

AGENDA # 1

City of Madison, Wisconsin

REPORT OF: URBAN DESIGN COMMISSION	PRESENTED: December 21, 2011
TITLE: A Resolution Adopting the Downtown Plan as a Supplement to the City of Madison Comprehensive Plan. (24468)	REFERRED: REREFERRED: REPORTED BACK:
AUTHOR: Alan J. Martin, Secretary	ADOPTED: POF:
DATED: December 21, 2011	ID NUMBER:

Members present were: Richard Wagner, Marsha Rummel, Todd Barnett, John Harrington, Dawn O’Kroley, Melissa Huggins and Richard Slayton. (Harrington left during discussion of this item.)

SUMMARY:

At its meeting of December 21, 2011, the Urban Design Commission **REFERRED** consideration of the Downtown Plan. Appearing in support of the project were Pete Ostlind, Susan Schmitz, representing DMI; Carol Schaeffer, representing Smart Growth Greater Madison; and Tim Anderson. Appearing in opposition was Scott Faust. Bill Fruhling of the Planning Division presented the Downtown Plan to the Commission. He noted that preliminary draft recommendations have been incorporated and refined. The emphasis of the plan was to understand the different neighborhoods and districts that comprise downtown, seen as a compilation of special areas that have their own identity. Some areas of downtown are lacking in identity and are now the focus of development. The plan tried to identify those areas, understand their uniqueness and provide some direction for the future; it also looks at all these areas and how they work together in the downtown. The plan recommends a lot of mix of uses across the downtown rather than segregated districts. Establishing maximum building heights is one aspect of the plan to continue to promote the character of those districts, and to reflect a bit of the underlying topography of the downtown and the skyline; to that end a couple of areas have been identified as potentially good areas for bonus stories. Recommendations include building heights that reflect the topography of downtown. Key view corridors are also identified, for example coming in on John Nolen Drive, as well as towards the lake down street rights-of-way. The plan now calls for a pedestrian walkway over John Nolen Drive. Other recommendations include the Bassett-Mifflin area, calling for preservation of the types of residential structures in the area. An alternative to this would be eliminating the urban lane, and instead of keeping the core of Mifflin and West Washington Avenue, build around some clusters of buildings that exist as a more organic approach to growing this area. The new Zoning Code that is awaiting finishing can’t move forward with the downtown districts until the Downtown Plan is accepted.

Pete Ostlind talked about high quality materials and design on any number of parcels. He would like to see the Commission provide more definition to what that means. The bonus story criteria talks about “exceptionally” high quality design and an “interesting building top;” how will that be implemented? He would like to hear the Commission’s input on text in the Zoning Code being as good as it could be in relation to how to implement the Downtown Plan. He considers scale and character for the Mifflin and West Washington Avenue are as important as an entry into the downtown.

Susan Schmitz spoke about the vision contained in the plan and its importance. DMI would like to see building height limits changed in the plan and Zoning Code to allow for more flexibility. On Mifflin Street there are two alternatives in the plan; this is an area that really needs redevelopment. We have a real opportunity here and DMI has come up with a plan called “Wisconsin Idea” connecting the University; DMI recommend that that be considered another alternative in the Downtown Plan. They would like to see West Washington Avenue included with Mifflin Street and some design guidelines for a possible grand boulevard. They would like to see more clarity on the view sheds, and more clarity on the design standards for bonus stories.

Tim Anderson spoke as a member of the Downtown Design Professional Workgroup and presented a report titled “Design Revisions for the City of Madison Downtown Master Plan.” He asked for amendments including an alternative vision for Mifflin Street. They feel the Downtown Plan lacks compelling vision that capitalizes on its many strategic relationships. It is an ideal location for building on a collaboration with the University and the City on how the downtown can grow over the next 20 years. The area is underutilized and ripe for development. They see this as a mixed-use district for housing, employment, etc. that would capitalize on the merging market related to the University’s new Institutes for Discovery. This would enhance the downtown value as a destination. They would like to see increases in the height limits and density in this district and to designate Mifflin as a downtown mixed-use district; the plan currently calls for this to be predominantly residential when it could be much more. Mifflin Street should be viewed as a special street that connects downtown to the University. Connections with Law Park and the downtown should be bold and pursued to truly connect the downtown, as well as ensure reconstruction of Wilson Street.

Carol Schaeffer spoke about the issues that Smart Growth Greater Madison, Inc. would like to see the Commission address: flexibility in the plan and preservation versus innovation. The flexibility in building heights is good but not specific enough. Removing specific numbers from stepbacks and setbacks is also recommended; they can be determined on a case-by-case basis. Uniform criteria is requested for density requirements. Preservation versus innovation, particularly landmarks, they ask that they remove “potential landmarks” with the same level of weight and make a recommendation to go back to the 1998 plan to encourage the designation to be sought.

