

Downtown Area Citizens Advisory Council Meeting Minutes April 2, 2013 and
Comments to the DDA April 3, 2013

Members of the Downtown Area CAC were bewildered by what seemed to some of us to be an irrational negative attack upon the DDA by certain members of City Council last Monday night. The CAC highly values the importance of vision, strong leadership, and strategic planning in shaping the future of downtown. That creative vision requires a focus that moves beyond the political control and power essential for city government to provide for general operations and specific needs. The downtown requires special attention. We believe that only the DDA is uniquely equipped with the creative focus and the economic tools necessary for the strategic planning that enables us to realize our long term community goals for the downtown. Last night, members of the CAC asked me to assure you that this remains our belief and we will publicly express it at every opportunity.

The Downtown Area CAC strongly supports the long –promised Review of A2D2 Zoning to make Recommendations to Amend the Current D1 Zoning Regulations. We also support the City Council decision to Re-convene the Design Guidelines Taskforce to review and make recommendations to City Council regarding improvements to the city’s design guidelines and design review process.

We know that the Council in 2009 adopted the D1/D2 zoning after considerable discussion and uncertainty and did so as a trial, expressly stating at various times that it would revisit the zoning and the design guidelines and process after a year or more.

Well we now see how the zoning is working. Not well. It is flawed and not supportive of Ann Arbor’s Downtown and Central Area Master Plan commitments: Out of town developers come and tell us their projects are “by right”. They produce or promise buildings that ignore the suggestions of our Design Guidelines Review Board as well as the policy directions of our adopted City Master Plans and ordinances. Just look at the Varsity Student High rise on East Huron and its negative impact on the Baptist Church historic properties to the east and the nearby Old Fourth Ward Historic houses to the west—indeed, to the entire East Huron streetscape.

Another example of the failure of our downtown zoning and voluntary design guidelines is the proposed giant student high-rise proposed at 413 East Huron. Both Varsity and 413 E. Huron are massive, unfriendly structures that conflict with City Master Plans. The city’s Central Area Plan recognizes potential conflicts in areas where the downtown commercial core meets low-scale downtown residential areas. Our 2009 Downtown Plan includes a section on Development Character and “Sensitivity to Context”. It establishes as a goal: “Encourage design approaches which minimize the extent to which high-rise buildings create negative impacts in terms of scale, shading, and blocking views.” In the case of 413 East Huron, our Historic District Commission recently passed a resolution saying that 413 E. Huron threatens the preservation of significant historic resources in the adjacent Division Street Historic District.

We believe these projects and zoning areas ignore the goals of City master plans and historic district ordinances, they stretch their floor area capacity with unwarranted housing premiums, create massive and pedestrian unfriendly structures, reject the advice of our Design Guidelines Board and yet insist they are “by right”.

Nearby, (diagram passed out) the strip of E. Huron includes multiple parcels that could be developed—some with 150 foot restrictions, some with a maximum of 180 feet—like the UM Credit Union parking lot next to City Hall and the Hands-On Museum site. These are right across the street from residential, historically designated neighborhoods we are committed to protect.

It’s time to keep our promise. D1 zoning ordinances and Design Guidelines processes need to be re-examined and improved.