

Bethesda Downtown Design Advisory Panel

Meeting Minutes

PROJECT: 7475 Wisconsin Avenue

DATE: January 28, 2025

Attendance:

Panel

John Tschiderer

Sandeep Walia

Yulia Beltikova

Robert Sponseller

Paul Mortensen, ex officio member

Staff

Elza Hisel McCoy, Chief, West County Planning Division

Atul Sharma, Chief, Design, Placemaking, and Policy Division

Stephanie Dickel, Regulatory Supervisor West County Planning

Sandra Pereira, Urban Design Supervisor, Design, Placemaking, and Policy (DPP) Division

Grace Bogdan, DPP Planner

Natasha Fahim, DPP Planner

Adam Bossi, West County Planner

Jeff Server, West County Planner

Meghan Flynn, West County Planner

Ugonna Njeze, West County Planner

Darcy Buckley, Parks Planner

Applicant Team

Matt Gordon, Selzer Gurvitch

Nick Gordon, MRP Realty

Chris Huffer, SK&I

Sami Kirkdil, SK&I

Jason Langford, SK&I

Larney Reed, SK&I

Yavuz Goncu, SK&I

Don Hoover, Oculus Landscape Architect

Liam Butt, Oculus Landscape Architect

Ian Duke, VIKA



Discussion Points:

Staff: This is the second presentation to the DAP at a conceptual level with an anticipated expedited review process under the Commercial to Residential Reconstruction (CRR) Plan. This review will focus on high level Sector Plan recommendations, general mass and bulk and conformance with the Design Guidelines. The applicant presented their updated drawings that reflected modifications that incorporated the first DAP meeting comments.

Panel:

General

- What is the width of the outdoor stair down to the metro entrance?
 - *Applicant Response: it is about ten feet.*
- Is the shadow in the rendering based off a shade study?
 - *Applicant Response: No, the rendering has been geolocated, so the shadow is automated based on the location, but I am not aware of the time of day or the month.*
- What is the business relationship with WMATA? I'm trying to understand the limitations of the partnership and how that affects the design.
 - *Applicant Response: There is an easement that has been in place for many years with WMATA and the Property is required to provide the access point. The easement across Wisconsin Avenue is maintained by the County. Agreements and design will need to be reviewed and approved by both WMATA and the County.*
 - Is WMATA part of the design process?
 - *Yes, they don't maintain this part of it, the County does. But anything that is involved with metro requires WMATA approval and we are beginning that process.*
 - Do they participate in the cost of these improvements?
 - *No, that will be our responsibility. Our issue is that the public really doesn't know that it is there underground so they don't use it. We were trying to react to the realities of the situation. We thought this was the way to encourage people to use it.*
 - You're one block from the metro regardless, so using it or not could be done in a more elegant way.
- You mention there is an elevator along with the stair?
 - *Applicant Response: Yes, it's located off Wisconsin Avenue in the building with a vestibule to the street.*
- How many stories is this building total?
 - *Applicant Response: 29 stories*
 - And is the core in the middle? Have you worked out a floor plate and layout?
 - *Yes, the core is in the middle, and we've set a layout, it's a limited floorplate and hasn't changed much with this massing.*
- (Staff) With this layout, the access from the alley has moved completely to the south and now we are wondering if the new alley to the east of the tower and curb cut is necessary?

- *Applicant Response: We thought adding an extra ingress/egress would be beneficial for this phase and the entire site in general. East West and Montgomery are one way, so having an extra access point was necessary.*
- *We also own that office building to the east and need to maintain marketability. We want to maintain the space. There are also windows along that western elevation of the office building so we need to maintain that space.*
- *On the alley treatment, if the pedestrians end up using that alley, the materiality, design and lighting will be important to ensure they feel safe.*

