commission noted that on Gilman, the Hub is already a long façade that looks like a back door, whereas across the street, buildings have a better human scale.

The Commission talked about the different architectures and colors existing on W Gilman Street. The applicant was encouraged to explore how to incorporate landscape, a possible mural, activity and movement/activity along the street.