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November 23, 2020

Members of the City of Madison Plan Commission
c/o City of Madison Department of Planning, Community, and Economic Development Room
GIOO
215 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.
Madison, WI 53709

Re: Alchemy Apartments, 619 & 621 N Lake Street

Dear Friends:

We are excited to submit the attached memo outlining the modifications and amendments to the Alchemy Apartments and Alpha Chi Sigma Redevelopment Submittal. The plans and documents outline a necessary new addition to the Langdon Neighborhood that will create new housing opportunities and the updated home for Alpha Chi Sigma, the chemistry fraternity of UW-Madison, in addition to much needed neighborhood re-investment for this key student housing area. This project has been designed to integrate with the surrounding neighborhood context and character while offering energy efficient, environmentally friendly modern housing and addressing safety & accessibility issues that currently exist. The project adds to the safety and vitality of the neighborhood.

We look forward to working with the Plan Commission and Common Council towards implementing this project and will be happy to answer any questions that you may have in regards to the submittal.

Sincerely,



William F. White

Enclosure

cc: Heather Stouder, Director, Department of Planning and Development
Colin Punt, Senior Planner
Alder Max Prestigiacamò

Memorandum

To: Plan Commission members, Heather Stouder, Kevin Firchow, Colin Punt

From: Bill White

Date: 11/23/2020

Re: Alchemy Apartment Proposal Downtown Plan Compliance

Alchemy Apartment Proposal

The Developers of the Alchemy Apartments proposal took the criteria of the Downtown Plan very seriously when preparing this submission. The Downtown Plan includes both broad policy objectives, and very specific recommendations, and where the broad differed from the specific as it related to our particular site, we honored the more specific.

The following includes the sections we felt were relevant to this project, and how we addressed them. Whereas the project is being submitted within the zoning for Downtown Residential (DR2), we have incorporated the 2012 Downtown Plan and 2016 Comprehensive Plan into our proposal.

2012 DOWNTOWN PLAN

[Key 2: Strengthen the Region's Economic Engine:](#)

Employment Recommendations

Objective 2.2 (Page 24)

Enhance economic value of the Downtown by encouraging high value projects that add employment and enhance property values.

This project enhances property values and adds high value to the area. It also provides jobs during the construction phase and for all the businesses that provide materials and services to the buildings and permanent full-time long-term jobs for property managers, maintenance personnel and local property service companies. Additionally, as a academic fraternity in STEM fields, the existence of a co-habitation live/work cluster provides a unique professional environment for students to facilitate professional innovation in high-value employment industries.

Room to Grow Recommendations

Objective 2.4 (page 23):

Encourage higher density infill and redevelopment that is context sensitive innovative and sustainable, and complements and connects to enhances the areas in which it is proposed.

This project increases density in an identified as appropriate for greater density area, increases sustainability, improving the area in which it is proposed. Project will include security features, including cameras and improved lighting.

Recommendation 17:

Direct Development to locations recommended in this Plan for buildings of that height and scale.

The applicants brought this project forward because the Downtown Plan specifically carves out this site recognizing that additional density was appropriate for this site. The scale of the buildings for this site was not directly addressed, however, the Plan indicates on several occasions that new developments be in character with the district massing and scale. Height was directly addressed in both the Plan and the zoning code, and we are at the allowable height. Additionally, the Langdon District includes a broad mix of varying mass, height, and scale of buildings in the district. We do not feel this building would be out of character for an urban residential neighborhood with a variety of housing types and options.

Recommendation 18:

Promote high quality architecture and craftsmanship for new buildings to reinforce Downtown as an engaging and attractive employment location.

The building design utilizes high quality masonry, wood and metal, with design elements that relate to historical building patterns while constructing a contemporary building that does not attempt to emulate historic structures in the neighborhood, in keeping with city design guidance. The project is also integrating and preserving historic elements from 619 & 621 N Lake Street into the interior design of the new building to bridge the historic and the present and maintain the existing fraternal culture.

KEY 3: Ensure a Quality Urban Environment

Mix of Land Uses Recommendations (Page 34):

Objective 3.2:

Provide a dynamic and flexible mix of land uses and densities that provides and enables ample opportunities for jobs, housing, retail, entertainment, and recreation in a compact urban environment.

This is a compact urban environment, we are adding to the called-for mix of densities that provides additional housing opportunities. The Langdon District currently includes a mix of density and housing. This project provides additional housing opportunities for students and young people drawn to the vibrancy of an urban lifestyle, in a beautiful location near the lake.

Mix of Land Use Narrative (Page 34):

Downtowns are characterized by concentrations of economic, cultural, and social activity and high levels of engagement and interaction. People are attracted to Downtown Madison because it offers a dynamic environment for living, working or visiting---with a rich and diverse array of activities and opportunities found nowhere else in the region, Increasing the number of people living and working downtown will contribute to this dynamic environment and support the further growth of downtown shopping, entertainment and recreational opportunities. This Downtown Plan seeks to encourage and facilitate continued downtown employment and population growth, and its land use recommendations provide for the increases in development density needed to accommodate it. But increased density is not an end in

itself. People are also attracted to downtown by its physical attractiveness--the beauty of its setting, the quality of its buildings and public amenities, and the distinctive characteristics of its individual neighborhoods and districts. This Plan provides recommendations which support substantial increases in downtown development and density, but also seek to ensure that downtown and its many neighborhoods continue to be attractive and engaging places.

