

August 14, 2024

Commissioners
Madison Urban Design Commission

Re: 418-446 W. Washington Ave & 413 -417 W. Mifflin St.

The proposal before you is for a quite large building that extends for more than half the 400 block of W. Washington and extends through the block to Mifflin St for a much narrower component. The design team has worked to separate portions of the building into smaller components along W. Washington. With the deep recesses, the effort works for the lower 4 stories. However, the consistent materials and color scheme across the upper 2 stories seem to be inconsistent with that goal.

While the upper two stories will not be readily visible to pedestrians on the sidewalk in front of the building, they will be visible from many other locations. Both pedestrians across the street and occupants in upper floors of buildings in the area will have direct views. So it is important to maintain a design that supports the intent of reducing the feel of the mass of the proposed building.

A specific recommendation of the Downtown Plan for the West Washington District is to “maintain and enhance the wide terraces” which create a “grand boulevard” entryway to downtown. Restricting driveways and street facing parking garages is recommended to enhance these two unique blocks along W. Washington.

This proposal includes a wide driveway entrance along W. Washington. While the presentation before you doesn’t show the layout of the parking garage the development team has indicated that currently it is only located under the W. Washington portion of the building. The portion of the building extending to W. Mifflin was noted as not having a below grade level. Earlier this week at a neighborhood meeting the development team was asked why this was the case. The response was that the ‘excavation costs would be too much’.

For this proposal there is a readily available and viable option for an entry/exit to the parking garage from W. Mifflin. This option should not be dismissed simply on a statement of an “increase in costs” which are clearly marginal in the overall construction budget.

As the Staff Report notes the proposal will be considered under the Conditional Use standards by the Plan Commission. One of the standards for allowing for the 2 extra stories is:

“The excess height allows for a demonstrated higher quality building than could be achieved without the additional stories.” (28.183(13)b)

Eliminating all curb cuts along the W. Washington frontage provides a demonstrated higher quality proposal and consistency with the Downtown Plan.

At their August 4, 2020, meeting the Plan Commission approved a proposal on the corner of the 500 block of W. Washington which had asked for two garage entries. The motion to approve included a condition that the driveway along W. Washington be eliminated. For that proposal a clear and viable alternative was available.

Staff has expressed concern with the through-lot nature of this proposal. The breezeway provides an element of separation and allows for circulation through the site. The benefit gained from a garage entry on W. Mifflin is a reasonable tradeoff for the through-lot proposal.

I urge you to have a discussion with the applicant on the option of placing the parking garage entrance on W. Mifflin.

Thank you for your consideration,

Peter Ostlind
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Madison