Metro Entrance

- I'm struggling with the location of this stair entrance at the corner of a building, I don't see how you can design your way out of this with it not feeling like a pit. It feels a bit anti-urban, and pedestrians will have to walk around this as well as the other landscaping beds and bump outs designed at the street level. It just looks like it all will feel narrow and constrained at the street. It seems to me if you can't enclose the metro entrance as it is now, you should at least allow the building to hold the corner. It doesn't feel integrated well into the building, rather the building is making way for it. Why is it essential to have it designed this way? Could it not be very public but not in the building the way it is shown in the precedent images?
 - *Applicant Response: Our thought was since it is currently in the building now, it is hard to find and not many people use it because it is not user friendly. It is a secondary access not the main access. We felt this was a step up in terms of public access.*
 - I agree it is currently very hidden, I just think there is another way to solve it. I don't think putting a pit on this side of the street is the solution. It feels very odd for such a prominent building corner in the city. Given its urban setting, I don't think the greenery is the solution here either.
- It is a bit suffocating to the streetscape where the secondary metro entrance is, and it's hurting the concept of the elegant opening at the corner of the building with this restrained entrance. I understand you have structural and sculptural restrictions. The exposed stairs are quite troubling and the cover you propose seems to be a little too high to provide adequate coverage.
- Let the architecture of the building dictate the ground plane design not the fact that the metro is there.
- The building looks like a weak chin, and too much has been given to the metro. I think the metro entrance is incredibly important and marketable to residents. I think its primary but how it gets integrated into the fabric at the ground level needs to be within the building to provide a stronger muscular ground plane. I think some of the other comments regarding the balconies are important, those are premium rents but how you integrate them will add interest to the elevational planes and bring the building in as a prime opportunity to do something special design wise. I think the retail will pay for the rent if the base is designed with more sensitivity to the street. This is a great piece of real estate. Your rents will support the cost of a creative design that makes sense. I think the stair design is a bad investment; the corner needs to be celebrated better with retail space.

- (Staff) it sounds like there are two alternatives to consider, either making it more muscular and covered and protected at the corner, or having the Metro entrance located elsewhere, prominently within the base and integrated into the building.
 - A mixture of the two, study both. Integrate it into a big move or integrate it into the building.
 - The stair and pit as designed is a nonstarter for us. We cannot support that design if it remains at the next stage.

Ground Plane

- Seeing a bit more intentionality from a landscape perspective would be helpful in the next round of review.
 - *Applicant Response: Since we were last here in December, we have brought on a landscape consultant. Our goal is to continue to advance but we just started to dig in on the landscape and we will continue to finesse.*
- As you move forward, please make sure the sun study works the way it is facing. It seems there is an opportunity here for art as well, if the front area/corner are not feasible for planting.
 - *Applicant Response: Yes, we have been discussing this with our landscape architects and there may be ways with larger plantings like trees. We agree there are other ways to activate the walls with maybe a bike room.*

Massing

- The overall massing is a nice development with the pinwheel. I think the balconies that interrupt the planes are contrary to the precedents, but I do find it interesting. The massing sets up something special at the corner, but I agree with my Panel members, it seems tight and there is not enough space to be successful at the ground plane. How important is this entrance given the main entrance is across the street? If you could create more of a recess underneath the building and save some wider sidewalk areas maybe that's an option. I like the massing, and it seems to be going in the right direction.
- I agree, at the corner. I like the asymmetry of the two planes. Perhaps because this is a residential and you cannot remove the balconies, maybe you could recess them to make them less prominent.
- I like that the massing on East West Highway is setback and gives more prominence on the corner. I look forward to seeing the materiality.
- There seems to be a lack of clarity on some of the facades as they go up, the building is trying to make up its mind of what it wants to be. I am always a proponent of simplicity, and those balconies seem less intentional. The way the building is angled at the ground plane rather than just being parallel to the street seems odd. I know it is meant to add visual interest, but the move is so subtle that it just adds complexity rather than visual interest.
 - *Applicant Response: We appreciate the comments on the angles and will keep it in mind when developing the materiality.*

- I still struggle a bit with the top because I'm not sure its purpose. Those big parapet walls, I'm not sure if there is a function to those, is there usable space on the other side? It looks single purpose in nature as proposed.
- The building on East West Highway seems like a separate building and maybe that's intentional, but it is so setback it seems like its speaking in different languages.
 - *Applicant Response: We are intentionally pushing it back and we are still developing materials for the building. The Design Guidelines recommend these buildings have stepbacks and this site is small even though it doesn't look like it. In making a feasible floorplate, we are looking at unique ways of creating the base, middle, top, while still keeping a feasible floorplate and building.*
- I think the chamfer of the building is fine, but the negative space below it is not. If it were a plaza or retail or other usable space it would be just fine.
- If you look back at your precedents, those plane elements are winning over the articulation of the surface. I think that's the piece missing in an otherwise promising design. I think the asymmetry and chamfer is helping the corner piece. I think the main issue is the articulation and prominence of the balconies.
 - *Applicant Response: Yes, I think you are right. The precedents are very basic and we are looking at it, and we understand it's not there yet.*

Panel Recommendations:

The Panel determined the Project could move forward through the concept plan process. At the next stage (site plan level detail through the CRR expedited review process), the Applicant should return with resolution to the metro entrance, balconies, and other comments above. The Panel and Staff requested the project return prior to formally submitting a Plan application to allow sufficient time for review outside of the expedited process.