

Bethesda Downtown Design Advisory Panel

Meeting Minutes

PROJECT: 4901 Battery Lane

DATE: September 22, 2021

The 4901 Battery Lane project was reviewed by the Bethesda Downtown Design Advisory Panel on September 22, 2021. The following meeting notes summarize the Panel's discussion, recommendations regarding design excellence, and the exceptional design public benefits points. The project is in the Sketch Plan stage and will need to return to the Design Advisory Panel at the time of Site Plan to review comments provided and determine final 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

Damon Orobona

Qiaojue Yu

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

Staff

Gwen Wright, Planning Director

Robert Kronenberg, Deputy Director of Planning

Stephanie Dickel, DownCounty Regulatory Supervisor

Grace Bogdan, Planner Coordinator

Hyojung Garland, Park Planning Supervisor

Rachel Newhouse, Parks Planner

Emily Balmer, DownCounty Administrative Assistant III

Applicant Team

Nancy Regelin – Shulman Rogers

Brian Strott – Applicant WC Smith Development

Chris Huffer – SK+I Architects (presenting)

Chanda Beaufort – VIKA civil

Trini Rodriguez – Parker Rodriguez Landscape Architect

Steven Sattler – Parker Rodriguez Landscape Architect

Sami Kirkdil – SK+I

Austin Klevan – SK+I

Members of the Public



Michael Miller
Robert Harris
Andrew Kossow

Discussion Points:

Staff: The project is at Sketch Plan and the review is focused on massing, urban design with respect to design quality and conformance with Design Guidelines. This is the first time this project has been before the Panel, Staff has provided a memo outlining certain concerns related to height, proposed open space, and building massing perspectives

Panel:

General Comments

- The County Council signed off on a plan to reduce greenhouse gases to net zero by 2035 so I hope you are looking more into the design and elements that can make it more efficient and working towards net zero energy. We have to talk in those terms if we are going to meet these ambitious county goals.
- Can you describe the public benefit package and the MPDUs?
 - *Applicant Response: We are proposing 15% MPDUs and we did look at the range of existing market rate affordable which is only 8 units, so we will be providing more than what exists today. We are doing 4 categories, there will be an emphasis on ADA accessible units, structured parking, tower setback, cool roof, minimum parking, etc*

Massing

- I like the massing, it reminds me of the buildings along Connecticut Avenue, however those buildings have drop offs fronting on Connecticut Avenue and I understand why you pulled that into the site, will there be a front door along Battery Lane?
 - *Applicant Response: Yes, there will be a front building entrance onto Battery Lane, the drop off will be a secondary entrance for deliveries and taxis.*
- I think this is a thoughtfully designed building, the massing looks great. Seems like you've worked closely with planning staff to satisfy the Guidelines, I second comments on activating the east west connection in the rear (north) of the Property. I think you are on the right path.

Setbacks and relation to Battery District

- Does the proposal include the streetscape that was created for the Battery District and more specifically is the building footprint setback from the street centerline treated consistently?
 - *Applicant Response: Yes, the proposed streetscape by Brown Aldon Properties has been integrated into our proposal and we are being consistent with the Battery District setbacks. The Battery District proposes varying setbacks along Battery Lane ranging from 20'-30'. This project is set back 25'.*
- What do the proposed building setbacks total?
 - *Applicant Response: Between the 3rd and 10th floor are cumulative 15' and then the penthouse will be setback even further.*
- So the cumulative is 15 feet and you are just doing that between two setbacks instead of all at once.

- *Applicant Response: Yes.*
- I agree your setbacks are heroic and will produce an elegant building. The loading dock only has 24' from the door to the back of driveway with the pedestrian walkway adjacent to that. I suggest looking at the depth of that space more closely as I don't think a regular size truck will fit or maneuver in that space as designed.
 - *Applicant Response: Yes we've begun looking into truck turning templates and it does accommodate a 10x30 truck but we will continue to study that given the surrounding pedestrian infrastructure.*

Precedents

- Just my opinion, do not edge towards heavy traditional, which will end up being faux traditional design. Let yourself be free to design a contemporary building using traditional materials, some of the precedent images were great while others looked faux traditional.
- However, there may be a wonderful traditional solution or contemporary solution for this building which should not be discarded.
- Agreed, I just didn't think all of the precedents accurately depicted that style.
- I appreciated the precedent images that actually showed a base, middle, and top that all related to each other very clearly, no matter what the style is. So hopefully these elements of elevations can be woven together for a full elevation, rather than totally fracturing them apart from each other.