Scott Faust noted the lack of flexibility in the PUD process. The Downtown Design Zones has limited him from developing a piece of property for the last 10 years because of the large setbacks required. The plan needs to address some flexibility for situations like this where there is street on three sides of the property. He sees height recommendations as positive but would prefer that they are recommendations and not requirements.

Comments and questions from the Commission were as follows:

- The notion of “superior architecture” is troubling. If you’re not willing to push the envelope...how do you convey that to the applicant? It’s in the eye of the beholder, but at some point what gets you the bonus is some incredibly deep level of sustainable design, or something that’s off the grid, or things like that that maybe cost a little bit more. Something really a step above that what is normally approvable.
 - This plan is supposed to be an overview without getting into specific details. Guidelines for design in downtown are included.
- They mainly prevent the most ugly, they don’t give you good architecture.
 - For downtown you want a recommendation for superior architecture, but actually defining and using it as a regulatory is harder.
- There are more subjective ways to do it. There still needs to be control over what is exceptional design and look at what they may give back to the community for those additional floors. How closely was that looked at?

- Not too much. Our view is it should be primarily about the exterior of the buildings and how they relate to the context of where they are located and the architecture. That's what the public experiences. Things like sustainability have been brought up but when you get down to it what we're trying to accomplish is how does that building look.
- I'm struggling to understand, on the bonus stories, the idea of linking the renovation of historic properties to some of those. That seems overly onerous; I understand the concept where that might work, but for a plan that's supposed to sustain for 20 years, what if we run out of historic structures to renovate? Who determines what is historic? It's about the building itself. That should be removed. It gets in the way of accomplishing what we're trying to accomplish with the bonus stories, which is density.
 - Those are areas where historic buildings have been identified on that block, or are recommended to be historic districts. One of the problems we run into as a City is the subjectivity. One of the things we looked at in considering bonus stories is "is there a way we can put in some objective standards?" Some of those things are trying to accomplish other objectives in the plan and that's how we made that connection to the renovation of historic buildings.
- I think Landmarks shares this sensibility that you're talking about.
- I agree that sustainability has to be part of the equation. The bonus stories is about how the City feels and I think eventually our state codes are going to mandate really high efficiency and it's going to be irrelevant. The design should be exceptional but it is hard to determine what exceptional is. Is the move from 10 to 12 based on encouraging people to do something extraordinary, is it only those who are the tallest should be more visible, or should we just say this should be about all the things you want within a short proximity.
 - We just identified those areas that didn't fit into a regular block grid and the pattern of building heights we are trying to establish. There are a number of blocks that are more transitional areas. More height off the street would still fit in and work just fine.
- I'm not sure if we've ever reached exceptional; solid and good yes, but exceptional, I don't know. I like the idea about some sort of benchmark for the bonus stories. A contribution to open space.
- If you're proposing context, how do you get something that's different and good if context is your criteria. There's something there that doesn't work.
 - Context is not to dictate the architecture of the building but more general things like height, setback and orientation. Where we are with drafting our guidelines, I don't think there is anything in there that would not allow the building you're referring to.
- There are also some buildings where architecturally the context should be ignored. You know logically the mass and density will evolve and it would be foolish to look at your neighboring property.
- At Landmarks we discussed Bonus Area G, and the Commission voted to delete this whole section. The argument was that the Lamb House is such a unique structure and placed in the middle of the block intentionally and anything you would build around it rips the fabric of this historic block. This is where the restoration linkage to historic development is called out on Page 130.
- It seems to me that West Washington is worth a lot more extra effort. The houses on Mifflin Street have been well-used.
- Overall it's difficult in picturing things project-by-project. Our intent is in density, mass and appropriateness, not in prescriptive architecture. The large gestures need to be established. Is it going to be a grand boulevard with larger scale buildings, or is it a smaller scale neighborhood that we feel is important to preserve? Does it need to be preserved to make our City better?
- If you weren't applying for the bonus stories those projects would still come through the Commission if they're in the Downtown Design District.
 - Pretty much all projects in the downtown core would still all come to the UDC.

