

Bethesda Downtown Design Advisory Panel

Meeting Minutes

PROJECT: Lot #25

DATE: January 24, 2024

Attendance:

Panel

Jonathan Fitch

Robert Sponseller

Rod Henderer

John Tschiderer

Paul Mortensen, ex officio member, Senior Urban Designer in the Director's Office

Staff

Atul Sharma, Assistant to the Deputy Director

Stephanie Dickel, Regulatory Supervisor DownCounty Planning

Adam Bossi, Planner III

Grace Bogdan, Planner III

Henry Coppola, Parks Planner

Cristina Sasaki, Parks Planner

Applicant Team

Matt Gordon

Bob Dalrymple

Russel Hines

Jeremy Souders

Jonathan Johnson

Trini Rodriquez

Discussion Points:

Staff: This is the second sketch plan presentation to the DAP. The review will focus on general mass and bulk and conformance with the Design Guidelines and revisions based on the first round of comments.

Panel:

General

- Thank you for listening to the comments from the last DAP, this has evolved nicely.
- We talked about this previously, regarding the locations of the elevators, I think you'll need a third elevator core, so that the elevators have a stronger relationship with pedestrians coming from outside and the main lobby. This would help those walking from Trader Joe's with their groceries, for instance.
 - *Applicant Response: Yes, we need to do the math on it, 2 vs 3 elevator cores. We don't disagree we just need to review the impacts. It's not the cost rather the efficiency.*
 - You could possibly add a corridor, (not too long), for the loading? Or move all three?
 - *Well then we've created the opposite problem that then the loading is too far. We may need an elevator consultant; we need to be comfortable with it. We get it and we will study this further.*

Highland Avenue

- On the ground plane, I am concerned about the frontages on Highland and Maple and if they can be programmed better to help activate the streets. I think it's great to have a stronger relationship with the park but what is addressing the streets? It's because there's this interstitial space.
 - *Applicant Response: From the face of curb to the face of building is 15 feet.*
- Is there any way to flip the utility and vaults to the north side so we can get more programming and then extend the program off the lobby? The utility just bifurcates it,
 - *Applicant Response: There is no service available on Maple, and it was a remnant of a stepback feature on Highland Ave, the 'bridge' that was removed in this iteration.*
 - Its four foot of grade change, it's not insurmountable, could you move it to the west where the grade gets higher?
 - *We can look into that.*
- If we have the entrance on the corner and a 15' sidewalk, it's not very celebratory or pedestrian friendly. It pinches where people will most likely congregate entering or existing the lobby. Either you can push the lobby farther into the building or get rid of the on-street parking to get more of a celebratory presence. Its tight. The community will appreciate this.
 - *Staff - we've also seen projects provide access to bike parking directly from the street which provides convenience but also introduces a storefront and activation.*
 - *Applicant Response: Are people doing that with transparent glass?*
 - *Staff - We've seen both, like in Strathmore there is a double height bike storage in clear view from the street, in other places we've seen frosted*

glass with other art and articulation. It gives people a much more humane experience with the building.

- I would get rid of the parallel parking.
 - *Applicant Response: The street section requires parallel parking on one side of the street, and there is no parking on the south side. We can talk with DOT*
- Perhaps the applicant can get rid of a few spaces adjacent to the lobby entry to create more space there. The remaining spaces could be short term drop off parking that could also be used for Amazon deliveries.
- How was it decided that parking was located on the north side of the street? It seems 8001 Wisconsin wouldn't be so impacted by this.
 - *Applicant Response: The project on the south side has a porte cochere and garage access on the south side.*
- I think if you remove the parking and get additional landscaping at the front of the building and really celebrate the sidewalk area would be very beneficial.
 - *Staff- this may be a more appropriate level for site plan. The big question is there a way to get rid of the parking totally or partially, and how can you activate the ground plane?*
 - *From what I am hearing, the tree line should move down with the sidewalk in the middle allowing a true frontage zone/landscaping by the building or even unit entries. The community pointed to the project on Arlington Road with landscape by the building.*
- Is there any way to program that space adjacent to the streets in the building? I understand the section issue. Could you make unit entrances from Highland Avenue? Jane Jacobs would be so happy. I'm not saying it's easy, it's a tough type.
 - *Applicant Response: You're right it's not easy but also, would a unit owner want steps in front of their unit? We also have to think about maintenance and such, will DPS allow stoops in the right-of-way?*
 - I get that you may not want it from an operating perspective, but it's been done nicely in other areas of Bethesda.
 - *Staff- DPS will not allow stoops in the right-of-way.*
- *(Staff) I do think you could make the argument to DOT and we (Planning) would support it. At a minimum, if you eliminate the parking at least by the lobby to help celebrate and emphasize that entrance, you could leave it elsewhere.*
 - *Applicant Response: That was a big comment by the community that they still want drop off spaces. I do like having the drop off maybe not by the door but at least somewhere for quick deliveries.*
 - Yes, Amazon and Ubers are going to go to the main door, we can't get them to use the rear since they need to talk to reception it's just how it works.
 - *We talked about this with DOT about a month ago, they have a hard time giving us an answer, they said draw it and review it.*
 - If you can't put program at the street level, landscape it at a minimum.

