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VIA EMAIL :jowcza@milwaukee.gov; lelmer@milwaukee.gov
Historic Preservation Commission
c/o Linda Elmer
Office of the City Clerk
200 East Wells Street, Room 205
Milwaukee, WI 53202

Dear Historic Preservation Committee:

I write as a property owner at the St. Regis Condominiums, a seven unit , 110 year old building directly across from the two developments whose applications for Certificates of Appropriateness are being heard jointly on July 11, 2022.

I join a chorus of adjacent property owners whose first objection is to the unfair process at play. We have had no aldermanic representation, either from our former or pending alderpersons. Thus, I am taking the liberty, after 25 years, to address you as a former alderwoman. I care about the interests of all concerned, including those of the taxpaying neighbors whose voices have not been heard thus far. Since the taxpaying neighbors have no elected representative, this process could very easily be held until after he is sworn in, or at least, until after there has been a public meeting with neutral city representatives who will listen. ¹ Maybe even, from Mayor Johnson's office?

What, after all, is the rush to get these two big projects approved by you, with a single sleight of hand? A hearing before you will be the only chance the affected neighbors will have had to speak rationally and factually about either or both projects' historic validity. To many of us, it feels like this is being slid through in the middle of a summer where most everyone is taking a long deserved vacation after two years of being cooped up due to the pandemic. Most offices require an advance appointment. Getting help from usually very responsive city and county employees has often been met with "I am away until...".

I myself have taken time since June 13 to research the property data in the City and County. I was at the door of the Register of Deeds and was told I had to make an appointment-for another day. I did so. Given the fairly opaque process now in effect, I did not get copies of everything I requested. Fortunately, another neighbor had the same idea and he got in days later and was able, as best I can tell, to get some deeds I was initially looking for. These are deeds that contain restrictions.

My question is: what does the Historic Preservation Commission have to say about the deed restrictions still, apparently, in effect? Specifically, they appear to entail a restriction on building any building within

¹ In this regard I cite Pastor Karen Hagen's letter of June 20, 2022, and adopt it.

“20 feet of the street line.” As respects your guidelines, I would cite the requirement of SITING as making this a fact relevant to this hearing.²

Reading these old deeds is only somewhat difficult, given tiny handwriting, but always interesting. As a lawyer who is somewhat familiar with property issues, it seems odd to me that the four proponent corporations have not initially addressed St Mark’s absolute and undeniable right to build whatever it wants onto this land that has been vacant -with civic and charitable interests in mind-for over 100 years. I speak here only of the high density apartment building proposal.

Perhaps the deeds were overlooked? Do they raise legal issues? If they do, then let’s take the time to look into them. As best I can tell from the architect’s drawings, one only sees a “15” setback from Hackett Avenue. The architect, Mr Shields, provided no acknowledgement of the permissible deeds, nor any legal description of the difference between “property line” and “street line,” and how if at all, the setback relates to the history of conveyances. My read of the restrictions is that a 20’ setback is required from some point. Let’s find out.

One thing is clear: the proposed **SITING** of this large apartment is not in keeping with the intent to “maintain the cohesiveness of the district as a group of stylistically compatible structures.” The proposed apartment building will stick out like the proverbial sore thumb. It should not receive a Certificate of Appropriateness unless and until it is scaled back.

I am also going to address the inherent conundrum that we, the affected neighbors, have been often reminded of: “Historic Preservation does not address parking or traffic concerns.” Really? even though the proponents DO address parking? What do we do? If I were Alderperson I would make the following argument:

Specifically, St Mark’s plan shocks us with the admission that they are eliminating parking for their own parishioners in order to, as one neighbor aptly said, “maximize profit to St Mark’s.” How is this not an implicit defilement of the concept of **FORM**?

“The massing of new construction must be compatible with the goal of maintaining the integrity of the complex as a cohesive group of historic structures...” Admittedly, this is vague, malleable language. I would argue as alderperson that the “integrity” of the St Mark’s complex will be destroyed if they are allowed to eliminate their parking.

St Mark’s has a lot of older folks who will need special access. Are they going to take away more street parking for “disabled access?” Will they require people to pay to park? How can the issue of “where will they park,” not be integral to the issue of **Form**? I propose that it is and that St Mark’s should return to the drawing board on that one.

The Final Historic Designation report, page 13, says the following:

“Today, Downer Avenue’s effervescent retailing activity makes it a stand-out among the city’s neighborhood commercial districts. Despite some changes in its businesses and architecture over the years, Downer Avenue remains a unique and vibrant hub of shopping and entertainment. It is an outstanding example of an older commercial district that has retained much of its historic character while continuing to meet the needs of modern businesses and consumers.”

² I cite to Kay Wosewick’s reiteration of the siting requirements as found in the “Final historic Designation Report North Downer Avenue Commercial District.