Downtown Madison has a low vacancy rate for downtown multifamily apartments. There is a need for this type of housing, it fits the increased density based on need, not for the sake of density itself and is a location that is specifically identified as being appropriate for potential denser development. Also, the quality of the new product is vastly superior in amenities and offerings, both in built environment and project features. This project offers modern accessibility standards and safety conditions that the current structures cannot provide. It also provides a mix of housing types within a single site

Building Scale Recommendations: (Page 42)

Maximum Building Height

Objective 3.3: (page 36)

Provide a flexible framework for building scale that encourages innovation and growth while reflecting the existing or planned (if recommended for change) character of the area in which a site is located and consider the larger Downtown context.

This project builds upon decades of dense land use plans for this site and block. Please see map at the end of this document for more information.

Key 4: Maintain Strong Neighborhoods and Districts

Langdon Recommendations (page 54)

Objective 4.8:

The Langdon neighborhood should build on its history as a traditional student neighborhood, including a concentration of fraternities and sororities. It should continue to accommodate a limited amount of higher density residential redevelopment on selected sites while maintaining the area's historic and architectural integrity. Preserving and enhancing Langdon Street as the spine of the district will be the key. The pedestrian walkway between the lake and Langdon Street should be formalized to enhance its aesthetics and safety and to make a stronger connection to the lakefront path.

This project actively preserves a student fraternity that has a century of history located on this site and within the Langdon Street community. Allowing the organization to rebuild within modern fire, building code and ADA standards, will allow this historic organization the capacity to continue to student-resident stakeholder of the Langdon neighborhood.

Additionally, the proposed redevelopment is not located on Langdon Street proper, so if the key to preserving and enhancing the district is preserving Langdon, this project does not disrupt or endanger that emphasis or character of the street. Additionally, this project will further enhance the aesthetics and safety between Langdon Street and the lake and include improved lighting and security measures, especially for pedestrians using Mendota Court as part of the neighborhood's mid-block pedestrian walkway.

Campus Recommendations (page 58)

The eastern edge of the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus interfaces with Downtown in significant ways. Portions of the campus district function essentially as internal components of the larger UW campus, while other portions of the district are an interrelated mix of University uses and private property and non-University uses. ... This Downtown Plan encourages appropriate interlacing of University and non-University uses and activities at the campus edges to promote engagement and synergy between the University and the community as a whole.

Campus Recommendations (page 58)

Objective 4.8:

The emphasis of the Campus district should be on continuing to improve how it interfaces with the Downtown along and near its borders. Opportunities exist to integrate complementary uses while making a clear and coordinated transition to campus.

The block that this project is located on is occupied by additional student housing facilities and the Lowell Center, a large hospitality complex owned and operated by UW-Madison. It is a block full of interrelated use serving the UW-Madison community. Building facilities for Alpha Chi Sigma's professional chemistry fraternity in addition to student housing is keeping with the campus recommendations of the Downtown Plan.

Key 5: Enhance Livability

Students (Page 61)

Objective 5.2: Provide decent, safe and affordable housing that is conveniently located for the large population of students.

The Alchemy project will in every way improve and enhance the quality and safety of the housing, while underwriting affordable rents that have been negotiated by Alpha Chi Sigma to ensure that rents moving forward are affordable to their members. The convenience of the location for students could not be any better, located directly on the border of university property, in addition to being less than one block from late night bus circulator routes. The property incentivizes walking, biking, and mass transit use for a large density of students.

Recommendation 115:

Locate higher density housing suitable for a diversity of student populations in a variety of building types close to the UW-Madison campus.

This building will be unique by providing two types of apartment formats (rooming house structure and standard apartments) while also being the home of a social and professional fraternal organization. The location of this proposal relative to the university location and its student-supporting uses enhances the livability for residents, and maintains the history of the Langdon community being home to college fraternal organizations.

Low and Moderate Income Housing (Page 64)

Objective 5.4:

Continue to provide a range of housing prices and rents to include units affordable to low and moderate income households.

As condo owners in the building, Alpha Chi Sigma will be able to provide housing units affordable to low and moderate income students in perpetuity. Currently there are no city, state, or federal financing instruments to actively incentivize building affordable housing for college students. This project is a unique opportunity to provide for student housing offered for rent at below market rates.

Safe Living Environment (Page 68)

Natural Access Control - Natural access control relies on physical elements to keep unauthorized persons out of a particular place if they do not have a legitimate reason for being there. On private property, properly located entrances, exits, fencing, landscaping and lighting can subtly direct both foot and vehicular traffic in ways that decrease criminal opportunities. In the public realm, non-physical or "psychological" barriers can be used to achieve similar objectives. For example, these barriers may appear in the form of signs, paving textures, nature strips, art, or anything that announces the integrity and uniqueness of an area.

