


DATE: October 21, 2021

TO: Bethesda Downton Plan Design Advisory Panel (DAP)

FROM: Grace Bogdan, Planner Coordinator, DownCounty Planning   
Stephanie Dickel, Regulatory Supervisor, DownCounty Planning

RE: Staff comments for the October 27, 2021 DAP Meeting

We have one item for discussion at this month's meeting which will occur virtually.

## Item #1

### 4725 Cheltenham Drive

Eric Colbert & Associates

Community Three

- 2<sup>nd</sup> Site Plan presentation. Originally presented at the September meeting, minutes are included below.
- At the September meeting, the Panel generally thought the project was moving in the right direction and appreciated the aesthetics, renderings, and removal of parking. However, there were substantial comments regarding the base of the building façade on Cheltenham Drive and the disconnect between the eastern and western base of the building.
- The Panel requested the Applicant to return to the DAP with a more simplified and coherent elevation.
- This submission has revised the base of the building to extend the clean lines and lightness of the western portion to the eastern portion, and the solid masonry end walls that were proposed on the eastern portion are now integrated on the western portion as well to support a more coherent design throughout the Cheltenham Drive façade.
- The Applicant maintains the request for 23 points for design excellence.
  - 10 Points: Generally consistent with the Design Guidelines and meets four of the CR Guideline Criteria
  - 20 Points: Superlative design that in a uniquely compelling way meets the Design Guidelines or overcomes a significant site or similar constraint; a top example of design within Montgomery County
  - 30 Points: Singular design that exemplifies the highest intent of the Design Guidelines and may be considered a top example of design within the Mid-Atlantic region

# Bethesda Downtown Design Advisory Panel

## Meeting Minutes

PROJECT: 4725 Cheltenham

DATE: September 22, 2021

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*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.*

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### **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.

