

Downtown Area Citizens Advisory Council Comments to the DDA—July 6, 2011

Members of the Downtown Area CAC and guests devoted their entire meeting last night to a discussion of the proposed “Varsity” student housing development (13 stories, 147 units, 445 beds, 77 parking spaces) at 425 East Washington--between Washington and East Huron. Tomorrow, July 7, 6:00 p.m., a Citizen’s Participation meeting at the Michigan League will allow all citizens to view and comment on this project.

Over a week ago the newly appointed Design Review Board provided suggestions for improving the design features of this “Varsity” proposal based on the downtown design guidelines that were adopted as a part of A2D2 earlier this year. The CAC agrees with the suggestions of the Design Review Board. This project still has a way to go before being acceptable design for this community. We support going higher if it improves design—offers the addition of retail. This will be a learning experience for all of us.

The CAC unanimously supported Zaragon II before the Planning Commission and City Council. Zaragon had followed the emerging design guidelines even before they were adopted. While compliance is voluntary for ‘the Varsity, we will not support the project until it shows more signs of improving its design based upon adopted design guidelines.

It’s not the height we object to. By zoning, they can add two more stories. We support doing so—as long as it improves the overall design. The first statement in the new design guidelines (A.1.1) asks developers to “Identify and then reinforce the positive characteristics of adjacent sites.” This proposed development fails to do that.

1. The A2D2 zoning regulations define this block of East Huron as a Character Overlay Zoning District “integrated with or adjacent to three designated historic districts—Division Street Historic District, Ann Street Historic District, and the Old Fourth Ward Historic District.” The “Varsity” proposes raising a 13-story undifferentiated building mass only 15 feet from the Huron sidewalk and adjacent to historic churches and historic house to the east and to the west.
2. Location of two parking areas and parking doors is an issue. By placing an underground parking garage door on Huron only 19 feet from the sidewalk, as well as one Washington, it raises problems for traffic as well as pedestrian safety.
3. The east side mass of the development extends from Washington almost to Huron and was described most mildly by Review Board members as “bland” “a slab” and “uninteresting”--lacking a significantly designed top or bottom, texture, or modular appeal. It has been described it as “a tsunami of windows and brick.” A sun/shade study is appropriate, along with better, varied design.
4. To its credit, the developers have now met with some neighborhood stakeholders--including the churches to the east. A five-foot walkway has been added on the east from Washington to Huron. This “mews” however, calls out for greater width, variety, lighting, even cover. But it is a positive step in improving the building design and use. The CAC is now working to connect “the mews” to the alley west of Talley Hall to create a public walkway from Liberty to Huron as advocated by our Downtown Plan as well as our new Design Guidelines.

