



**Agenda Item #:** 6

**Project Title:** 33 W Johnson Street - Planned Development (PD), New Mixed-Use Development. (District 4)

**Legistar File ID #:** 80306

**Members Present:** Cliff Goodhart, Chair; Jessica Klehr, Shane Bernau, Christian Harper, Wendy Von Below, Marsha Rummel, and Rafeeq Asad

**Prepared By:** Jessica Vaughn, AICP, UDC Secretary

## Summary

At its meeting of October 18, 2023, the Urban Design Commission **RECEIVED AN INFORMATIONAL PRESENTATION** for a Planned Development (PD) located at 33 W Johnson Street. Registered and speaking in support were Andy Inman, and Rob Uhrin. Registered in support and available to answer questions was Blake Richter. Registered and speaking in opposition were Fred Mohs, and Gene Devitt.

Inman highlighted that they are proposing to rezone to Planned Development to get the density and get the 11<sup>th</sup> floor, which will be programmed as primarily public space with a restaurant. The overall height of the building is 125-feet, which is remaining lower than the height allowed under the Downtown Plan in terms of feet, as well as below the Capitol Preservation Height Limit. Changes since the July 12<sup>th</sup> Informational Presentation include moving the Residence Inn entry to the Wisconsin Avenue side, adjacent to the entrance for the Autograph Hotel. A portion of the drop-off will be in the terrace; they have done what they can to minimize the impact to the terrace on Wisconsin Avenue. To achieve a grand gesture to the Capitol, the building proportions have become more uniformed and integrated. The base has been brought down in scale for a more human scale element along Wisconsin Avenue. The architectural language of the building has now been brought all the way around.

The Commission had the following questions for staff and the development team:

- This is all over the place, but when you start to look at it, it has this abstract artistic, Frank Gehry thing to it, the architecture, I like that. I like that it's at the corner. Like the previous project, there are some things that don't play well together. If you are going to look at, there is a chaotic corner, Wisconsin and Dayton, which is not bad, but both sides should counter each other, complement each other, have the same window treatments, same glazing patterns, canopies, etc. Don't have three different things, have two and let your corner do all the work for you. You have this metallic beige extended mullion, and it stops, but the plane...keep the same treatment. Have that recessed piece be the same language, which is breaking up that corner from your punched opening side. It will start to bring attention to the corner piece, which is what you want people to focus on. There's still some greenspace there, within the property lines. I'm okay with it, it's different but I think it's time for some different stuff happening, everything is starting to look the same.
- I have to say I really like the changes you made. The merging of the two separate hotels works so much better. I thought that was a handsome building, but it looked like a completely different building and now they are working together a lot better. From a ground level this will be so much more pedestrian friendly. The changes you made with the traffic patterns are an improvement too. Addressing some of the comments from the neighborhood, how many units are in the combined hotels and how many parking spaces do you have on site?
  - Very close to 330 on both hotels, combined. Parking is about 140 on-site parking stalls.
- I am gathering the complaint is that you're looking at using the neighboring public ramp?

- We're working with the Parking Utility, they monitor the occupancy of all the structures. Revenues are very much down. We've got good history now with the AC Hotel. Even when we're fully occupied we have numbers of how many guests are driving, and that number in general is declining. More people are getting to hotels via rideshare or other means. We share the concern of making sure there is ample parking.
- It is a concern, as somebody who has been a victim to sold-out nights and Orpheum and Overture, and there is no hotel there now, I can appreciate what it will be like when there is a hotel there.
- I too have concerns about the front of the building and that iconic view of Wisconsin Avenue. I don't know where the City's at as far as trying to protect those Ash trees, everybody wants to write them all off but in reality you can protect and treat them. I can appreciate that two of those may have to go; whatever lengths you can go to so Wisconsin Avenue is a tree lined alley. That might involve getting trees bigger than 2.5 caliper.
- It looks like the design has improved. Using the City right-of-way is a no-go. You can't solve your drop off on City property, I personally won't support it even if you make other design improvements. It's a premier street which should not be used for the purpose you have here. There are some other things in the staff report I'm seeing but I don't have comments on them.
- That is going to be the big challenge for this Commission, to make a finding that this project is in conformity with the Downtown Design Guidelines that talk about this being a premier street, tree canopies, one curb cut, no drop-offs. Making an advisory recommendation to the Plan Commission talks about compatibility with existing or planned character of the street, and the height as well. We mentioned that being a huge concern the last time you were here. It's not a whim of this Commission, it's a written plan that we have to make a finding of being in compliance with. Stretching things 180 degrees is really tough. I'm concerned about the Commission being able to make a finding that this is in conformity with those plans.
- Based on what you read, the language of the Wisconsin Avenue, it's not. And those are up there. I don't think that says no to the project, it tells the architect what you have to do before you come back. Bring your site into compliance so your project can be approved. The architecture can't solve all the site issues.
- It's a very difficult problem, we've seen two other projects here. We're also going to be asked to approve bonus stories, which says "this project is great," and what do we get? A project that ignores a stated plan on a premier street.
- I agree about the Wisconsin Avenue concerns. The building reads very dark in your renderings, what are those materials?
  - The palette is masonry, we're responding to the Madison College buildings, we want something that is rich so we have a dark base. We're still fine tuning the brick color. Masonry metal panel, a lot of glass, a darker metal mullion. We're still planning the final palette and would love to hear thoughts on that.
- (Referring to Slide 32) As we're seeing more buildings get taller downtown, color is becoming more important, and the issue of just dark versus light is becoming more important. I hope you might look at this tower, there are so many exciting things happening in there, curves, horizontal lines as opposed to the verticality we see downtown. As you move forward on that element maybe it deserves color to celebrate those curves. The way those horizontals are celebrated are unique and different, but you're going against it with so many vertical fins. Color is subjective but I would make an argument that dark colors downtown are hard, I hope you might revisit that and also celebrate your curves more.
- I would like to expound on what Jessica said there. This is generally Residence Inn, this is Autograph, then I come around and it almost looks like more of a Residence Inn. If Autograph is the trendy expression, why don't you continue this type of expression all the way around to and down Dayton and have two hotels that really are distinct from each other, and two buildings that look like two different hotels.
  - We wanted the palette throughout the building to stitch together but show uniqueness. We wanted to make sure we celebrated the corner, but soften the design as you move towards the historic building.
- Why not extend the corner a little further and have a more slender "quiet" zone? You could bring out that corner and make a statement that this is a different hotel than anything else we have in town.
  - There's a lot going on here, the historic, but bird glass is the other one. If we were to stretch more glazing we start to push up against the bird glass percentages.

