

Bethesda Downtown Design Advisory Panel

FROM: Laura Shipman
Design Advisory Panel Liaison

PROJECT: St. Elmo Apartments
Sketch Plan No. 32015004A

DATE: September 26, 2018

*The **St. Elmo Apartments** project was reviewed by the Bethesda Downtown Design Advisory Panel on **September 26, 2018**. The following meeting notes summarize the Panel's discussion, and recommendations regarding design excellence and the exceptional design public benefits points. The Panel's recommendations should be incorporated into the Staff Report and strongly considered by Staff prior to the certification of the Site Plan. Should you have any additional questions and/or comments please feel free to contact the Design Advisory Panel Liaison.*

Attendance:

Karl Du Puy (Panelist)
George Dove (Panelist)
Damon Orobona (Panelist)
Rod Henderer (Panelist)
Paul Mortensen (Panelist, Senior Urban Designer in the Director's Office)
Qiaojue Yu (Panelist) RECUSED

Laura Shipman (Design Advisory Panel Liaison)
Gwen Wright (Planning Director)
Robert Kronenberg (Deputy Director)
Mark Pfefferle (Interim Chief Area 1)
Grace Bogdan (Lead Reviewer)
Stephanie Dickel (Planner Coordinator, Area 1)

Nancy Bassing (Applicant Team)
Becky May (Applicant Team)
Steve Cook (Applicant Team)
Mark Elliott (Applicant Team)
Craig Williams (Applicant Team)
David Schwarz (Applicant Team)
Steve Robbins (Applicant Team)
Naomi Spinrad (Member of the Public)



Discussion Points:

This is the second Design Advisory Panel meeting for St. Elmo Apartments to review the Sketch Plan application. Notes and recommendations from the previous meeting on April 4, 2018 are also attached. This meeting focused on the specific issues along the through-block connection including tower separation, cantilever and balconies.

- There needs to be air and light between buildings, and view to the sky. There is not enough separation. I don't mind how tight the space is at pedestrian level, but how tight it is on the upper floors.
- You have two buildings with very long faces and it makes the separation more critical. These are not point towers.
- If you meet the guidelines, what would happen? What is the reason that is not working?
 - *Applicant response:* You would lose the FAR that was gained, and we would return to the other approved building. It just brings up the question of if you like this building or the previous scheme. You also can't slide the elevators 10 feet, the parking would not work.
- I don't understand why you can't re-look at this, and you could make the garage plan work. I do think this project is better than the one approved previously.
- What was the FAR of the previous design?
 - *Applicant response:* We are adding 50,000 sf. If we drop below that then construction costs would prohibit going higher. You can't slide the building then the windows would not work. We have worked with the Bainbridge. They are a part of this approval and request, they are not objecting to the approval.
- The changes were good on the balconies, that was a successful exercise.
- I think alternating balconies from closed to open is a bad idea. This is not an improvement. Should be more consistent. We could nitpick the other details of the building but I'm still concerned about light and air of the two buildings. It's like putting lipstick on a pig, liked other balconies.
- The building is ok but the separation is too tight. If you had just gone up and stepped back. The building itself is a fine building but you should have more separation.
- I don't have a problem with the narrow alley I have a problem with the building face to building face above. At our last meeting we blindly accepted some caveats like stair tower and parking, we should have said that is not our problem, figure it out.



- The 70 ft up 5 ft closer is a horrible option.
- The other project would not be as good of a project, because it is closer to the Bainbridge. If the project is a few feet greater would it really make a difference? Would I prefer to see more distance yes, but I defer to David on whether that would be good architecture.

Panel Recommendations:

The following recommendations should be incorporated into the Staff Report.

1. The panel is split on the issue of tower separation and whether the upper floors should step back along the through-block connection. Two would like to see the team push back the building a minimum of 10-15 feet to meet the Design Guidelines tower separation distance. Whereas two other panel members do not think this will make enough of an impact to be worthwhile for the applicant.
2. The panel is split on whether the current balcony design is successful. One does not think the alternating railing design is positive and they should be more uniform.
3. Public Benefit Points: Two panel members believe the project is on track to achieve at least the minimum 10 Exceptional Design points required in the Bethesda Overlay Zone. One panel member thinks the architecture is ok but thinks we don't want to set a precedent and we need to pay closer attention to the design guidelines. One panel member did not have enough resolution of the issues raised to say.
4. Straw vote: **2** in support, **2** in support but with conditions (greater tower separation, at least an additional 10-15 feet), **0** do not support, **1** recused.



