

PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT SERVICES STAFF REPORT

For Planning Commission Meeting of September 20, 2011

**SUBJECT: The Varsity Ann Arbor Planned Project Site Plan
(425 East Washington Street)
Project No. SP11-023**

PROPOSED CITY PLANNING COMMISSION MOTION

The Ann Arbor City Planning Commission hereby recommends that the Mayor and City Council approve The Varsity Planned Project Site Plan and Development Agreement, subject to preliminary approval from the Washtenaw County Water Resources Commissioner.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the site plan be **postponed** to allow outstanding staff comments to be addressed and revised plans to be reviewed.

LOCATION

This site is located between East Washington and East Huron Streets, east of Division Street, and is in the Downtown Development Authority district and the Allen Creek watershed. The northern portion of the site is adjacent is bordered by properties in the Old Fourth Ward Historic District.

DESCRIPTION OF PETITION

The subject site currently contains a two-story professional office building and is zoned D1 (Downtown Core District) and East Huron 2 Character Overlay District. The petitioner is seeking approval to construct a 13-story, 177,180-square foot apartment building containing 181 dwelling units/415 bedrooms and 70 vehicle underground parking spaces. The building will also contain accessory uses, such as a fitness center and management office. Residential floor area premiums have been applied to earn an additional 395% of floor area, for a total floor area ratio of 695%. The petitioners intend to design, outfit and market the development to university students.

The site is subject to a Secondary building frontage requirement (0 feet minimum/10 feet maximum) on East Washington Street and a Front Yard building frontage requirement (15 feet minimum) on East Huron Street. The proposed building has a 15-foot setback from the north property line (abutting East Huron Street) and has a 0-foot setback for about half of its frontage on the south property line (abutting East Washington Street). The other half of its southern face is set back 25 feet, creating an entry plaza in front of the main entrance. Planned project modifications are necessary to allow this entry plaza, as it is more than 20% of the building frontage. The planned project modifications are discussed in depth later in this report. The proposed development otherwise conforms to the area, height and placement requirements set forth in the Zoning Ordinance.

A five-foot wide paved walk is proposed on the east side of the building within a variable width east side setback. The walk link will connect the sidewalk on East Huron Street with the entry

plaza and the public sidewalk on East Washington Street. It will be open to the public 364 days of each year. A striped mid-block pedestrian crossing of East Washington Street is proposed in line with the walk link and leads pedestrians to another existing link between East Washington Street and East Liberty Street, along side of the McKinley Towne Centre.

The entry plaza has been designed to provide amenities residents of the building and the general public, in keeping with the intent of a parkland contribution. Special pavers will be used in the entry plaza and public sidewalk, benches will be provided, and retaining walls surrounding landscape beds will have decorative facings. Ornamental fencing and gates will be used for the walk link as well as permeable concrete pavers laid in an artistic pattern. Pedestrian lighting is also proposed in the entry plaza and along the walk link. The petitioners have worked cooperatively with the adjacent First Baptist Church and will provide an opening in the ornamental fence and a paved connection between the walk link and the church's memorial gardens.

The second through 12th stories will have 17 apartments each. Eleven apartments are proposed on the 13th floor. Most apartments will have one or two bedrooms, although a few studio apartments and some four-bedroom apartments are proposed. Every bedroom and studio apartment has at least one window directly to the outdoors. The primary resident entrance to the building is on the south side. Entry to the building is also possible from several side doors on the east side of the building and through the parking garage on the north side of the building.

A driveway on the north side of the building, off East Huron Street, leads to the lower of two underground parking levels containing 45 vehicle parking spaces. A driveway on the south side of the building, off East Washington Street, leads to the upper underground parking level (essentially the ground level of the building) containing 25 vehicle parking spaces. The two parking levels are not connected. Two shared-use vehicle parking spaces (for use by a car sharing service) are proposed at 416 East Huron Street, adjacent to the northwest of the subject site and also owned by the petitioner. Each shared-use vehicle parking space counts as four off-street vehicle parking spaces. Easements and enforcement measures for these shared-use vehicle spaces are addressed in the draft development agreement. The 78 off-street vehicle parking spaces are two more than are required to support the premium floor area.

