

Landmarks Commission  
Meeting of March 16, 2020  
Legistar 59708, Agenda item #3, 817-821 Williamson St.

The character of Williamson Street differs not only block by block, but also by north/south sides of the street. This was recognized by staff in connection with 740 Jenifer/739 (741) Williamson Streets: "staff explained that the building would be better suited to the north side of the street than the south side given the different characters of the different sides of the street."

### **Land Combination**

Is a lot combination even needed? The legal description for 817 and 821 Williamson is: "ORIGINAL PLAT, BLK 148, NE 31 1/2 FT OF LOT 3 & ALL OF LOT 4." The City's open data tax parcel map shows a single lot.

However, if a combination is needed, this is approximately 1 1/3 original lots. The applicant claims the lot would "not be out of place with the irregularly sized lots in this block and also within the nearby blocks in Third Lake Ridge." Lots may be irregular sizes, but large lots are rare (except for the north side of Williamson in the 600-900 blocks) – most lots are 1/2 or less of the original lot.

Williamson, lot sizes on the south side of the 800 block

803: 2,178

805: 8,712

811: 4,356

813: 4,356

817: 12,870

825: 4,356

831: 13,068 (1 1/2 lots, with a structure only in the center third of the lot)

839: 17,160 (Ridge Side Coop, 9 units in 4 houses)

851: 8,976

Williamson, south side, entire district, additional lots over 8,712 (the standard size of original lots)

1001: 15,246 (Common Wealth Development, 4 buildings redeveloped, built 1890-1909)

1217: 12,408 (fire department)

1221: 56,628 (Willy Coop, first building constructed in 1953)

1525: 13,219 (the old Hans Sewing, now MadCat, built in 1972)

Whether or not a property has crossed lot lines and functioned as a single lot is irrelevant to the Commission's decision. If the combination of 817 and 821 would (1) be incompatible with adjacent lot sizes or (2) fail to maintain the general lot size pattern of the historic district, the Commission should not approve a combination. The adjacent lot sizes are 4,356 (813 and 825 Williamson) and 8,712 (814 Jenifer) and 4,356 (820 and 824 Jenifer).

### **Visual Compatibility**

The new structure needs to be "visually compatible" with historic resources located within 200 feet. Page 8 of applicant's submission purports to show all historic resources within 200 feet. The map is inaccurate in that it does not include the following historic resources:

805 Williamson:

Assessor records reflect 4 structures on this lot. The building fronting Williamson consists of two structures, one built in 1862 and one built in 1872.

831 Williamson:

Assessor records reflect the building facing Williamson was built in 1875 (the back warehouse was built in 1965).

841, 843 and 847 Williamson:

Assessor records reflect the 4 houses in Ridge Side Coop were built in 1909, 1904, 1905, and 1890. Ridge Side Coop is a single lot. Thus, pursuant to MGO 41.03 (5) ("Any improvements located on lots that fall within this measurement shall be considered within two hundred (200) feet of the subject property."), all four houses are deemed historic resources within 200 feet.

It is also curious why 807 Jenifer, 811 Jenifer, and 822 Spaight are included (on the map and in the photos) as being in the visually compatible area when the 200 foot radius provided by the applicant excludes these properties.

### **(a) Gross volume**

The standard is "visually compatible" not "mathematically compatible" (as noted by staff comments with respect to 702 Williamson and other projects). Yet a mathematically compatible analysis can provide a sense of whether a structure would be visually compatible.

The gross volume would be almost 4 times larger than the next largest historic commercial building in the visually related area. (Volume of approximately 268K sq. ft. for the proposal, the historic resource on 831 Williamson is about 69K sq. ft.) Unlike 702 Williamson, where much of the volume was hidden by other buildings, the volume would be readily apparent.

Even the front façade (*not* including the section behind the driveway) would be about 3,000 sq. ft as compared to 831 Williamson (about 900 sq. ft) or about 3.5 times larger.

While other historic resources are built into the hillside, creating an illusion of somewhat less mass, the proposal driveway goes down into the hillside, creating an illusion of somewhat more mass.

The last three pages of applicant's submission provide a sense of how the proposed structure would dominate the block. (It is also worth noting that applicant's renderings of adjacent structures are misleading. Both 813 and 825 have much more of a narrow vertical expression than the squat, square shapes depicted.)

### **(b) Height**

Applicant's submission purportedly includes the height of 3 nearby structures.

813 Williamson: 44.77'

825 Williamson: 40.7'

839 Williamson: 38.36'

All of these are homes. The homes may well be that height, but each of homes is set back about 20' feet from the sidewalk (when considering the front wall, not the front porch), which decreases the visual impact. Each of the homes has a partially exposed front basement, which add 3-6 feet of the height (in two of the homes that is hidden by the under-porch slats, thus decreasing the visual height).

Commercial properties are set close to the sidewalk and have lower heights:

800: height not reflected in assessor records, but appears less than 30 feet

805: 20 feet, plus the peaked roof (total of 26 feet, per property owner)

811: 24 feet, plus peaked roof (comparable overall height to 805)

831: 24 feet, plus the peaked roof

803 Williamson, built in 2018 by the applicant, was limited by this Commission to a height of 33 feet. It is clear that 805 and 811 are well below 33 feet in height when one looks from across the street. Imagine adding on another 10 feet in height along Williamson – that is what the proposal calls for when the front parapet is included.

**(c) The proportion and rhythm of solids to voids in the street facade(s).**

The first floor facades of commercial building vary, one of which, 831, is almost entirely glass.

