

Can't we do better?

I joined the virtual community meeting on January 11 to learn more about the proposed mixed-use building at 1302 South Midvale. The developer wants to build a seven-story building that anchors future development, promotes pedestrian traffic, and serves as a gateway to the community. This new development could bring much needed housing along with welcome amenities. It could even transform a vacant parcel of land that has long been an eyesore on a prominent and busy intersection.

Can it really jumpstart future development? Can it be done in a way that creates a more walkable, human-scale environment? This seems like a tall order given the building's location and the limitations of the site. How would the building serve as a gateway to the community and what does the gateway concept really mean? Can you even build a seven-story building in a residential neighborhood?

First the location. It is just north of the US 18/151 interchange. The expansion of the interchange several years ago has done a great job moving cars, especially with the recent addition of the express lane, but not such a great job of creating a pedestrian and bike friendly environment. Especially at a location that serves as the gateway to a residential community, and indeed, the city itself.



South Midvale and Hammersley is a busy intersection in a residential neighborhood. This building would butt up against the sidewalk on two sides.



There are adjacent businesses and a strip mall to the south. Built years ago, in an era when downtowns were giving way to suburbia, the

mall is home to a hardware store, a few locally owned shops and restaurants, and a paved parking lot. There are rumblings about the potential for redevelopment.



To make a building of this mass and scale work, one of the curb cuts on Hammersley would be eliminated. This means that a cross easement would be required to provide access to the adjacent businesses and the strip mall. To go anywhere expect south on Midvale, cars, delivery trucks, bicyclists and pedestrians frequenting the other establishments would be routed along this cross easement - an awkward route thru the building's parking lot.

It's hard to imagine how this promotes pedestrian traffic. If anything, it seems like it would promote traffic congestion at an intersection that is already unwelcoming to bikes and pedestrians. And how about a setback? Something wide enough to serve as a

buffer between the sidewalk and the street that shields pedestrians from the road.

The cross-easement scenario was recognized by many as less than ideal at the community meeting. The thinking put forward was that, if the proposed development were to be successful in jumpstarting future development, the access issues could be dealt with at a later point in time. My only thought was “Really? Is that the best we can do?” Does it make sense to build a housing development on a busy intersection when there are inherent challenges with traffic patterns, especially without knowing what is going to happen with the establishment to the south? Can’t an inclusive and comprehensive plan be developed that includes the entire site?

Conversion of an aging strip mall into mixed-use housing developments fits well with the city’s emphasis on urban infill and the rapid bus transport system. It’s a way to capitalize on a desirable location along a major transportation corridor with apartments, townhomes, and retail. While there are undoubtedly many tricky challenges in untangling the complicated real estate issues, it’s being done in other areas of the City. It’s a way to alleviate the housing shortage while bringing walkable urbanism to the suburbs.

This is a welcome opportunity for city planners to provide guidance to the community and not just for this area but for the entire Midvale/Verona Road/Beltline frontage road area: the right community amenities and the right housing in the right location. This is an opportunity to bring greenspace and planning to a potentially high-density corridor. Access and linkages are important. They help create the social fabric of a neighborhood and make places like Madison a great place to live. In the 1880s, when Frederick Law Olmsted conceived of Boston’s Emerald Necklace, access and linkages were at the heart of his vision. The seven-mile network of linear parks and greenways, built in the late 1800s, created an endless loop for residents to interact with nature, their city, and each other. The importance of access and linkages still holds true today.

On another note, at the community meeting, one of the community members asked what demarks the proposed building as a gateway. If I understood it correctly, the response was something along the lines of residential areas to the north of the beltline interchange and a more commercial area to the south. I must admit, when I heard this, yet again, my reaction was “Really, can’t we do better?” Is that how we want to define a gateway concept? Is that what heralds the southern approach to the city?

Like it or not, the interchange marks the entrance to the city. Let’s turn it into an asset. Rather than narrow sidewalks, imagine multiuse trails along the roadway to the north and south of the interchange buffered by landscape zones landscaped with native plants, continuous tree canopies, and decorative lighting. This is another welcome opportunity for city planners to work with the community and other stakeholders to create a cohesive vision of what constitute a gateway concept. A vision that links people to nature and defines a sense of place beyond just a highway interchange demarking a transition from a commercial corridor to a residential neighborhood.



Does the proposed seven-story mixed-use development link with this vision? Can you even build a seven-story building on the proposed site, especially as other developments along Midvale, including the Manchester and the Sequoya Commons, are both five stories. Long story short, the answer is "yes", provided that the conditional use standards are met.

Conditional Use Standard #9, in summary, says: "...The Plan Commission shall find that the project creates an environment of sustained aesthetic desirability compatible with the existing or intended character of the area". Conditional Use Standard #12, in summary, says: "...The Plan Commission shall consider...the impact on surround properties, including height, mass, orientation, shadows and view; architectural quality and amenities; the relationship of the proposed building(s) with adjoining streets, alleys, and public right of ways; and the public interest in exceeding the district height limits".

If approved by the City Planning Commission, the building would be on approximately the following scale relative to the rest of the neighborhood.



Photo courtesy Max Schweimer

Are the conditional use standards met? Will the building provide viable retail? Will it integrate with the neighborhood? What other amenities would it offer the community? Your voice counts. If you want to play a role in co-creating your community, speak up!

Reach out to:

- Alder Yannette Figueroa Cole (district10@cityofmadison.com)
- The Crawford Marlborough Neighborhood Association (info@cmna.org)
- The Urban Design Commission (urbandesigncomments@cityofmadison.com)
- The Planning Department (pccomments@cityofmadison.com).

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