



Bethesda Downtown Design Advisory Panel

Meeting Minutes

PROJECT: 7126 Wisconsin Avenue

DATE: July 28, 2021

The 7126 Wisconsin Avenue project was reviewed by the Bethesda Downtown Design Advisory Panel on July 28, 2021. The following meeting notes summarize the Panel's discussion, recommendations regarding design excellence. The project is only in a concept stage and will need to return to the Design Advisory Panel at the time of Sketch Plan submittal to review comments provided and determine straw vote for design excellence. Should you have any additional questions and/or comments please feel free to contact the Design Advisory Panel Liaison.

Attendance:

Panel

George Dove

Rod Henderer

Brian Kelly

Qiaojue Yu

Paul Mortensen, ex officio member, Senior Urban Designer in the Director's Office

Staff

Gwen Wright, Planner Director

Robert Kronenberg, Deputy Director of Planning

Elza Hisel-McCoy, DownCounty Division Chief

Stephanie Dickel, DownCounty Regulatory Supervisor

Grace Bogdan, Planner Coordinator

Jonathan Bush, Planner Coordinator

Hyojung Garland, Park Planning Supervisor

Dominic Quattrocchi, Parks Planner

Rachel Newhouse, Parks Planner

Emily Balmer, DownCounty Administrative Assistant III



Applicant Team

Heather Dlhopsky, Wire Gill
Judd Ullom, Foulger Pratt
Josh Etter, Foulger Pratt
Matthew Pohlhaus
Marius Radulescu
Valerie Hochman
Sami Kirkdil

Members of the Public

No public in attendance

Discussion Points:

Staff: This project was originally part of the Bethesda Market Sketch Plan, heard by the DAP in 2018. This site, on the western part of Wisconsin Avenue, has separated from the Bethesda Market and will move forward separately. Originally, this was comprised of three properties and now a fourth property has been acquired. The project is only in a conceptual stage and so there will be no straw vote taken during this meeting, and the review is focused on massing, urban design with respect to design quality and conformance with Design Guidelines.

Panel:

General Massing

- I think the massing has improved considerably but I think it can be improved further by providing additional setbacks beyond the minimums specified in the Design Guidelines. Can you tell me how you are achieving the 18' setback on Miller?
 - *Applicant Response: This is actually an average of 18 feet and that is because of the depth of the courtyard.*
- So the reality is that you have a zero setback, and I'm not advocating for more on Miller rather that I think the setbacks on Bethesda and Wisconsin are timid and could be strengthened by enhancing those setbacks.
 - *Applicant Response: What we tried to do is instead of providing a stepping setback, having a consistent reading and continuous mass that relates from side to side, we felt that was more important. The base should have the same relevance on all three sides.*
- I'm not arguing the basic strategy, I think that feels right, just enhancing the moves on both frontages would keep your strategy and strengthen the relationship
- What are the current setbacks provided?
 - *Applicant Response: So we have 8 and 10 feet on Bethesda Ave and 10 feet that tapers to 8 feet on Wisconsin Ave.*
- The Design Guidelines recommend on Wisconsin Avenue 10-15 feet and you are going 8-10 feet and on Bethesda Avenue recommends 10-15 feet and you are going 8-10 feet.
 - *Applicant Response: Yes.*
- It is an improvement from the cantilevers that were proposed in the previous design.
- This plan on the screen is cut through the middle of the building? The plan shows more articulation than the model.