Pedestrian Connections

- The north/south pedestrian connection must be completely public in presentation and character and invite neighborhood residents to use it. It must avoid being read as a private pathway for residents only. Perhaps the applicant can create this pathway to be a well-designed and well-lit sidewalk to the adjacent driveway so that the entire depth of the space reads as public access.
- I agree with the north/south connection and I think having it next to the driveway will help it feel open. However, the most important public space will be the northern east/west pathway and space between that path and the north elevation of this building. I wish the Sector Plan had a street type so we could better design it for that fronting pathway. The programmed uses, particularly at the ground floor of the building should really help energize that important public pathway. How are you activating this northern landscape area and how are you connecting this building to that east west connector? That needs to be the most actively experienced open space in this plan. I hope the units on that backside could have full access on that pathway. Currently, it looks like you may have parking on that first floor. The space shown as green separated from the pathway by trees should not be a passive, unused area for tenants and/or passing pedestrians. Could we have a residential access door at the rear?
 - *Applicant Response: There is a huge grade difference which may make it more difficult, but we can consider putting the amenity spaces like a bike room and dog washing space could be located there.*
 - *There may be some combination of uses and activation. Perhaps a bike connection, the residents would use that if designed properly. We think it could be more like a park setting and keeping more eyes on the space and more usable.*
 - *We wanted to make sure there were plenty of eyes on the path so it didn't seem dark and lonely, so we agree with orienting terraces and balconies towards these connections is preferable.*

- What are these connections supposed to be ultimately? Are they supposed to be right of way? Hopefully, they will not be completed piecemeal. How do we make sure it is implemented consistently? What should the pavement language be for the user to recognize that this connector is meant to be public not private. If there are no guidelines, then it should be discussed more throughout this process.
 - *Applicant Response: There are currently no standards and the idea up until now for pedestrian connections have been for breaking up blocks and providing porosity downtown. This one is really different and less urban, it is signaling a pedestrian system and a larger network, perhaps that material doesn't need to be sophisticated but ensure it is friendly for all users (bicycles, toddlers etc.) we could have plenty of future conversations to determine what works best. Whatever is decided here can be implemented in the Battery District as it moves forward.*
- Have you tried to incorporate more programmed elements into the open space? Currently it seems mostly tree and lawn, especially at the north end.
 - *Applicant Response: There are a couple things we are balancing, particularly green cover so we are trying to leave the rear as a bucolic park setting, but we are hoping for the courtyards to be more active and social, we are early in the process so we will work on more connections in the future. Achieving the 35% green cover is actually pretty difficult to achieve in the urban setting.*

Panel Recommendations:

At Sketch Plan a straw vote is taken to determine whether the Project is on track to receive the minimum 10 points for Design Excellence. The Panel voted 5-0 that the Project is on track with the following to be addressed at the time of Site Plan:

- a. Strengthen relationship of the rear of the building with the proposed east/west connection at the northern portion of the Property.
- b. Provide consistent pavement material and design pedestrian connections recognizable as the public realm not private pathways.
- c. Further identify style of the building with a base, middle, and top that clearly relate to one another.

Bethesda Downtown Design Advisory Panel

Meeting Minutes

PROJECT: 4725 Cheltenham

DATE: September 22, 2021

The 4725 Cheltenham project was reviewed by the Bethesda Downtown Design Advisory Panel at Sketch Plan on May 27, 2020. On September 22, 2021, the Panel reviewed the project for Site Plan. The following meeting notes summarize the Panel's discussion, recommendations regarding design excellence, and the exceptional design public benefits points. The project is in the Site Plan stage and the Design Advisory Panel will determine if comments from Sketch Plan have been incorporated and take the final vote for design excellence public benefit points if it is determined the Project is suitable. Should you have any additional questions and/or comments please feel free to contact the Design Advisory Panel Liaison.

Attendees:

George Dove
Rod Henderer
Brian Kelly
Damon Orobona
Qiaojue Yu
Paul Mortensen, ex officio member, Senior Urban Designer in the Director's Office

Staff

Gwen Wright, Planning Director
Robert Kronenberg, Deputy Director
Stephanie Dickel, Regulatory Supervisor, DownCounty Planning
Grace Bogdan, Planner Coordinator, DownCounty Planning
Jonathan Bush, Planner Coordinator, DownCounty Planning
Hyojung Garland, Parks Planner
Domonic Quattrocchi, Parks Planner
Rachel Newhouse, Parks Planner
Emily Balmer, Administrative Assistant III, DownCounty Planning

Applicant Team

Steve Robbins, Attorney
Elizabeth Rodgers, Attorney
Grant Epstein, Developer
Mwangi Gathinji, Developer
Dave Yampolsky, Developer
Steve Dickens, Architect



No members of the public were in attendance

Discussion Points:

Staff: The Panel first saw this item at the Sketch Plan stage in May of 2020 with favorable support that the Project was on track to meet the 10 minimum design excellence points. At Site Plan stage, the review is focused on more detailed and developed architectural expression and site design, consistent with the Design Guidelines.

