



Bethesda Downtown Design Advisory Panel

Meeting Minutes

PROJECT: Lot 44/4702 West Virginia Avenue

DATE: March 27, 2024

Attendance:

Panel

Yulia Beltikova

Rod Henderer

Robert Sponseller

John Tschiderer

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

Staff

Robert Kronenberg, Deputy Director

Elza Hisel-McCoy, Downcounty Chief

Atul Sharma, Assistant to the Deputy Director

Grace Bogdan, Planner III

Adam Bossi, Planner III

Henry Coppola, Parks Planner

Cristina Sasaki, Parks Planner

Applicant Team

Matt Gordon, Attorney

Bob Dalrymple, Attorney

Jason Weinstein, Developer

Shane Crowley, Developer

Jeremy Souders, Architect

Trini Rodriguez, Landscape Architect

Steve Sattler, Landscape Architect

Discussion Points:

Staff: This is a Speed to Market project for Sketch Plan and Site Plan level of review. The discussion should focus on detailed architectural design and determination of design excellence points.

Panel:

Eastern Greenway

- Are you also designing the upgrades to Chase Avenue Urban Park?
 - *Applicant Response: No, we are only designing the Eastern Greenway, but we've been working with them to ensure that there will be a consistency to the design.*
- So, there are all these greens along the greenway and Montgomery Parks is the curator? Who is in charge of the overall Greenway?
 - *Applicant Response: The overall vision has been created by Parks and Planning and it will be varied in ownership.*
 - (staff) Parks has created a Concept Framework which was brought forward a couple years ago to provide consistency throughout the Greenway and to maximize connections between adjacent projects and the larger neighborhood.
 - Like the Highline as an example, what makes it so great is the consistency throughout.
 - *Yes, we are trying to ensure continuity, even if in the beginning it comes a little disjointed.*
 - *The current landscape architect (Parker Rodriguez) has been hired by the three development project teams to design the Greenway between Chase Avenue Park to the south and Maple Avenue to the north. Lot 44 is one of those three teams/projects.*
- The path in the Greenway seems very wide, and it seems to dominate this narrow park.
 - *Applicant Response: It is designed to be 10 feet wide per Parks requirements. We agree it should be narrower, but this is a main theme of the Greenway per Parks staff.*
 - I'd think 8 feet would be sufficient here so that landscape is dominant and to better accommodate the true number of users who will use it every day. This probably should not be a natural bike path, but more for pedestrians only. A 10-foot pathway seems more like a street in width and character. Its too wide.
 - (Parks staff) We hear you, and will discuss further.

Loading & Utilities

- So, when you load into the building, you'll have to unload from the on street loading space into the garage and lobby?
 - *Applicant Response: Yes, but these are condominiums so there will be very little turnover each year. We did try to move the on street loading closer to the alley, but MCDOT had issues with site distance.*
 - So, there were previously three curb cuts and now there are two?

- *Yes, it is a big improvement.*
- *Did you ever study enlarging the alley?*
- *We did study it, but even with an additional 5 feet dedication it would not allow proper turning movements. The Benihana site may also not redevelop for many years.*
- *So, loading the condominiums will be a challenge but it's a one-day challenge, the daily trash and deliveries are solved for. How big is the loading layby? This loading depth seems extremely large, and suburban in character. It would be preferred if the sidewalk could be wider, and the delivery layby depth was narrower so that cars can deal with the wide trucks a couple times a year rather than pedestrians dealing with it every day of the year.*
- *Its 11.5 feet deep, the recent updates to MCDOT standards have made it very difficult. We agree it feels very suburban in this urban setting.*
- *Do you have to vent the transformers?*
 - *Applicant Response: No, the transformers will be located within the basement, and they will have their own access key from off the alley and it will vent as normal.*
 - *That's a great improvement.*

Layout

- *What are you doing with the “doghouses” at the top of the “townhouses”, as you referred to them?*
 - *Applicant Response: We aren't sure yet, they will be recessed and will definitely be a different material. They will not be seen from the ground.*
 - *I am predicting an issue with the amenity space so close to the townhouse space.*
- *Did you lift the overall height when you moved the garage?*
 - *Applicant Response: Yes, and though the amenity space won't have an outdoor space, it will be daylit while keeping the separation.*
- *Is there garage below the townhouse?*
 - *Applicant Response: No, so there are openings on the ground level for those users to access parking on the first floor.*
- *Do the townhouses take their trash through the garage?*
 - *Applicant Response: We gave them a dedicated room, so they don't have to access the garage. We created the corridor between the townhouses and the parking. We had two choices in how to solve Fire Access code requirements and we chose this one with the corridor, which also allows the corridor to directly access this small trash room.*
 - *Do the townhouses have elevators?*
 - *Yes, internal.*
- *With the concrete contractors there doing the tower construction, you should strongly consider doing the townhouses out of concrete rather than wood. This would give you an additional foot of interior height per floor and might solve other issues as well.*

