

Troubling Developments Impacting the Residential Quality in the Old Fourth Ward

The Old Fourth Ward (OFW) Historic District has weathered more than its share of development challenges in the past few years. After many residents spent countless hours working on city plans such as the Downtown Plan, the Central Area Plan and the new A2D2 zoning law for D1 and D2 development, we were ultimately confronted with a horrendously inappropriate new development on the very edge of the neighborhood, 413 E. Huron, inexplicably called the Foundry by the developers who insisted that this gargantuan structure was theirs to build “by right!” Ultimately, the Ann Arbor city council approved the project by just one vote, despite unprecedented opposition and much to the dismay of the OFW and many others in the city. We saw it as a complete betrayal of the citizens and a capitulation to out-of-town interests. It stands now simply as testament to poor zoning and poor planning.

Unfortunately, a new issue confronts us. This time a “boutique hotel” has been proposed for Glen between Ann and Catherine, on land squarely within the boundary of the OFW and zoned PUD, or “planned unit development.” In exchange for this special zoning, the proposed development must serve a public benefit.

Many residents of the OFW neighborhood turned out for a public participation meeting with the developers in August. The developers think their hotel is just perfect for this sight while the neighbors were generally dismayed at the size, height, massing and design of the hotel. There are also considerable traffic issues on Glen, a street which is heavily congested during most of the year with traffic from both the UM hospital and the University of Michigan itself along with extensive pedestrian use.

The developers, in response to neighborhood input, tweaked their design somewhat before showing it to the Historic District Commission. It’s still too big, too high, too massive, too out-of-scale, and too intrusive for the Old Fourth Ward. Also, nobody has yet really addressed the dangerous traffic issues the hotel presents.

On top of all this, the developers have yet to articulate what PUBLIC BENEFIT there is to the Old Fourth Ward Historic District. In 2009, the new Ann Arbor Downtown Plan stressed the need to protect the livability of the residentially zoned neighborhoods adjacent to the downtown. “Definite land use boundaries, marking the outer limit of expansion for downtown-oriented commercial development, should be respected in order to reduce pressure for inappropriate encroachment into neighborhoods.” A recommended action strategy was that residential zoning boundaries should be respected and commercial expansion past these limits should be discouraged.

Even the DDA Renewal Plan of 2003 had stated that “Maintaining and strengthening the traditional residential character of the near-downtown neighborhoods is essential for the economic and social sustainability of downtown Ann Arbor.” One of the DDA’s proposed strategies for “preserving and improving the symbiotic relationship between downtown and its nearby neighborhoods” was to resist development pressures and uses within these neighborhoods that are not consistent with their residential nature.”

The proposed hotel development on Glen between Ann and Catherine is clearly commercial, not residential. We maintain that there is no public benefit for the Old Fourth Ward neighborhood. OFW President Christine Crockett and Vice-President Ray Detter have thought about and discussed this issue a great deal. We oppose it and urge you to oppose it as well. It is not acceptable for our residential area either in design or use.