A total of 121 bicycle parking spaces are proposed, including 6 Class C open hoops in the entry plaza on the south side of the building, 6 Class C open hoops on the north side of the building, 37 Class B covered hoops within the vehicle parking levels, and 72 Class A spaces in a dedicated, secure storage room on the ground level of the building.

Storm water management for the site will be provided in underground tanks underneath the north driveway from East Huron Street and the north front yard. Detention for a 100-year storm volume is proposed.

There are no protected natural features on the site. On the adjacent church property to east there are two landmark trees. As the proposed development footprint is very similar to the existing development, these trees will not experience any additional impacts.

A development agreement has been drafted to address a variety of issues, including: public access for the walk link, amenities provided in lieu of a parkland contribution, required footing drain disconnections, off-site sanitary sewer capacity improvements, permanent easements and

enforcement procedures for the off-site shared-use vehicle parking, street lighting, and documentation of LEED Energy & Atmosphere points.

DESIGN REVIEW BOARD

The petitioner presented The Varsity at Ann Arbor project to the Design Review Board on June 22, 2011 at the Board’s inaugural meeting. The full report is attached.

In summary, the Board observed that the proposed design responded favorably to the Downtown Design Guidelines. Stronger aspects of its design included complementing setbacks and greenspace, the plaza at the south east corner, the walk link along the east side, the slender, offset towers reducing the building’s mass, and the variety in materials. Weaker features included significant area devoted to vehicle circulation (both on site and within the building footprint), front facades disconnected from the base, lack of end treatments for the walk link, underutilized plaza, dominant east façade, and a non-contextual north streetwall.

The proposed development has been revised to address some of the Board’s comments. Additional amenities are proposed within the plaza and walk link, and the north streetwall has been redesigned. The petitioner has provided the attached statement of revisions in response to the Board’s report.

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

The petitioner held a meeting for interested citizens on Thursday, July 7, 2011, two weeks prior to submitting this project for approval. Invitations were sent to all residents and property owners within 1,000 feet of the site as well as all subscribers to the GovDelivery planning update service. Over 50 people attended the meeting. The full report provided by the petitioner is attached.

In general, the discussion addressed:

- Setbacks and Building Design – whether the proposed setbacks were enough and whether the design meets the *Downtown Design Guidelines*
- Parking – whether more might be needed
- Vehicular Access to the Site – one versus two curb cuts and driveways
- Details of the Units – size, number of bedrooms, anticipated rents
- Benefits to the City – what benefits this project would bring, and impacts to the tax revenues

SURROUNDING LAND USES AND ZONING

	LAND USE	ZONING
NORTH	Office, Residential	D1 (Downtown Core), East Huron 1 (Character Overlay)
EAST	Institutional (Church)	D1, East Huron 2
SOUTH	Mixed Residential/Office/Commercial	D1, State Street
WEST	Mixed Residential/Office/Commercial	D1, East Huron 2