The current built environment on the site offers challenges to public safety. This project enhances livability with lighting, properly located entrances, an improved walkway, security cameras at a pedestrian intersections, and the elimination of dark, narrow passageways.

Key 7: Build on Historic Resources

Historic preservation and the desire for increased densities and new development can and should complement each other. This plan does not suggest that every building be saved simply because of its age, but its recommendations will advance a more deliberate and complete approach to historic buildings.

Recommendation

Prepare an inventory of historic properties in the Langdon Neighborhood and consider creating a local historic district that is generally coterminous with the Langdon Street National Register Historic District. Note: The PC recommended adding text to clarify that historic districts would have to go through the normal nomination process as required by ordinance.

This recommendation has been referenced by critics of the project as a reason to deny the approval. However, there is no way to know determine if a future study would actually find a local historic district is an appropriate recommendation or if property owners were interested in seeking the designation. Even if that occurs, what the criteria or specificity of the local historic district requirements would be, remain unknown, or whether the Common Council would approve the proposal. Unlike some of the more tangible and immediate recommendations in the Plan, this is a long-term project and it possible that the consideration of a local historic district will not result in the creation of a local historic district. That said the approval and completion of this project would not preclude the future creation of a local historic district.

Objective 3.3: Building Scale Recommendations



The Maximum Building Heights Map establishes a pattern of permitted heights that is consistent with, and will help to implement, Downtown Plan objectives regarding compatibility of scale, preservation of key view corridors, and respect for the unique character of individual Downtown neighborhoods and districts. In most cases, the map sets a single maximum number of stories that can be applied consistently throughout that particular height district.

The additional benefits of safety and greater sustainability should also be considered as features that creating additional density enables the applicant to provide via this project. It also makes it economically feasible to allow the members of Alpha Chi Sigma to continue to occupy the site of their home for the last 90+ years, making significant improvements to the experience for Alpha Chi Sigma, which further raises the bar for affordable fraternal housing in the district. We also believe that by creating an outstanding housing option for students, we are in line with the character of the Langdon District, which is a predominantly student housing area.

The fraternal space within the Alchemy building includes the adaptive reuse of many decorative contributing architectural elements of the contributing buildings on this site. The character of the Langdon Street NRHD is described as follows in the plan (page 96): "The significance of this district lies in its high concentration of fine examples of high-style period revival architecture expressed in large collegiate rooming houses primarily

constructed for the social Greek letter societies affiliated with the University of Wisconsin between 1900-1930." This project is meant to be a student housing project, in the heart of a student district, and in no way diminishes the character of Greek life on Langdon. It, in fact, preserves cherished elements of the existing structures that are no longer safe or hospitable facilities. A list of elements being preserved has been included as part of the project's submittal materials.

2018 COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

Strategy 2:

Support development of a wider mix of housing types, sizes, and costs throughout the city.

Actions:

- a. Include "Missing Middle" housing types within detailed sub-area plans.
- b. Encourage provision of life cycle housing choices by supporting lower priced or lower maintenance accessible housing options integrated into places with convenient transportation options.
- c. Continue to enable and encourage a variety of ownership and occupancy structures including co-housing, condominiums, and owner-occupied rentals.

This project is ideally situated to create affordable housing in a neighborhood integrated with convenient transportation options, and it supports a co-op, fraternal housing model.

Strategy 3

Increase the amount of available housing.

Actions:

- a. Support substantial new housing opportunities by prioritizing planning efforts to transition underutilized, automobile-dominated commercial areas into complete neighborhoods and mixed-use Activity Centers.
- b. Explore adjustments to the number of dwelling units, building size, and height thresholds between permitted and conditional uses to increase the allowable density for residential buildings in mixed-use zoning districts and select residential zoning districts.
- c. Take a proactive approach to finding and marketing housing development opportunities to development partners.

The Alchemy has a unique ownership structure, and meets the desires of the Comprehensive Plan to see conditional use utilized to increase allowable density on this site in this transitional, mixed-use neighborhood situated between UW-Madison, State Street, and Langdon Street.

Strategy 4:

Integrate lower priced housing, including subsidized housing, into complete neighborhoods.

Affordable housing was a consistently identified priority throughout the Imagine Madison process. Participants emphasized the need for more affordable housing that is well served by transportation options and amenities. Public input highlighted issues related to homelessness, housing cost burden, housing for low-income families, affordable housing for older adults, and affordable housing close to the UW-Madison campus for students. Resident Panels specifically prioritized Strategies promoting affordability and support for Madison's homeless populations. Affordable housing must go beyond

simply low-cost housing. It must be clean, safe, and fit the needs of the household. All housing, regardless of price, should meet standards of quality and provide a safe, healthy environment for those living there.

Actions: (a.) Support the distribution of affordable housing throughout the city.

Affordable housing should be distributed throughout the city and within areas that have access to transit, City services, and amenities for daily living.

This project provides needed affordable, below-market rate student housing. Downtown provides exceptionally limited opportunities to create new housing that is below market-rate due to the high land values and increased construction costs. There are no city, state or federal incentives to build affordable housing, eligible to full-time students. This project provides a unique opportunity to do so in a neighborhood and market that is in desperate need of such efforts.