

Landmarks Commission  
Meeting of August 17, 2020  
Agenda item #2, Legistar #59708, 817-821 Williamson St.

At the last Landmarks meeting, there was discussion of the mass of the project being too large, as well as too high (though a comment was made that height might not be as big of an issue if the appearance of mass was decreased) and that the lack of a significant setback from the sidewalk makes the presence of that mass felt.

So what has changed?

1. The façade abutting the sidewalk was three segments, west to east: 9'3" (setback 8'2"), 41'9", 10'2" (setback 8'2")  
The revision is 4 segments, west to east: 23', 6' (setback 6 feet), 23', 8' (setback 6 feet).
2. The western 23' segment has the third story stepped back about 5.5', with a railing set back about 1' from the building face.
3. A cornice has been added between the second and third stories. This cornice hangs out about 1½ feet.  
The cornice is offset on the two 23' segments – on the western segment it is perhaps 2 feet higher than the eastern segment.

I believe these changes are mere tweaks that do little, if anything, to address the massing of the project. In fact, the setback segments have been moved 25% closer to the sidewalk (6' rather than a little over 8') and the width of the eastern setback segment is shrunk by 20% (down to 8'). The depth of the setback may have decreased due to the required City easement. These easements are generally used to make the sidewalk wider or to move the sidewalk closer to the building to allow for a wider terrace. Whichever, the presence of the building will still be 2 feet from the sidewalk, with shallower setbacks. If anything, the mass will be felt even more.

I could reiterate my comments from my prior letters as I believe those comments are still applicable. However, I will limit my comments to the primary issue that the developer claims to have addressed – the creation of the appearance of two buildings, thereby decreasing the appearance of mass.

1. Per the revised submission letter: "The façade has been designed with a recessed area in the middle to break this into two elements as would be similar to two buildings located next to each other with just a walkway in between. This condition exists on this same block on this same side of the street between 803 and 805 Williamson."

The recessed area is 6 feet wide and 6 feet deep. The space between 803 and 805 is about 6 feet and runs the depth of the lot. The fact that this same developer was able to build 803 as close as possible to the 803 lot line should not serve as evidence of a visually compatible rhythm of buildings masses and spaces for this project. Historically, the corner building at 801/803 was also set close to the property line, but that home was also substantially set back from the sidewalk, creating a seemingly larger space. (See Attachment A for comparison photos.) Existing spaces between the historic buildings on the 800 south block generally range from about 10 feet to 30 feet.

A 6 foot wide recessed area that is only setback 6 feet does not create a visual space, especially when the materials are the same and the design motif is continuous through the four segments. When the Landmarks Commission approved 739 Williamson it required a 9 foot wide living wall - a green wall that gave the illusion that a 40+ foot wide project was two separate buildings, one 17 feet wide and the other 20 feet wide (including the setback wings at the building edges). That green space was critical to approval, as it was expected to actually create a sense of space.

2. The revised submission letter states: "The corner of the second façade is also stepped back so that each façade is less than 24' wide, which would maintain the rhythm and massing of this block."

These two stepbacks/recesses are a mere 6 feet in depth, reduced by 25% as compared to the last set of plans. At some point a stepback does nothing to create an illusion of less mass, for example a 6" stepback would be meaningless.

For 739 Williamson, the Commission viewed the setback wings and the portion abutting the sidewalk as a single segment. Under that analysis, assuming the 6' wide middle recess counts for anything, there are two segments, one 31' wide and one 23' feet wide.

But then again, this is not an issue of mathematics, it is an issue of visual compatibility. And even if the mass arguably "reads" as two separate structures due to the 6' recess, the mass remains incompatible with the historic resources. Looking at the last pages of the revised project, the mass does not appear lessened by the 6 foot wide recess. (Though, once again, the perspective seems off. The last page is a front view and the western segment looks to be 3 feet or so shorter even though it is set back just 5½ feet from the front façade.)

3. The revised submission letter explains why the building cannot be moved further back, and then explains the other commercial properties are set close to the sidewalk and then says: "Every other property with the exception of 813 also have front porches with the steps coming down and hitting the back of the sidewalk."