COMPARISON CHART

	EXISTING	PROPOSED	REQUIRED/PERMITTED
Base Zoning	D1 (Downtown Core)	D1 (Downtown Core)	D1 (Downtown Core)
Gross Lot Area	25,489 sq ft	25,489 sq ft	No minimum
Max. Usable Floor Area in % of Lot Area	86% (21,000 sq ft)	695% (177,180 sq ft)	400% MAX normal (101,956 sq ft MAX) Up to 700% MAX with premiums (up to 178,423 sq ft MAX)
Character Overlay District	East Huron 2	East Huron 2	East Huron 2
Streetwall Height	2 stories	2 stories	2 stories MIN 4 stories MAX
Offset at Top of Streetwall	Not applicable	5 ft Washington 5 ft Huron	Average 5 ft MIN
Building Height	2 stories	151 feet	24 ft/2 story MIN 180 ft MAX
Massing Articulation	Not applicable	Not applicable	None
Side, Rear Setbacks	5 ft (east) side 60 ft (west) side	5 ft (east) side 0 ft (west) side	None
Building Frontages	Secondary Street, Front Yard Street	Secondary Street, Front Yard Street	Secondary Street, Front Yard Street
East Huron Street	145 ft	15 ft	Front Yard Street: 15 ft MIN
East Washington Street	1 ft	Secondary Street: 0 ft at streetwall Approx. 50% exceeds for entry plaza	Secondary Street: 0 ft MIN, 10 ft MAX at streetwall 20% may exceed for entry plaza
Parking	Special Parking District	Special Parking District	Special Parking District
Parking – Automobiles	22 spaces	78 spaces (70 off-street parking spaces, 2 shared-use spaces) [70+(2x4)=78]	76 spaces MIN for premium floor area
Parking – Bicycles	None	72 Class A 37 Class B 12 Class C	71 Class A spaces MIN

HISTORY

The site was rezoned as part of the A2D2 Zoning Initiative. The current base and character overlay zoning districts and building frontage standards became effective in December 2009.

PLANNING BACKGROUND

The Downtown Plan is based upon several guiding values which articulate the most fundamental elements of the downtown. These values include providing a diversity of uses and accommodating a diversity of users, and providing a viable economy, a “green” and energy-efficient built environment and transportation network and social and cultural opportunities. Dense land use and development patterns which draw people downtown and foster an active street life, contribute to its function as an urban neighborhood and support a sustainable transportation system is a goal expressed in the Plan (page 22) as well as encouraging a diversity of new downtown housing opportunities and expansion of the downtown resident population to strengthen downtown’s role as an urban neighborhood, continuing to seek a range of age groups and income levels in the downtown (page 24).

The Non-Motorized Transportation Plan indicates there is an opportunity for near-term pedestrian street improvements with a minor mid-block crossing for East Washington Street between South Division Street and South State Street. No specific location on the block was identified. The Non-Motorized Transportation Plan explains that a minor mid-block crossing “will still be high visibility crosswalks, but in most cases would not have features such as a crossing island.” (Page 160).

PLANNED PROJECT MODIFICATION

Planned project approval is requested to increase the East Washington building frontage from Secondary Street required front setback. The proposed building has a 10-foot setback for 51 feet of the building frontage; the remainder of the building is set back greater than 10 feet to provide an entry plaza. The code allows 20% (or in this case, 21 feet) of the building frontage to exceed the maximum setback for an entry courtyard or plaza. (Petitioner statements are in plain type)

Modification Request

The setback requirement would limit an entry courtyard or plaza to only about 21 linear feet in width along the E. Washington Street frontage.

The site plan proposes an entry plaza approximately 51 feet in width. This provides about 1,600 square feet of plaza area in order to accommodate a range of pedestrian amenities, and to provide a more significant articulation of the building massing on both the south and east elevations of the building. The pedestrian amenities provided include benches, planters with seat walls and artwork on the face of the planters, pedestrian lighting, bicycle parking, and a canopy over the main pedestrian entry. The larger courtyard functions as the primary pedestrian entry to the building and is oriented to the southeast, towards the University of Michigan central campus. This larger open space also achieves the objective of working in cooperation with the adjacent First Baptist Church to soften the impact of the proposed structure on the church property by providing a significant open space, in addition to coordinating with the church to develop a mews or pedestrian connection along the east edge of the site.

The mews will include special paving, pedestrian lighting, ornamental gates and fencing, pylon markers at each end of the mews, green screens with vines on the proposed building, detailed

landscaping on the ground plane, and two points of connection to existing walks on the church parcel.

We note also that staff supports a modification to increase the percentage of the south streetwall that can exceed the maximum setback because it creates a better, more compatible transition between the subject site and the church to the east. Staff also supports the modification because there is no existing, consistent streetwall along the north side of East Washington street to continue, and thus no awkward gaps are created by the enlarged plaza.