- *Applicant Response: Yes, the plan shows more and we hope to add balconies at the next phase, but we need to see how the plan evolves.*
- So these recesses and giant reveals are most important on the edges of the tower. On your previous slide (page 18), there is a slice on Bethesda Ave side of the tower that does not appear on the Wisconsin Ave façade, and to truly articulate the tower perhaps it should be on both, similar to your Telegraph Tower precedent. How do we make those giant urban scale reveals without having the balconies eradicate the reading of that slot? That is going to be a challenge, as making the tower a threshold to Bethesda is a good move, but making the tower more legible is important. This is very much part of the design process, if you look at A.15 it shows the articulation only in one location on Bethesda Ave and I think that slot should be articulated consistently on the Wisconsin avenue slot. And then the next question is how many slices is appropriate before watering down the reading of the tower? As you move forward, perhaps leave that on the thinking list for balconies, is the tower still legible? Maybe the balconies have a unique depth. The precedent is interesting and a good move forward.
 - *Applicant Response: We have another precedent where the articulation of the façade is shown in a more subtle way, where there is a fold that creates something a little less obvious and more noticeable in reflection.*
- Sure, I don't want to be too prescriptive, just generally want to be sure the tower is more legible and you're creating the jamb of a threshold, an urban doorway, which gives us access to Bethesda and the Women's market across the street.
 - *Applicant Response: That analogy is perfect, we would like to use that. We will take a look back at all these comments.*
- I think the important element is the to the south of the Women's Market, I think that is proposed to be a very strong connection to Chevy Chase. I think the way the tower and the southern corner actually addresses that very well and creates a nice face from the park's main access. I imagine the articulation will be very important moving forward.
 - *Applicant Response: Yes that was our intention, you can see a slight bend rather than a flat façade. There are several moves we are trying to make with the park in mind. From the north looking back on Wisconsin Ave, the façade will read as though there is something else going on.*
- If you increase your setbacks on Bethesda and Wisconsin, you will definitely lose GFA, what does the notch on Miller give you? From a massing point of view, it does not greatly contribute to the surrounding urban environment, perhaps one of the simplifications could be rethinking that notch to make up some of the GFA by providing better setbacks on Bethesda and Wisconsin.
 - *Applicant Response: Well the current strategy is it breaks up the building façade and it brings light in. Could the corridor perhaps be on the south side to take up the depth along Miller so that the Bethesda Ave side has a greater setback?*
- I agree that the south façade could be simplified. This project is similar to Metro Tower that also had three facades, and they did honor the setbacks so I believe this project could do the same.

Access

- I like that you were able to acquire the bank site, but it is unfortunate that the proposed garage entrance is located off Bethesda Avenue.

- I agree with relocating the access from Bethesda Avenue, if there was a way to relocate that to Miller and continue the retail and pedestrian connection along Bethesda. Does your parking go thru block? Is it accessed on both sides?
 - *Applicant Response: It is only accessed through Bethesda and trucks are backing in along Miller. This is a very tight site and there is a big grade difference between Bethesda and Miller. We also reviewed the traffic light at Bethesda and Wisconsin which would allow better traffic movement from Bethesda rather than Miller.*
- The drive through for the bank is proposed to remain?
 - *Staff: We have communicated with the Applicant and continue to, we are not supportive of the drive through, this is a downtown area and we struggle with the idea of a drive through use/design/traffic movement at this location particularly due to the circulation with nearby bicycle lanes and pedestrian environment.*
 - *Applicant Response: This is part of our purchase agreement with Capital One, so we are obligated to pursue the drive through option to the extent feasible.*
 - *Applicant Response: We have looked at many options for access and loading, while we are still showing it on Bethesda Ave, it has been located as far away from the intersection as possible. Currently, there are several access points on Bethesda Ave and Miller Ave that we are consolidating that will greatly improve the existing scenario. Whether the drive through remains or not, if it gets removed the one access point will get narrower and further improve the Bethesda streetscape.*
- I did not understand the bank and drive through would remain, I do not support the drive through.
- What happens to the banking drive through when the bank discovers this is no longer a suburban environment and people won't use it this way? What happens to that sliver of space? I know it is in your agreement, but inevitably it will be harder to park on and do drive through, with the new retail fronting on Bethesda, I think it would reinforce that. In thinking about the long term use of the site, how would you cope with that down the road?
 - *Applicant Response: That's a fair question, I think we have heard loud and clear from Planning staff so we are thinking ahead of what that could become. We may need to go back to the bank and determine next steps, and come back here again with a new vision if the drive through doesn't make it in.*

General

- I understand the continuance of the bank site has made this a little more difficult but I appreciate the way the corner has matured. As a concept I am happy with how this is developing, and I agree that more of a setback on Wisconsin Avenue would be beneficial
- I understand you are receiving extra height because of the financial contribution to Bethesda Market, what happens if it doesn't happen?
 - *Applicant Response: Our agreement and funding will go directly to Bethesda Market, so the payment will be happening whether the project doesn't go thru or does, so it will be a financial contribution nonetheless*
- What is the future contemplated retail? General or restaurant?
 - *Applicant Response: That's a really tough question considering it will be another 4-5 years before it comes online and the retail market is changing right now. It could be a variety of things but the market will dictate that in the future*

- If you go the restaurant route have you considered how to incorporate outdoor space given the rise in outdoor dining in these times?
 - *Applicant Response: That's a great question, we wouldn't have space at this point in the design to accommodate that so we will have to rethink that. There may be limited opportunities for small seating outside.*
- When you come in for Sketch Plan, it would be helpful to show your ground floor plans in context with your neighbors to the north and south to further show the relation to the surrounding building footprints, open space/adjacent plazas, bike lanes, etc.