

RE: Items 11 & 12: 118-126 State St.

Members, Plan Commission:

As a member of the Downtown Coordinating Committee (DCC), I would like to express my support for the hotel project at 118-126 State St.

During the two years in which I have been a member of the DCC, the committee has spent an inordinate amount of its time and attention on the crime and disorder at the “top” of State St. and in discussions on the best means to address it.

Three years ago, I participated in a series of meetings convened by Downtown Madison Inc. to discuss and “brainstorm” ideas to address these problems that were quickly increasing costs and decreasing trade for area businesses. If the on-going issues of fighting, drug-overdoses, public defecation, etc. were not quite threatening the viability of the businesses, it was clear that they were often making work miserable for merchants and their employees. It was at this time that the best “solution” arrived at was to remove the Philosopher’s Grove sculptures.

Since then, the number and frequency of drug overdoses have increased along with the number of surveillance cameras (now four). As has the level of police deployment at the site creating substantial overtime costs and a reduction of services elsewhere. Serious assaults, as well as regular threats of violence, exchanged between denizens of the corner continue to make this area a place to avoid along a Capitol Square that is otherwise friendly, thriving commercially and in spirit.

In summary, nothing has worked to even reduce the level of crises on those blocks, let alone eliminate it.

My experience is that people who are involved in “anti-social” behaviors want to be around people just like themselves. And when many people who are not so engaged invade their space, they leave. (I acknowledge the opposite is true as well.) I can think of many examples, the most recent is the change in Olbrich Park with the opening of a boat-rental site during the day and the Biergarten at night.

Now comes the proposal for a 133-room that is nearly adjacent to the area in question. While the precise effects of the hotel on the chronic issues described above cannot be quantified, I think it is reasonable to assume that there will be a strikingly positive effect due to the presence of a 24 hour/ 7-day business with hundreds of employees, hotel guests and restaurant patrons coming and going within yards of the center of problems.

As a result of this new enterprise, other storefronts on the block may become occupied and **stay occupied** rather than a constant churning of different bars and marginal retail ventures. These businesses will further attract people, light-up the street and make the top of State St. and Mifflin St, a viable site for business, entertainment and simply walking around undisturbed.

Unfortunately, the Planning Division staff report gives greater weight to its concern over the height of the top floors of the building instead of the **real and current problems at the ground level today**. My interest is not on what happens at 250 feet. I, and most people will never see this “elevation. It is a theoretical concern.

Like most of the workers, residents, tourists, business owners and people walking by, our interest is seeing a new beautiful building where we stand and not a continuation of the status quo.

Best regards,

David Ahrens
15th District Alder