Based upon compliance with the following standards, the Planning Commission may recommend approval, and City Council may approve modifications of the area, height and placement regulations of the Zoning Chapter in the form of a planned project site plan:

- 1. The lot(s) included in the planned project must meet the minimum gross lot size requirement of the zoning district in which they are located.**

There is no minimum gross lot size requirement for the D1, east Huron 2 Character District.

- 2. The proposed modifications of zoning requirements must provide one or more of the following:**

- a) Usable open space in excess of the minimum requirement for the zoning district.**

There is no minimum open space requirement. The proposed site plan provides approximately double the amount of open space that might be provided in this district.

- b) Building or parking setback(s) in excess of the minimum requirement for the zoning district.**

The proposed building setback is in excess of the minimum 0 foot setback requirement for the district.

- c) Preservation of natural features that exceeds ordinance requirements, especially for those existing features prioritized in the land development regulations as being of highest and mid-level concern.**

N/A

- d) Preservation of historical or architectural features.**

N/A

- e) Solar orientation or energy conserving design.**

N/A

- f) An arrangement of buildings which provides a public benefit, such as transit access, pedestrian orientation, or a reduced need for infrastructure or impervious surface.**

The configuration of the E. Washington elevation of the building provides the public benefit of increased pedestrian orientation, and provides space for a range of pedestrian amenities and planting areas.

- g) Affordable housing for lower income households.**

N/A

- h) Permanent open spaces of 20 percent or more in any low-density residential district.**

N/A

- 3. The planned project shall be designed in such a manner that traffic to and from the site will not be hazardous to adjacent properties.**

The planned project is designed in such a manner that traffic to and from the site will not be hazardous to adjacent properties.

- 4. The proposed modifications shall be consistent with the proper development and use of adjacent land and buildings.**

The proposed modifications are consistent with the proper development and use of adjacent land and buildings.

- 5. Required off-street parking and landscaping must be provided in accordance with the provisions of Chapters 59 and 62.**

There is no requirement for off-street parking. Interior parking is provided. Required landscaping is provided on both street frontages. Additional landscaping is provided along the mews walkway and with green screens and vine plantings on the east and west sides of the north half of the building.

- 6. The standards of density, allowable floor area and required usable open space for the zoning district(s) in which the project is located must be met.**

The standards of density and allowable floor area for the zoning district in which the proposed project is to be located are met. There is no minimum usable open space requirement.

- 7. There shall be no uses within the proposed project which are not permitted uses in the zoning district(s) in which the proposed project is to be located.**

There are no uses within the proposed project which are not permitted uses in the zoning district in which the proposed project is to be located.

SERVICE UNIT COMMENTS

Planning – Several outstanding issues could not be addressed prior to preparing this staff report. They include issues related to:

- Corrections to the grading plan sheet as noted by Development Inspector
- Corrections to the landscape plan sheet as noted by Forester
- Inadequate drive approach on East Washington Street to access the service alley as noted by Systems Planning
- Unacceptable solid waste plan as noted by Solid Waste/Recycling Coordinator

Staff will provide a revised recommendation as part of our presentation of the petition to the Planning Commission on September 20, 2011 if these issues have been resolved.

Downtown Development Authority – The proposed development includes at least one metered parking space eliminated to accommodate a new fire hydrant and a pedestrian mid-block crossing. Current agreements between the City Council and the Downtown Development Authority include provisions to compensate the public parking system for metered parking space elimination. The recommended policy would not accept relocated metered parking spaces. A one-time fee may be required for each metered parking space eliminated.

Prepared by Alexis DiLeo
Reviewed by Wendy Rampson
6/16/10

Attachments: Parcel and Zoning Map
Aerial Photo
Site Plan
Elevations
Citizen Participation Report
Design Review Board Report
Petitioner's Response to DRB Report

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Systems Planning
Project No. SP11-023