Elevations

- How is the transparency of the amenity space from the Greenway? The current base seems heavy.
 - *Applicant Response: I hear you, we did see those comments this morning and they are good comments. One thing we want to be careful about is that we don't necessarily want that to be a main entrance to the building. It makes sense to have an access but we think its more about a visual connection rather than a physical connection, we want the corner on Highland to remain the main entrance.*
 - Yes, we agree it should be an incidental connection.
- In both of these perspectives, you have this very dark shadow line wrapping the entire building that is caused by a horizontal gap between the base and wide bays above. I'm not so sure you need such a hard line above the base. Could those bays above come down and engage the 1 ½ story base to remove that slot. I do think that is a nice height for the scale of Bethesda. If you did it on the Greenway frontage, if the bay connected to the base, the heavy structure wouldn't seem so heavy and could open up more with a primary and secondary structural reading rather than just a primary structure.
 - *Applicant Response: That comment came up in the last meeting as well and we've been studying it and still are. That was an attempt to break up the base and provide a terrace, but again if that's not a concern of the Panel we'd be willing to do that.*
 - The building feels very heavy and if you did that it would help lighten.
 - *Are you talking about the entire bay or just the outside?*
 - Just the outside piers and the middle column could go away, then you'd create a primary and secondary structure. Again, the height is nice and you'd still have the expression of a base within the greater elevation.
- *(Staff) These second story terraces, once you ground these bays, I hope you preserve the terraces in some way because this will be a great space for residents overlooking the Greenway.*
- I think there's one too many materials. When you look at the black and white renderings it displays a much more beautiful building, if you could simplify this it would help.
- There is a language element with the vertical windows being added by the horizontal windows. Simplification and more vertical expressions overall would be helpful.
- The lines on Maple Avenue seem to be the most successful. If you look at the north face there's this nice northern volume. Could it all be the same language?
 - *Applicant Response: Yes I hear you, we can look at that. We've had similar comments internally and have kicked this around.*
- I liked your comment regarding the entrance onto the Greenway, it should be asymmetrical and incidental as opposed to formal and symmetrical. The first-floor plan with the symmetrical stair is a formal gesture of extending the building to the landscape.
 - *Applicant Response: The way it is rendered now with the single bays, you lose some of the visual connection, but you maintain the Parks subtly.*

- If you look at the plan, the building entrance was less symmetrical and smaller, the stair location on axis makes the entrance more importance and it doesn't need to be. If the entrance and core could be moved closer to the lobby it would solve many problems. The core shouldn't be so far from the door.
 - *Applicant Response: I personally think it helps activate the amenity space, as you have to walk through that to get to the core. You have to make the same walk regardless of where the elevator is.*
 - That's not a question can be answered until we know how the lobby and amenity space is programmed.
 - How to get from the parking into the lobby?
 - *Well, the first floor here is only public parking, the dedicated parking for the building is on the lower floors.*

Panel Recommendations:

The Panel voted that the project is on track to receive the minimum 10 design excellence points with the following to be addressed at the time of Site Plan:

1. Highland Ave: Celebrate the lobby entrance more through removing all or some of parking and allowing wider sidewalk experience. Program Highland Avenue through unit entries, bike storage entries, and/or landscaping. Explore moving utilities farther west to avoid bifurcation of the ground floor.
2. Greenway: Revise entrance to be incidental and asymmetrical, perhaps closer to the lobby, while maintaining visual transparency from Greenway to the interior courtyard no matter where the entrance is.
3. Elevations: Overall simplification of language and materials, grounding the bays and enhancement of transparency of the amenity space from the Greenway.