- I hope we don't define context just by architecture. I'm not against density in certain areas but we need to look at that carefully.
- Part of the historic value of a neighborhood is having trees. My concern is if you want to have trees you have to give them a place to grow. I'd love to see this plan start thinking about setbacks in relation to trees.
- If we want to downtown to be more sustainable and green, there's really nothing in here about greening up downtown.
 - One of the things we wanted not to do in this plan is repeat recommendations for policies that are already existing in other plans (the Sustainability Plan). We wanted to try to capture the essence of that without getting into repeating specific policies and recommendations that already exist.
- Filling of the lake, I like the idea and plans but that's something we did a long time ago and I'm concerned about not creating headaches down the line.
 - These are concepts. What potential mitigation measures might be needed, this is a multi-year process in and of itself. If this stays in the plan, it's authorization to take it to the next step. Through its iterations, at any of those points the plug could be pulled. Too much money, environmental impacts that can't be adequately mitigated. The Board of Parks Commissioners talked quite a bit about that and recommended that the plan be adopted with that in there. The Committee on the Environment was less enthusiastic and their caveat was that that recommendation be deleted from the plan.
- I like the idea of redesigning John Nolen Drive, but "formally design," I'm not sure what that means.
 - Not overly contrived but something more deliberate than what exists today. It seems like there are opportunities there to enhance the appearance. Lower level landscaping, little walls periodically, overlooks or stopping points, those kinds of things.
I'd use something more descriptive than "formally."
- Is there a tool to take West Washington Avenue and analyze what makes it works now? I'm not persuaded it's the housing stock. That would help us understand.
- Trees are the first thing that come to my mind, not the buildings.
- The space, view, proportions, but I don't think the plan speaks to that.
- There is something special about John Nolen Drive as it is. Be careful because it could look contrived. The view of John Nolen from the bay, as the sun comes up, it has a certain character. Not that it can't be improved but I'd hate to assign what an improvement is.
- I echo the comments about filling in Lake Monona. I miss the little park that you could look over the railroad tracks. I'd like to see the bikes moved back inland so that pedestrians can use the lakeshore.
- I've been struggling with the neighborhood districts; the idea of context and the recommendations that come out of there, what is the purpose of these neighborhood districts, I like these more broad speaking gestures of embracing. I'm not sure the value that these neighborhood districts add to our ability to make decisions with this plan.
- When you're at a space and you feel a character, we want to build on the good characters in some areas rather than see the same designs show up all over the City. But how do we do that without overly defining it?
 - The original intent was that it was hard for people to talk about specifics in the downtown when you're talking about the whole downtown. A few years ago they were called character areas, and it was about trying to break up the downtown into bite-size pieces and show their differences. It merged into this.

Maybe by breaking things up into too many bites you dilute the vision and you can no longer see the grand gestures. It's very hard to cobble them all together because of how things are divided. Maybe you take these and give them some level of priority. What are the most important things we need to accomplish in order to ensure that our downtown is going to grow and be sustainable? Growth should be

the goal here, sensitive growth. Find a way to order these keys so we have an order of priority. While historic preservation is important it's a much more subtle and less impactful than putting up a 10-story employment center.

- There should be a little more work or language about the issues obvious to everyone about filling in the lake. This park should be more read in it.
- I wonder about another way to approach the pedestrian linkage on John Nolen Drive. Make it a foot path, put a signaled light so you enter the park at ground as opposed to going over a ramp, which lacks connectivity.
- Look at architecture from someone living today instead of reusing 50 year old architecture.
- Everybody should be applauded for the amount of work that went into this. It reads well, the graphics are excellent.
- I suggest we have a special meeting on this.
- What opportunities are going to be there with real world constraints is something we also need to think about.
- It would be very helpful for readers of this document to understand how it fits in with the Comprehensive Plan, the zoning and any of the subarea plans.
- We didn't discuss the transportation plan.

ACTION:

On a motion by Huggins, seconded by Rummel, the Urban Design Commission **REFERRED** consideration of this item. The motion was passed on a vote of (5-0). The motion requested that the Secretary place this as the main agenda item at the Urban Design Commission's special meeting of January 25, 2012.

After the Commission acts on an application, individual Commissioners rate the overall design on a scale of 1 to 10, including any changes required by the Commission. The ratings are for information only. They are not used to decide whether the project should be approved. The scale is 1 = complete failure; 2 = critically bad; 3 = very poor; 4 = poor; 5 = fair; 6 = good; 7 = very good; 8 = excellent; 9 = superior; and 10 = outstanding. The overall ratings for this project are 7 and 8.

URBAN DESIGN COMMISSION PROJECT RATING FOR: Downtown Plan

	Site Plan	Architecture	Landscape Plan	Site Amenities, Lighting, Etc.	Signs	Circulation (Pedestrian, Vehicular)	Urban Context	Overall Rating
Member Ratings	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	8
	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	7

General Comments:

- Comments as discussed.
- Excellent presentation to a monumental task. Valuable process, great work. Vista views exhibit extremely helpful.