

From: Jennifer Smith
Sent: Friday, February 09, 2007 11:07 AM
To: planadmin
Subject: Downer Avenue Master Plan

Dear City Plan Commission Members,

I am writing to express my strong opposition to the current draft of a master plan for the Downer Avenue shopping area, and in particular my very strong opposition to the proposal for a zoning variance that would allow construction of an 11-story residential and hotel complex one block west of Downer. This proposal is dramatically out of step with the existing pattern in the neighborhood, in which the overwhelming majority of structures (including multifamily buildings) stand four stories or less, and the developers make no argument I can see that would justify such an egregious departure from the neighborhood's character and charm on behalf of this single project.

I moved to the Downer Avenue neighborhood essentially by chance in 2005, when I started a teaching position at UWM and happened to find a rental apartment in the neighborhood. I have been very happy in the area, and when I decided to shift from renting to owning, I restricted my condominium search to an area within a few blocks of the Downer Avenue shopping strip. I recently purchased a unit in an older building just off the street, and I know that I and my fellow residents are very attached to the character of the neighborhood we live in: a combination of beautiful old single-family homes, some now single-family and others multi-family residences, and older three- and four-story apartment buildings, some owner-occupied and some rented, with a few newer buildings of the same size mixed in. This mixed residential pattern makes the area around Downer Avenue a walkable, attractive, densely-populated residential area, and its close proximity to the university, the lake, and the downtown should ensure -- even if the beauty of the neighborhood itself did not -- its continued attractions for new residents. Introducing a new building that departed dramatically from this existing pattern would be a lasting scar on the neighborhood and an invitation to additional high-rise construction, and I feel residents are rightly concerned that the developers -- and, perhaps, the city -- are not prepared to recognize the attractions of the area as it stands and to create projects that are in keeping with the existing construction.

Furthermore, while I strongly support revitalization of the commercial strip along Downer Avenue -- most importantly, occupation of the retail spaces that are currently vacant -- I also feel that the master plan documents' implicit or explicit characterization of the area as blighted is unreasonable and reflects a strategic purpose rather than reality on the ground. In the strong performance of the newly-opened Cafe Hollander, for example (where it is now almost never possible to get a table without waiting on a weekend), I think one can see that the existing neighborhood around Downer is entirely capable of generating strong patronage for retail business on the Avenue when the right mix of tenants can be found. This is as it should be: indeed, the idea that a densely-populated residential area loaded with expensive single-family homes, attractive multifamily homes and student rentals should be (and be doomed to remain) a retail wasteland without a major new infusion of construction strikes me as absurd on its face. Rather, the owners of the Downer Avenue strip should be asking themselves what they can do to ensure that residents of the area shop, eat, and recreate close to home rather than being driven farther afield to find businesses that suit their needs.

In sum, I would like to add my voice to the others from the neighborhood who oppose the zoning variances contained in the proposed Downer Avenue Master Plan, and I hope that you and the city's other decision-makers will keep local residents' views in mind when you vote on the proposal.

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

--Jennifer Smith.

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