- You've made improvements, the Johnson corner is much better. I like the comments about introducing color to this pretty dark palette. My first reaction was this is really heavy, really dark. There is still a synergy lacking between the different pieces, there's still some competition happening, I don't know if it's the cap, my eye wants to go up to those caps but it's also competing with the architectural focal point at the corner, which I think is awesome. It's hard to pinpoint, but to me it's still lacking some kind of cohesive synergy between those two sides.
- I will echo what Alder Rummel said that Wisconsin Avenue is a non-starter, to ignore or try to justify the departure from the Downtown Design Guidelines. I'm not so sure if it's the setback issue, I know it's very important as you look at the progression of setbacks all the way up Wisconsin Avenue, but the line in the sand is the right-of-way and the new driveways being introduced, unfortunately it's a non-starter. As far as the trees on Wisconsin Avenue, I know they are treating some of those Ash trees, but some more stately trees in the long run would be better so the loss of two isn't the worst thing in the world. I appreciate this is the second Informational Presentation, I know it's a challenging site.
- I also wanted to show appreciation for the silva cells and some more stately street trees, which will be necessary.
- The height is another issue. Personally I think there could be a path to allowing an 11<sup>th</sup> floor, being within the height of a permitted 10-story building, and I prefer it because lower floor to floor means less space between the sill and head of the window for a much lighter appearing building. Are there any adjacent landmarks?
- (Secretary) Bethel Lutheran Church, the Masonic Temple. Within the same block but not directly adjacent to the project site.
- The Johnson Street side of the building is vastly improved.
- I think the height is appropriate. Architecture is not supposed to be, this is a downtown area, it's asking for dynamic design. It has to conform with some of the ordinances, but I think there are fixes for the site without changing the building design. I think the building design works if the site issues are fixed. I don't mind the black architecture, and I don't mind pops of color in there, but it could be more dynamic with colors, some color in there to accent the curves.
- In a city of brown and beige you definitely stand out – to the bird glass point...
  - We are complying with that, yes.
- In thinking about dark colors versus light – the heat impact is something to think about. The roof is something to think about...white roofs?
  - We have the roof plan in the packet, much of it is occupied with terraces and outdoor spaces for the Residence Inn and rooftop restaurant. Plantings, pavement, furniture and mechanicals.
- Aren't there things like white roofs? Maybe that's a way to address heat index concerns.
  - We've done both in previous projects.
- I frequently concur that the dark masonry downtown is overwhelming. It doesn't matter what time of day or season, when you go around the corner at the James it feels like a canyon. I don't get that effect from this one, it will play a whole lot differently on this block. Masonry has to be some color, it would look cornier to tie it into the old MATC building, when you had a lighter tan color it looked like a different building. In this case I think it's an attractive use of it, there's a lot of other very light colored buildings around, there is something to be said for the dynamic black and white thing going on. Having said that I definitely agree that the darkness of not just the masonry but other materials are hiding the dynamism of those curves. Whatever you can do help those stand out, it's the architectural feature of certainly that corner and in large part this project, to have them disappear into darkness is a big mistake.
- When you were here before you shared context photos, the actual photos of realized projects brought a depth and shine to these materials, they weren't actually that dark in reality. If you could show us the reality of it, it would help us get past some of these less-finer renderings.
- Put the actual context in the renderings instead of the white boxes.

## Action

Since this was an **INFORMATIONAL PRESENTATION** no formal action was taken by the Commission.