

TO: Members of the Plan Commission and Staff

FROM: Nan Fey

RE: North Central Group's Hotel Project on the Lamp House Block
Legistar #35010 and #34641

DATE: September 22, 2014

I regret that I was unable to attend the Urban Design Commission meeting at which the proposed hotel project at the corner of East Washington Avenue and Webster Street was considered, and that I also have a conflict with your meeting this evening. It's clear from the close vote by UDC, and the Planning Staff's report that you have before you a complex set of issues to sort through. There's just one issue that I wish to speak to – the integrity of “plans” in the City of Madison.

As chair of the Plan Commission during the years in which the City wrote its first Comprehensive Plan, the Downtown Plan and rewrote its outdated Zoning Code, I've seen first hand the interplay of the many tools we have available for “land use planning” especially in the central city. The relationships between and among them frequently need to be balanced in delicate ways when particular projects are proposed by the private sector in our community, and it's challenging to anticipate the many issues that might arise in a particular location in advance.

That said, perhaps more thought and analysis has been given to Block 109 than any other in the city because of the landmark Lamp House, placed near its center by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1903, and on which a significant number of its neighboring buildings on the Mifflin and Webster Streets sides of the block existed at the time it was built. This heritage block is so special that it was the subject of intense study by an Ad Hoc Committee that I chaired in recent months, and I hope you have all reviewed the recommendations in its report, specifically with respect to the building heights on East Washington Avenue and Webster Street, which are unchanged from the Downtown Plan; this is crucial to your evaluation of this project.

The committee asked only one thing of developers who chose to build on this corner of the block – that their designs allow for “meaningful light” to fall on the Lamp House rooftop garden. To allow flexibility in how this goal might be achieved, we modeled gaps between potential buildings and suggested that any large building situated on the Pahl Tire corner, which could be as tall as 8 stories on the East Washington Avenue side and at the corner (with the possibility of 2 bonus stories in the event of “exceptional design” qualities), should be stepped down along Webster Street to meet the 6 story more residential scale specified in the Zoning Map. The current proposal asks the Plan Commission both to override the Webster Street height limit (nearly doubling the height currently allowed) and to grant the maximum number of bonus stories on the East Washington Avenue side. I strongly urge the Plan Commission to reject the current proposal.

I am well aware that the Plan Commission has the power to over-ride existing land use plans, but every time it happens the community wonders, quite understandably, what weight these plans really have and why we bother to write them if policy-makers are free to ignore them. A project approved on Iota Court in 2012 was a particularly troublesome example involving the demolition of contributing buildings to the Langdon Historic District, and this month a project on Williamson Street was appealed to the Common Council because it violated a height limit recommended in the applicable special area plan – the fact that these decisions have been upheld doesn't diminish the toll they take on the confidence of the community in our planning processes.

Clearly the hotel being proposed here is a creative concept but, while some "improvements" have apparently been made since its initial proposal, the current design simply does not meet the building heights specified in the applicable planning documents. I have confidence this development team will find a way to work within the existing height limits on this block if it is required by you to do so.

I urge the Plan Commission to either place the current proposal on file, or refer it with specific instructions that revisions must comply with the Downtown Plan and the Lamp House Block Plan adopted as a supplement thereto. Thank you.

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