

Downtown Area Citizens Advisory Council Meeting Minutes 11/6/12 and Comments to the DDA-11/7/12

Last night's meeting of the Downtown Area CAC was devoted almost entirely to a discussion of the merits and problems of the two 14 story student housing developments recently proposed for the Downtown—one at 624 Church Street above the Pizza House and the other at 401-413 E. Huron, to the west of Sloan Plaza. Since our last meeting, both of these projects have gone before the Design Guidelines Review Board and both have had Public Participation Meetings.

At those public meetings, the Design Review Board and community treated the Pizza House development gently, supporting the DDA's willingness to accept the developer's request to follow a "contribution in lieu of" process to provide off-site parking. The major criticism of the project's design was that it looked a lot like Zaragon I and Zaragon West and, perhaps, that it might be more innovative.

But, in the case of the proposed development for 401 and 413 East Huron, the reaction from the Design Review Board, as well as the public, was that this project needed to be re-designed. Nobody likes this project. To its credit, the developers did make some small changes in the design in time for the Public Participation Meeting, but those community members present did not consider that nearly enough. The next morning four members of the Development team met at Sloan Plaza with seven members of the Downtown Design Guidelines Citizens Review Committee, an independent group representing eight near-downtown residential neighborhood organizations. It included the former dean of UM's College of Architecture and Urban Planning (Doug Kelbaugh).

The meeting, overlooking the site from the 8th floor penthouse windows of Sloan Plaza, was cordial. But the message was clearly in line with Design Guidelines and community sentiment:

The building's massing and dark massive presence on Huron and Division encroached on the street's view corridor. The bulk needed to be reduced and redistributed to allow sunlight to the north and an improved pedestrian experience on Huron and Division. The project was simply trying to cram too much on the site. The developers were encouraged to move their elevator, lobby and height to the prominent and important southwest corner of the building. Perhaps a Planned Project approach should be considered to celebrate that prominent corner, to show a greater respect for the character area in which the building is located as well as the historic and residential neighborhood to the north.

That morning meeting was followed by two others—both with Mayor Hieftje—one with the neighborhood group and one with the developers. Our goal is to make this project better before it ever goes to the Planning Commission and we hope that a part of the Planning Commission's Public Hearing will closely look at the way in which this project has sought to follow our adopted Downtown Design Guidelines.

The developers are hoping to have a continuing presence in downtown Ann Arbor beyond the project at 401-413, perhaps in relation to the future of the downtown city lots being considered in the Approaching William Street effort. We hope they can strengthen that possibility with a more successful development on East Huron Street.