

Tuesday, February 5, 2013

My name is Chris Crockett, President of the Old Fourth Ward Historic District, which includes the Division Street Historic District and the Ann Street Historic Block. This project acutely affects all three historic areas. To refresh everyone's memory I want to summarize some important issues that citizens of Ann Arbor presented at the hearing on January 15.

Ray Dettler said that they did not follow the process.
Norm Tyler presented an overview and sketches demonstrating the negative impact of this "massive student warehouse" on the adjacent historic districts. It is 100,000 sq. ft. larger than The Varsity. He gave the Planning Commission an itemized list of non-compliance and non-responsiveness by the developers to specific design guidelines and the design review process.

Ellen Ramsburgh read the unprecedented resolution passed by the Ann Arbor Historic District Commission about the joint obligation of the Planning Commission to preserve and protect historic districts. We must ensure that new construction will enhance and improve the Old Fourth Ward, not endanger its viability.

Ellen Thackery of the Michigan Historic Preservation Network and the National Trust for Historic Preservation urged the commission to reject the project because of its overwhelming mass and scale which doesn't fit in the area.

Ben Bushkuhl of the HDC also spoke again this project.

Doug Kelbaugh emphasized how the proposed building juts out onto Huron at the point where the road narrows. This could create precarious sight lines for both pedestrians and drivers. At the very least the façade promises to become what he aptly characterized as a "regrettable sore thumb."

Allison Stupka of the Old West Side reminded the commission that their association had supported other large projects, but can't support this one. The developer of 623 S. Main worked with their association and redesigned that project in response to neighbors' concerns.

Hugh Sonk of Sloan Plaza stated that this building is 50% larger than the massive Varsity which is currently under construction. If built, this would be the largest building in Ann Arbor.

Don Duquette of Sloan Plaza, an advocate of downtown density, spoke about how massive, dark, dominant, dangerous, and ugly this design is. He also warned about the ramifications for traffic and jaywalking.

Dr. Phyllis Boniface questioned how the psychiatrists in Sloan Plaza will be able to continue their practices with all the noise and disruption this new building will bring.

Norm Hyman, lawyer for Sloan Plaza, warned about fire dangers to both this building and Sloan Plaza due to inadequate access to the perimeter of the building.

Eleanor Linn, a South University resident, called for a redesign of the north face of the building and of the necessity of light and air for adjacent residents.

Steve Kaplan maintained that this is the wrong way to achieve density. The building is inflexible and will always be student housing.

Mercedes Pasqual cautioned that something of value will be lost if this is built.

Ilene Tyler, representing the Ann Arbor Preservation Alliance, pointed out that this project sits in the East Huron 1 Overlay District. This requires that a property within this overlay must follow the regulations governing development in the overlay district in addition to other development regulations. Furthermore, this project ghettoizes the neighborhood and will decrease property values of its neighbors.

In the same way, this design fails to incorporate principles of the character area of the historic district. Instead of referencing Ann Arbor's designated character area, the developer arrogantly imposed one of their own which even includes buildings currently under construction. They also want to plant the legally required buffer trees in essentially a planter box with neither adequate soil nor adequate light to survive.