Bethesda Downtown Design Advisory Panel

FROM: Laura Shipman
Design Advisory Panel Liaison

PROJECT: St Elmo Apartments
Sketch Plan No. 32015004A

DATE: April 4, 2018

*The **St Elmo Apartments** project was reviewed by the Bethesda Downtown Design Advisory Panel on **April 4, 2018**. The following meeting notes summarize the Panel's discussion, and recommendations regarding design excellence and the exceptional design public benefits points. The Panel's recommendations should be incorporated into the Staff Report and strongly considered by Staff prior to the certification of the Site Plan. Should you have any additional questions and/or comments please feel free to contact the Design Advisory Panel Liaison.*

Attendance:

Karl Du Puy (Panelist)
George Dove (Panelist)
Damon Orobona (Panelist)
Rod Henderer (Panelist)
Qiaojue Yu (Panelist, recused)

Laura Shipman (Design Advisory Panel Liaison)
Gwen Wright (Planning Department Director)
Robert Kronenberg (Area 1 Division Chief)
Elza Hisel-McCoy (Area 1 Regulatory Supervisor)
Michael Brown (Area 1 Master Plan Supervisor)
Leslye Howerton (Area 1 Planner Coordinator)
Matt Folden (Area 1 Planner Coordinator)
Grace Bogdan (Area 1 Planner Coordinator)
Stephanie Dickel (Area 1 Planner Coordinator)
Atul Sharma (Area 2 Planner Coordinator)

Bill Landfair (Engineer/Planner, Applicant Team)
Elliot Rhodeside (Landscape Architect, Applicant Team)
Craig Williams (Architect, Applicant Team)
David Schwarz (Architect, Applicant Team)
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Steve Robbins (Attorney, Applicant Team)
Naomi Spinrad (Member of the Public)
Amanda Farber (Member of the Public)

Discussion Points:

- Public Comments:
 - Thank you for the physical model.
 - The promenade and cantilever feel like a tunnel.
 - *Applicant response:* There are 20 feet before the cantilever, so it is high enough and provides spatial definition and there are no columns. We don't have spaces like this in Montgomery County because we have not built cities. You come from a wider street into compression and intimacy, like in Chicago or New York. Once a building is 10 stories it doesn't matter how tall the building is because eyes don't perceive it.
 - West side what happens when the next building comes up next door?
 - *Applicant response:* The windows on the courtyard are sufficient. The next project will have to assemble and will then be able to provide enough separation.
 - Love the sculpture, is there lighting around?
 - *Applicant response:* As the sun moves the facets are lit, at night there are stationary lights that provide a glow. Catenary lights above provide lighting and human scale.
- Terrific presentation, it helped us understand the thought process.
- The scale of the straight wall on the promenade is an issue, would suggest stepping back upper floors, but understand it would reduce units.
 - *Applicant response:* The site is quite constrained and wouldn't make the height worthwhile economically. Bringing building down to the street and anchoring building is a creative way of doing building for richer design. Do not want to make it feel like the building is sideways to the street.
- Remarkable presentation, great precedents. Don't have problem with architecture and massing, but separation between buildings is tight. Design guidelines call for 45-60ft.
- Did you consider pulling in long arm of courtyard on other side 10 feet to allow more separation on Bainbridge side?



- *Applicant response:* Did look at sliding the bar, but by eroding corners it allowed views. No question that the center of Bainbridge will be impacted. Need to have corners where they are to get the FAR and make the building economically viable. We looked at views from Bainbridge units, and in each case there is a wider angle of view than the previous approved scheme. Looked at solar angles, no question that there is impact, but it is a wash. Net result is that the new design is better at morning and afternoon, not as good during the day when most aren't home. Sliding the building 5ft makes minimal difference on impact to Bainbridge. Given this site and guidelines this is the most responsible design we can come up with. Most important issue is impact on units, and impact is better than the existing approved building, which is closer.
- Balconies add mass, without some of them do you have better building? Particularly on the promenade façade because they add bulk to the parts of the façade. They project and are distracting. Would it help to make projections less bulky with less balconies, many on upper floors may not use the balconies so much.
 - *Applicant response:* You would have a less articulate building. Don't care as much about center unit balconies, but many of these are MPDUs and would make these units less nice which is a philosophical problem. Could make balcony edges rails to be more transparent.
- The presentation was extraordinary, but the only weak point is the separation. The suspended light between the buildings, peaks of sun and quality of materials and general shade and comfort make the promenade work much better than what you see. Tight space even if you pull the building back. Losing the balconies probably won't impact the tight space, rails may work but may not make much impact.
 - *Applicant response:* If you have greater glass area need something to mitigate the large sheer wall. That is the role of the balconies.
- Concern about cantilever and how that makes the pedestrian feel? How can you minimize the area of it popping out?
- The tower wants to have its own integrity, concern about the reading of what is tower. Find it disturbing that plane doesn't come down to the ground along the promenade.
- Different opinions on separation but otherwise very supportive of the building.



Panel Recommendations:

The following recommendations should be incorporated into the Staff Report.

1. Public Benefit Points: The project is on track to achieve at least the minimum 10 Exceptional Design points required in the Bethesda Overlay Zone.
2. Explore how to further improve the pedestrian experience along the promenade and reduce the bulk and imposing feeling of the cantilever, balconies and large sheer wall. While some panel members suggested tower step-backs and increased tower separation may help, others stated that these small moves may not have a large impact.

