

January 24, 2012

Mr. William Fruhling and Michael Waidelich
Madison Dept. of Planning and Community and Economic Development
Madison Municipal Building

Dear Bill and Michael:

I am asking your help in preparing some planning concepts for the Urban Design Commission discussion of the Downtown Plan as we proceed in several key areas.

Several members of the Commission have expressed skepticism about the present two alternatives regarding the Mifflin Area. They are not sure that basic plan and the alternative plan which envision a desire to keep the "house form," even if new construction, is the alternative to be chosen. Since the other two plans benefit from the department's presentation of the Mifflin area it would be helpful if you could prepare a third alternative that some members have requested in a like format. This would view the area more with mixed uses linking the area to both the University and the Downtown as a key pivot of future development. Heights probably range from four stories to eight, with bonus stories. The concept of a pedestrian oriented street linking to the Square might still be feature of the area, either mid-block or otherwise. This would pick up on the concepts in the campus area pedestrian linkages.

The next issue to address from comments I heard is the unique character of West Washington, especially the two blocks with old houses. Again I do not believe Commission members are seeking retention of the current buildings nor do they believe height alone is the sole issue here. In my own recent visits to the area I tried to do some discernment of the design elements that make the area work as a unique urban place. My list includes the following: the wide urban street, the way the set backs of the private buildings contribute to that openness, additionally the open one story or two story porches move the main mass of buildings back even further than the setbacks, the large shade trees on the public right of way, the actual green space (soil and plantings) not just open space on the private lots that extend the public green space is also key.

These blocks on West Washington function almost "defacto" as an urban green or park, which the plan so noted is lacking in the vicinity. Keeping this urban greenspace needs to be a plan priority. The wideness of the street and setback and the straight vistas bring in a lot of light. Shadow studies need to occur in thinking about redevelopment. Heights on the south side next to Bassett Neighborhood are probably fine at four stories as compatible with the general Basset height except perhaps along the lakeshore, but with higher floor stepbacks the north side might take more height and the shadow studies could help evaluate this. Your consideration of the area may have resulted in other items on the list of unique

characteristics that should be weighed and I hope you can bring them to the commission.

The next item I think the Commission is interested in discussing is the criteria for bonus stories. As you know I was involved with this issue in the downtown design discussions. It would be helpful if copies of the present criteria could be provided as well as the plan's thoughts on new criteria. Information on the actual experience of the application of bonus stories under existing rules would be useful. Can a list be provided of actual projects which in the past requested and received bonus stories and are images of these projects available. Are there staff evaluations or reports to the Plan Commission that discussed whether to awards bonus stories available? I understand the subjectivity than can create a presumption for bonus stories but wonder if staff thought of other ways to actually score criteria. If better architectural design is one criteria, might scores of Urban Design Commission rankings as a test of the criteria used to evaluate architecture create an incentive and record for such design?

One issue that has come up at Urban Design as we see projects increasing urban density, generally a good thing, is we lack ways to build the urban amenities on the streets that can make dense areas pleasant. Perhaps this also can be worked into the bonus criteria discussion.

One item to clarify for the Commission discussion is related to flat iron buildings. The plan appears to call for the preservation of existing flat iron buildings not just the flat iron form for parcels that form flat iron corners. Since I think new buildings like the Courthouse and the Overture Center have respected the flat iron form, I believe replacement buildings in a flat iron form can be an urban enhancement to creativity. I hope staff can be clear or have clearer language on this item.

The last issue on my list is the plan reference that projects should not be judged as just stand-alone efforts. While this seems desirable, there is no suggestion how the commissions, applicants or the public could possibly have the tools to do so. We now get so little analytical feedback on trends and evaluations that we often are guessing as to whether say more of one type of housing is needed or if office space is required or if live-work units are really wanted. Unless there is a solid basis of information for the public participants (planners, commissions, neighbors, and city council) to decide, the current model which puts the risks on project applicants must perforce remain our working arrangement with hopes for better trends and projects.

I hope our special meeting can move forward these discussions and if needed we can conclude at a regular meeting or another special meeting next month.

Sincerely,

Dick Wagner, Chair Urban Design Commission