The second floor facades of commercial buildings have evenly spaced windows of the same size, and the voids created by the windows can be almost half of the second story façade. However, the window/brick spacing in the commercial building is roughly equal – there are not huge windows with brick being only about half (or less) the window width. Windows in historic buildings are single windows, not grouped in threes as reflected in the submission. There are not any large inset voids (as is created by the proposed front inset balconies).

The doors in historic buildings are all a focal point, unlike this submission where the only indication of a door is the wider metal trim.

**(e) Design of the roof**

A flat roof is not visually compatible with the historic resources. The only flat roof in the visually compatible area is at the corner, on the north side of the street, 800 Williamson. A flat roof was permitted for 803 Williamson, also at a corner. Having a mid-block historic resource with a flat roof is rare on the south side of Williamson: 937 is a 2-flat, and 1019 is Nature’s Bakery which is 2 stories with partially exposed basement, both of which are narrow, have a vertical expression and appear under 30 feet in height.

Williamson roof lines within 200 feet:

- 800: 2 story, flat roof
- 805: 2 story, peaked roof
- 811: 2 story, peaked roof
- 813: 2 story, peaked roof
- 825: 2 story, peaked roof
- 831: 2 story, peaked roof, flat front cornice (warehouse built in 1965 at the back of the property has a flat roof)
- 839: 2½ story, peaked roof, with an attic converted to living space
- 841, 843: 2 story, peaked roof. These two historic homes were attached by enclosing the approximate 6 foot gap between the homes.
- 847: 2 story, peaked roof

Jenifer roof lines within 200 feet:

- 804: 2 ½ stories, dormers added at some point which essentially turn the attic into a full story. The dormers were added prior to 1968 (no construction building permit in the City database which begins as of 3/6/1968)
- 808: 2 story, peaked roof
- 812: 2½ stories, peaked roof
- 814: 2 story, peaked roof
- 820: 2 story, peaked roof
- 824: 2 story, peaked roof
- 828: 2 story, peaked roof
- 832: 2½ story, peaked roof

834: 2 story, peaked roof  
836: 2½ story, peaked roof  
842: 2½ story, peaked roof

**(f) Rhythm of buildings masses and spaces**

The frontage along the south 800 Williamson block is relatively intact. Newer additions have been made at the back of a few properties, and two homes in Ridge Side Coop had the approximate 6-foot gap between the homes filled in (but only at the first floor level). This property, 817 Williamson, and the new corner property also developed by the applicant, 803 Williamson, are the only outliers.

No building is wider than 30 feet (except the two homes joined at the first floor at 841). Gaps may be relatively narrow (perhaps 10 feet) to relatively wide (perhaps 30 feet). But no structure is as wide as the proposal, with an approximate 59' wide façade along Williamson. (Though the renderings show the eastern approximate 10 feet perhaps stepped-back about 2 feet, that is not reflected in the floor plans nor in the site plan.)

Compare this proposal to Baldwin Corners, which creates an illusion of separate buildings.



Photo, Google Maps, 2018.

**MGO 41.18**

In addition to meeting TLR standards, new construction must also meet MGO 41.18(1)(d), which requires that the proposed work “will not frustrate the public interest expressed in this ordinance for protecting, promoting, conserving, and using the City’s historic resources.”

This standard was applied to the need to keep original windows.

<https://madison.legistar.com/View.ashx?M=F&ID=7076164&GUID=A0B376AA-70BA-4904-B211-7B582CE4D334>

What features of this proposed structure could frustrate the public interest, in addition to the above standards?

1. The mechanical room in the parking garage is about the size of the elevator. This cannot hold all the mechanicals for the building.
  - Will there be a rooftop elevator overrun? If so, what are the dimensions? Any rooftop overrun would only be set back about 10 feet from the front façade.
  - What other mechanicals will be placed on the roof (e.g., A/Cs)?
  - Will there be any need for individual apartment venting (e.g., 902 Williamson has lots of white, unpainted, exhaust vents)?

2. Where will the fan(s) be placed to exhaust the underground parking? As has been discovered by neighbors of 902 Williamson, this can be quite loud, plus it is hardly a historic feature that deserves prominence.
3. The building will be built into a hillside. What is planned for the 21.6' back yard setback? Will a retaining wall be needed or will the existing slope be maintained? If a retaining wall is needed, it is important to note that there are several (3?) large trees that are essentially on the property line. A retaining wall at the property line would likely result in the death of these trees. Also, to what extent will these trees need to be pruned back to accommodate the proposed height of the building? Again, if severe enough pruning, the trees could die.
4. To what extent does a modern feature on a new building detract from the historic character of a district? Balconies with aluminum railings, whether inset or hanging, are not a historic feature. Yes, there are balconies on the north side of Williamson, and at 739 Williamson, but these were approved prior to the adoption of Chapter 41 and this ordinance section that prohibits frustrating the public interest.  
The Williamson side balconies would be about 1/3 of the front façade on the second and third stories. Along the back would be 3 sliding glass doors at ground level, 3 inset balconies on the second floor with sliding glass doors, and the third level would have a continuous balcony running the width of the building with 2 sliding glass doors. Yes, less consideration is paid to the backs of buildings. But the back of this building will be visible from Jenifer, in particular from the approximate 30' drive/parking gap at 814 Jenifer.
5. The height of this building will put it close to the high-voltage wires. Will undergrounding be required? If so, just for this one lot?

I hope that the Commission denies a Certificate of Authority for this proposed project.

Respectfully Submitted,  
Linda Lehnertz