The commercial buildings are close to the sidewalk, but the street facades of those buildings range from about 670 to 825 square feet. The facade of this project, not including the garage, is about 2,200 square feet. As to the homes, the open-air framing of the front porches actually decreases the feeling of the mass of the homes. Steps and sidewalks coming down the hillside to hit the back of the sidewalk are irrelevant.

The revised submission letter also states that "in order to make this project feasible" no interior space can be removed from the project. The issue of a project's financial feasibility is irrelevant to the Commission's decision. Like BUILD II requirements, financial feasibility is not within the ordinance decision making criteria.

I would also like to comment on document #43 of the Legislative record. This is not relevant to the Commission's decision, so please feel free to skip the rest of this comment letter. But I cannot allow Mr. Kear's comment letter to stand as the representation of any sort of truth.

- Mr. Kear discusses the Plan Commission's discussion of the housing crisis. That discussion is not new. In fact, it was widely discussed in connection with the

Comprehensive Plan. Much of Williamson Street was initially designated for higher intensity. The 800 and 900 north blocks were Community Mixed Use, but were reduced to Neighborhood Mixed Use on the final map. The 900 south and the 1000 and 1100 blocks were Medium Residential, reduced in intensity to Low-Medium Residential. Williamson Street was specifically removed from the corridors named as a "Growth Priority Areas." The Plan Commission, and ultimately the Common Council, decided that Williamson Street was not a street on which to focus for future housing needs, in part (perhaps in whole) because of its historic designation.

- Those of us commenting on 817 Williamson are not NIMBY's. Rather, we value the historic designation of this neighborhood and are working to maintain the historic characteristics. There is more to City and neighborhood planning, and keeping livable neighborhoods, than just increasing density.
- Mr. Kear structures part of his argument around "affordable housing" and that such cannot be achieved without greater mass/height. First, this is not an affordable housing project. The developer is not under any constraints as to how he can outfit the interiors or as to the rents he can charge. The other large housing projects on the north side of Williamson that have been built in recent years are all luxury housing. Second, the so-called NIMBY's have been asking for years for affordable housing. One staunch proponent of affordable housing even obtained agreement from the then P&D chair to have a meeting focused on affordable housing – such meeting was never scheduled. One example of a project where affordable housing proponents worked to get affordable housing was 906 Williamson. The developer agreed to provide 2 units and then, after approvals were obtained, reneged. BUILD II even provides an additional story in select locations if there is truly affordable housing.
- Mr. Kear claims that one of the historic qualities we NIMBY's want to maintain is homogenized whiteness. That is completely offensive. I bought my house in 1985. At that time there was a mix of colors and incomes. Houses were cheap because this was not labeled a desirable neighborhood. As the neighborhood has become more popular, infill does tend to be whiter and richer. I, for one, miss the great diversity that once was this neighborhood – including talking with the homeless men on their way to spend the afternoon drinking at the beach. But building yet another apartment building to house just a certain segment of the population, whether students or young professionals, does not help to increase diversity. Of note, this project has 11 efficiencies, 10 one bedrooms and 3 two bedrooms.
- Those of us writing today do not, for the most part, live "in the shadow of this simple Cook project." Historic preservation is not a goal for just the immediate neighbors. Historic neighborhoods are a city-wide resource and whether a person lives next door, or two blocks away, or 5 miles away, they should work to maintain that historic fabric (assuming they are interested) and not be subject to name-calling and dismissive attitudes.
- Mr. Kear calls those who voted against the project nay-sayers. I would call those nay voters residents who care about the historic fabric and care about following the plans and processes, whether the historic ordinance or neighborhood plans, that were created to help ensure orderly development.
- Mr. Kear calls the yea-voters residents who understand the "need for housing is the paramount need of the district." The need for *affordable housing* does exist in the neighborhood and is of great importance to many. The "need" for yet another

development that does nothing but create more housing for a limited market segment is questioned by many.

- Mr. Kear says the need for housing “surpasses inflexible standards.” Ordinances, and the Comprehensive Plan, do create standards for the regulation of growth. It would seem that Mr. Kear is suggesting you abandon those standards for what he, in his personal opinion, deems to be the one and only goal of creating housing.

Respectfully Submitted,  
Linda Lehnertz

ATTACHMENT A



Google Street Map Oct 2016 and Jul 2019