Landscape and relationship to Cheltenham Urban Park

- Are those streetscape planters for bioretention purposes? The pallet here is great but I wonder about the durability and maintenance of the plants.
 - *Applicant Response: No, they are not for bioretention. We will look into the maintenance, thank you for your comment.*
- Also, there is a retaining wall on the east side of the alley way, is this part of the project?
 - *Applicant Response: There is one on the west side which we will construct, there isn't one on the east side but there is a fence and guardrail and then a swale going into the park.*
- Will you pave the alleyway?
 - *Applicant Response: Yes, we are proposing specialty pavers in the portion shown in red to alert the drivers that the space will be shared with pedestrians*
- Wasn't there a lot of discussion at sketch about the relationship of the project to the park?
 - *Applicant Response: Yes, the fence is something that exists there today. Early on there were some concerns about the relationship and we've heard from the community that they do not want the Park to have more connection with the alley for safety concerns. Where we ended up at the end of the Sketch Plan was that we would give a financial contribution to the Parks Department to fund improvements at the Park.*
- *Parks Staff-* We welcome edge condition improvements including removal of the fence. One thing to note is that Cheltenham Park is part of the Eastern Greenway so this is part of a larger connection. The slope down to the Park is only a few feet and there would be minimal impact to mature trees in that location and we are open to improving that edge.
- That fence as it exists today is a physical and visual barrier. I imagine it would need to be rethought by Parks. Maybe there is a more open type of fence that creates a better relationship while providing the safety that the community is wanting.
- Yes, and it seems according to the Applicant that they will be contributing to Parks to accomplish that.

Elevations

- For me, the freehand sketches imply a continuity in the base but the renderings show a disconnect and lack of continuity in the treatment of the base in the building. I wonder why and encourage some simplification of the base to achieve the design shown in the freehand sketches.
 - *Applicant Response: I think the design intent was to have two offset vertical planes. In this case we kept the material pallet the same, but we mixed up the proportions and we*



added a lot of architectural detail to keep it engaging because of BOH uses located there. I think they are all part of the same family and not as dramatic as you're saying.

- I don't disagree with the material palette, you're right that is consistent in the base, but it appears there were different designers on the right and left side and is not as coherent as it could be.
 - *Applicant Response: Noted, thank you.*
- Is this elevation distorted? The grid in the lower level doesn't seem to align with the grid above. Is that illustrative?
 - *Applicant Response: The tower is stepped back, it's not a 1 to 1 alignment. On the western side it is a direct grid relationship while on the eastern side the grids are slightly off and does have a little offset there.*
- The eastern base (right) is compressive in its expression, it has vertical openings and significant amount of brick and meets the ground. The left-hand portion is much more an extension of slab, trabeated, and boxy in proportion. Is there a way to weave the vocabulary a little more so it isn't as jarring a differentiation? The minute the left side lifts off the ground it has a levity to it, and the minute the right side touches the ground its very weighted. The dialogue is jarring, if you can explore that somehow so there is less jarring continuity that will be successful.
- This is a relatively small building and there are a lot of moves here, most are successful, maybe one less differentiation will be helpful.
 - *Applicant Response: Ok, I'm sure simplification is music to my client's ears.*
- Perhaps there is something at the western frame that anchors to the ground.
- Either that or the second floor has more of a continuous expression and that ties the two sides together.
 - *Applicant Response: That's an interesting idea on the second floor, on the eastern half its hard to read that there are two balconies, and if you imagined that balcony coming over it may help.*
- I do really like the eastern half of the elevation and if you can tie that simplicity over that will be helpful.

Western Corner

- What is the façade of the upper portion of the building towards the west side? What are your thoughts or what do you think would be appropriate by the adjacent owner given you are the first site and the neighboring parcel may redevelop in the future?
 - *Applicant Response: I would say that you could logically fit a bar building along Wisconsin and maybe turn it into a T and could possibly end up with an open space or maybe a drive court between the buildings. It may be that where that goes back into a street that could accommodate the stair tower of this proposal, so maybe our building is only partially blocked rather than fully blocked by the new development.*
- Then I guess my question is, in a future iteration, what happens to the series of Juliet balconies on the western side? And that is also for us to think about, not just you.
- Your erosion of the corner on the eastern side is subtractive and the western is actually projecting out. And it could present a problem to the next development if that designer doesn't appreciate the move.
- I think it's very likely that will be considered a party wall and the balcony will be removed. It may be a gamble worth taking, but the reality is the façade from the street will continue. It is a potential weakness for that unit.



- If you think about the setback requirements for the adjacent property the balcony may survive, what is the setback to the corner?
 - *Applicant Response: I think we are only 6' on that corner and the balconies are about three feet deep.*
- I think it's worth the gamble and as an interim condition it definitely makes the façade more interesting, and we tell staff when the next project comes in that there is a push to respect the building and try to save the balcony in relation to any new projects.

General

- I like the rendering technique; I think it's really nice.
- I think the aesthetics and presentation are very nice, and this is moving in the right direction.
- I appreciate the removal of the parking, there is public parking nearby if it is necessary. This will be a very nice project.
- Oh, I didn't realize that there was no parking. I appreciate that.
 - *Applicant Response: Yes, we had one level with an option to remove at sketch and so now there is no parking, only loading.*

Panel Recommendations:

The Applicant is requesting 23 design excellence points. Some Panel members thought the current design was probably not deserving of 23 points, especially in light of points given to past projects, therefore the Panel was not willing to give 23 or 25 points for this design at this time. However, if the Applicant came back with updates that responded to the comments, perhaps it could achieve these points. Following some discussion, the Panel and Staff directed the Applicant to incorporate comments from the meeting with regard to the eastern and western base design and then present to the DAP once again in October. Total points awarded will be determined at that meeting.

