



To: Members of the Urban Design Commission

From: Rocky Bluff Neighborhood Association, Erik Haroldson, President

Re: Redevelopment of 2901 University Avenue and 2902-2912 Harvey Street

Date: September 26, 2017

This letter is in response to the proposed development between the streets of Ridge, Harvey, and University Ave. The Rocky Bluff Neighborhood Association (RBNA) welcomes the opportunity to collaborate with the development team and the City. We hope to assist with design elements and ensure both that the development is consistent with our unique neighborhood's character – our "neighborhood in a forest" – and that the development benefits from the neighbors' experience in the area.

We have several comments about the project as currently designed. These include how the project interacts with the Comprehensive and Neighborhood Plans, as well as issues regarding the design character of the proposed development and the building's impact on the neighborhood. There are also a number of elements about which RBNA members are enthusiastic. The crescent shape of the University frontage is visually appealing and distinctive. Also, in some ways, we are glad to see the stepped-back design on Ridge and University. We appreciate that the design makes an effort to reduce the visual sense of mass for certain parts of the development. We would also be interested in discussing the possibility of having a neighborhood sign placed by the Ridge Street side of the project. And we are encouraged by the plans for significant setbacks, which would allow for substantial landscaping. Finally, while the Party Port is an iconic neighborhood institution, some in Rocky Bluff would look forward to using the commercial establishments anticipated in the proposal.

One concern of the RBNA is that the proposed development seems inconsistent with the vision of both Madison's Comprehensive Plan (Comp Plan) and the area's recently adopted neighborhood plan, the Hoyt Park Area Joint Neighborhood Plan (Hoyt Plan, adopted 2014). First, there is the issue of density. The proposed project would require assembly of four separate parcels, one along the south side of University Avenue and three along the north side of Harvey Street. Under the Comp Plan, future land use for that side of Harvey Street is designated Medium Density Residential (MDR), meaning 16-40 units per acre with an expectation that density remain within or below that range (Vol. II, Map 2-1, p. 2-82).

With the current proposal, the three Harvey Street lots would bear the vast majority of the project's residential mass and would exceed the unit limit for MDR. The Comp Plan anticipates a need for flexibility and does so by allowing a limited exception to defined density limits where an approved neighborhood plan calls for a small area of higher density (Vol. II, p. 2-82). The Hoyt Plan, however, does not call for higher density in the area affected by the proposal. The Comp Plan also cautions that its maps are more of a general representation, with refined recommendations to be provided through detailed neighborhood plans (Vol. II, p. 2-77). The Hoyt Plan does include detail about the lots that would be assembled for this project, as well as the mass and scale of any redevelopments. The Hoyt Plan shows, parcel-by-parcel, that the Harvey lots are intended for medium-high density of 26-40 units per acre (pp. 15, 20).

On the issue of scale, the Hoyt Plan calls for maximum building height of 5 stories to be on the University Avenue frontage (p. 39). The plan then envisions the height to scale back to the Harvey lots, where there is a 2-story maximum (p.39). The proposal instead has the highest density of the project in the middle of the combined lots, with the 5 story height largely over the Harvey lots, where the University Avenue frontage is chiefly 1 story with a small portion at 4 stories.

A potential compromise between the proposal and the requirements outlined in the Hoyt Plan might be to allow a 4 story maximum height. This would also allow for a less abrupt, more visually appealing transition into the more single-family character of the neighborhood. One of the Hoyt Plan's land use policies is to ensure smooth transitions between pre-existing and potentially conflicting neighboring land uses (p. 11). It is also our understanding that the Hoyt Plan was consulted by this development team for a recent project on University Avenue in Shorewood Hills. As Shorewood Hills did not have a detailed plan for the site, the Hoyt Plan was used as a guide, in particular for building height. That building has a maximum height of 4 stories and is not bordered by any single family homes or other residential properties. This newly proposed building, on the other hand, is situated directly in a residential area and would have a substantial effect on neighbors, in terms of mass and scale, and the amount of traffic that it would generate.