Elevations

- Are you trying to separate the top floors with those blank walls right above the townhouses?
 - *Applicant Response: It's a privacy issue, as those are condo units that would be facing the townhouse rooftop.*
- What is the material for the rest of the building?
 - *Applicant Response: Contemplating a white masonry for the entire building with a granite base, but it is not finalized.*
 - (staff) we do need to know the materials given that we are at site plan. The applicant should provide a list of materials for another final review by the DAP.
- (staff) are you comfortable with the West Virginia Avenue elevation?
 - There seems to be a corner element or an anchor at this corner missing. It would be nice to have something at the corner to heighten that experience.
 - *Applicant Response: We studied a corner, we can look at a bigger opening at the piano noble?*
 - I actually like the simple look given that there is much more going on above.
- You've really made some great strides. The previous renderings were very disjointed, this all speaks the same language.
- On the north elevation, could you make some refinements for the cornice line from the taller building into the townhouses? It seems mismatched and would look much better tied together. Currently they do not totally align, and one is thicker than the other. The "hyphen" between them is also very narrow, which does not help the reading of both sides.
 - *Applicant Response: We studied this, the scale of the two bands is different and we were concerned about creating a wedding cake design of having too many horizontals. We were trying to strategically break the horizontals. The townhouses are in line with the main door of the tower, we were trying to play with the dimensions there.*
 - Another way to deal with it could be bigger hyphens between the two sides. They are sort of attached but not. Maybe if you can push the intermediate with the door access (below) back a little bit that would help. This is less of a problem on the south side but on the north side it seems like a missed opportunity.
- (staff) There are two cornices shown for the townhouses, maybe one can be more downplayed? And the headers for the windows at the top level are quite large.
- Is the exhaust different for the two parts? So, the townhouse will go through the sides? It would be nice to see details on that.
 - *Applicant Response: We have not designed the exhaust yet, we could use the balconies on the upper tower units. Maybe we could use the roofs for the corner townhouses but the middle will be difficult. There are not many discrete places for the middle townhouses, it's really the dryer vent that Montgomery County likes.*
 - Condenser dryers are really improving in technology. They are used in Europe and eliminate the need for exhaust vents outside. Perhaps you can use them here?

- *We've tried to push them and not many clients have been open to it. I think it's an education issue. I'm open to being educated on condenser dryers to avoid vents.*
- *If you could find a clever way, it will really solve those issues.*
- Does anybody else wonder about the belvederes? Either do two or zero, it's the only asymmetrical thing on your project. Maybe it's the next level of detail, how do you do the tower? I'm ok with it here because of the park but maybe you should do two.
 - *Applicant Response: We studied it, but I've been looking at Robert Stern and really like the asymmetrical view.*
 - *I also like the asymmetry facing towards the park.*
 - *Maybe we could continue it up but make it a lighter feature or color.*
- Can you remind me how many units? and how many parking spaces?
 - *Applicant Response: 57 units with 99 parking spaces. That's a marketability thing, these are large for sale units and the assumption is many of these residents will have two cars. We have to do 7 deeply affordable units, so to make the economics work we have to sell the market rates at a higher price point and therefore give them parking.*
 - (staff) *We are in a downtown with plenty of public parking. Our Board is hyper focused on parking so you should be expected to have that conversation with the Board and staff. That said, I like what you've done with the building, we just want you to be prepared.*
 - *Applicant Response: We are dealing with this in other jurisdictions, owners with large condo units like this are going to have more cars and the large condo situation is just a different animal. We could have fit a higher number of apartment units with the 99 spaces it seems to make more sense.*
 - (staff) *We hear you, but the parking is tied to the additional building height which the Planning Board has discretion over.*

Panel Recommendations:

The Panel requested the Applicant to return with additional detail regarding the landscaping, building materials, and refinements as noted above.