Indeed, the project's impact on traffic is a significant concern for residents of Rocky Bluff. This includes both the high number of cars belonging to project residents (due to the number of units), as well as various types of increased traffic due to the commercial uses. Harvey Street and the Ridge/University intersection each have difficult, and potentially hazardous, traffic and parking issues which already require attention. A higher population density on that block will only heighten these problems, or drive them further into the neighborhood. Such problems range from the difficulties pedestrians have crossing University using the two-stage divided crossing as vehicles speed down the hill, to backups on Ridge when turning onto University, to speeding cars and crowded parking on Harvey, to buses already overcrowded by the time they arrive at neighborhood stops. These are serious safety and infrastructure concerns, and solutions should be addressed by all parties before the issues are made more significant. In addition to addressing the traffic problems by decreasing the density of the proposal, other potential traffic solutions include facilitating an access point on University rather than only on Ridge. This solution would lessen the amount of traffic in the neighborhood. We look forward to exploring this and other solutions.

In addition to traffic and density concerns, RBNA is concerned about other potential burdens to the Rocky Bluff area. These include loss of mature trees, light pollution, noise pollution (both of which are worsened by the loss of mature trees), odors from commercial uses, and loss of cherished scenic views. While some of these problems are inevitable with increased development, some issues will be compounded by the proximity of a large project to smaller scale residential dwellings. We hope the project can be designed to minimize many of the burdens which would be placed onto the neighborhood.

With regard to design, one concern is the 5-story "wall" on the western edge of the property, which will have the effect of a rather imposing mass, especially on Harvey Street. It is in noticeable contrast to the nearby single family and other smaller-scale residences. It also conflicts with the Hoyt Plan's specific recommendation to maintain neighborhood residential scale on Harvey Street (p. 38). Our suggestion to modify the maximum height to 4 stories would mitigate this effect. There are also a couple elevations for which renderings have not yet been provided, such as a view from directly across Harvey Street and a view looking eastward from further west on Harvey Street, which would give a sense of the project as viewed from the neighborhood (including the potential 5 story mass).

In addition, it would be nice to see the higher floors have a design that incorporates the neighborhood character, which could distinguish it from other higher density buildings built in recent years. One particular feature of newer residential buildings is the abundance of balconies, also seen in this project. We feel this design feature could make for a difficult and awkward transition into the single-family character of the rest of Rocky Bluff. Finally, while we like the stepped-back aspects of the Ridge and University frontages, we recognize that they come at the cost of putting the height too close to Harvey, as noted above, and that this design maximizes the scenic views of tree-lined Shorewood from the more interior parts of the project.

A large scale development in Rocky Bluff that has many admirable design features is the Quarry Arts Building on Hill Street. It manages to be large without being overbearing. Its distinctive design features, which are sensitive to the neighborhood's form and character, include high-quality natural materials and warm, unobtrusive lighting. There are also many small design details that help create a welcoming environment that blends into the rest of the neighborhood.

A hallmark and renowned feature of the neighborhood, as noted in the Hoyt Plan is its identity as a neighborhood in a forest (pp. 7, 51). The proposed development adjoins a key entrance to Rocky Bluff, which is characterized by gorgeous trees lining the street as Ridge ascends to the forested bluff of Hoyt Park. To follow the Plan recommendation that development be sensitive to the character of this urban forest, we would like to see any proposed development enhance that quality rather than alter it (p. 32). Ways to accomplish this include preserving some of the many mature trees on the four lots, planting tree species that will attain the height of the existing canopy, planting trees of a more mature dimension, and using color schemes and design elements which will blend in, such as green-colored or wood materials.

Overall, the character of Rocky Bluff is forested and rustic. We would like to see a development which reflects that existing character, using it as a guide to create a welcoming and uniquely appropriate addition to the neighborhood. This would comport with the Hoyt Plan's repeated expectation that future development and redevelopment is consistent with and sensitive to the neighborhood's scale and character (pp. 10, 32, 38).

We appreciate the opportunity to bring our Rocky Bluff perspective to these matters. And we look forward to collaborating with both the City and the development team in any future stages of this proposed project.