Keeping in mind that St Mark's is part of a commercial district which relies on people either walking there or driving there and parking on side streets-like mine- how can St. Mark's justify the "appropriateness" of their parking plan: "we're eliminating our parking and we'll take it up after we get our certificate." How is that the least bit fair to the residents and businesses of our historic neighborhood under your guidelines? I would argue here: **Siting**, and **Scale** are violated. Further, there will be actual demolition of the parking lot. In light of this, I propose that the City should immediately do a traffic study, reviewing the trajectory of traffic patterns before, during and after construction.

The **Final Designation Report** says the following about "Guidelines for **Demolition**: "although demolition is not encouraged and generally not permissible... Consideration will be given to whether or not the building contributes to the neighborhood and the general appearance and has a positive effect on other buildings in the area." P.24. I submit that demolishing the current parking lot for St Mark's should be allowed only if they provide alternative parking within their building plans. If they cannot do this, they should be denied a Certificate of Appropriateness.

Here is another passage from the **Final Historic Designation Report**, as it relates to the part St Mark's will be tearing down:

"The new hall(1949!) is decidedly modest compared with the original proposal for the structure. The design preferred by the congregation was a very large, Gothic style cloistered parish house that would have given the complex the character of an extensive medieval monastery. Because that plan proved to be too expensive for the parish, the present, smaller cloister and modern style parish hall was constructed instead." P. 15

Is history about to repeat itself? We are in a period of steady inflation. There are no requirements for these two developments to actually produce what they say they want to produce. In fact, from the joint presentation, it is apparent that St Mark's must profit to a high degree for them to build their new piece. They are not fundraising. They are selling land which has been used for benign, if not charitable, purposes for 100 years. St Mark's plans are extreme and speculative. There are always cost overruns. There may be a recession. Their proposals might make them dollars. They don't make sense for this neighborhood.

Building Materials are very important. What guarantees are there that materials they are citing will be a final product? Are they are using real brick or brick facade? Could Mr Shields kindly provide examples of the red brick he says will be used on the apartment complex? To my eye, it is massive and looks nothing like that found in the historic neighborhood. Further, he cites the following: "...taking a queue(sic) from the surrounding historical brick buildings in the neighborhood, the proposed building will transition from a reddish face brick to a lighter colored brick on the side and back facades. This approach can be seen throughout the historic district." To which historic district does Mr Shields allude? It does not appear in this historic district. This "lighter" brick is unacceptable and its inappropriateness has been described by others.

Referring to the apartment building, the overall **Siting, Scale, Form and Materials** are not consistent with the beautiful brick and stone masonry or the surrounding buildings. The brief statement in their proposal calls it "St Mark's Multifamily Housing." This is not what this housing will be. It will be "market rate" apartments (code for very high rents in a skyrocketing rental post pandemic era), small units that, as one proponent said, will be great for the new medical staff coming in to "St Mary's."

The trend in hospitals is to hire *locum tenens* workers to fill in the gaps in the shortage of medical personnel. *Locum tenens* workers are to be appreciated, and valued. They are needed. But they generally travel to and from and this does not suggest it will be “multi-family” according to the demographics of this city. Who else will afford these units? Gig workers. Short termers. Transients making temporary good wages. This is not the tradition of the Downer Historic District.

True “multi family” is not this. I know (pretending I am the missing alderperson) that expressions of the desire for affordability, inclusivity, diversity, accessibility and ecology are not the purview of this committee. Yet, these are historically relevant and presently relevant. Someone has to consider these. If not now, when? If not you, who?

I would much prefer that St Mark’s do something to make the community better. For example, maybe they sell the land to a non-profit like Habitat for Humanity. Actual multifamily residences people from across my town who are not Caucasian could actually afford to buy and enjoy?

Milwaukee east and downtown has a plethora of “market rate” housing. Just drive by The East Sider in the gloaming and notice the paucity of lights on in those expensive apartments. Or, drive in the downtown Water Streets and Commerce Streets. It’s a Canyonland. So much market rate housing, lots of lights out, no furniture on the overhang decks. What is Milwaukee to do with all this “market rate” housing that enriches developers and burdens the taxpayers?

Environment and ecology are extremely important. Our historic district will lose too many trees. Now and forever. This new development proposes little if any landscaping, no new “old growth” trees or conifers. They will plant scrub trees and bushes, in whatever green space is left. These two developments will destroy two gorgeous Lindens that are over 100 years old.

Many a beautiful encounter in that green space has happened over the years. We enjoyed gardening there. Our kids and grands played in the playground. Dogs played there. People picnicked on the grass. St. Mark’s held services on the lawn. How many trees must Milwaukee lose to “market rate” development before the health of all Milwaukeeans is affected? Will St Mark’s reputation as a good neighbor be damaged? Will they still host our voting ward?

I do have a question, based on what at least one pastor of another small church has inquired of me: how can a tax exempt institution like St Mark’s make a huge profit on land for which they paid a minuscule amount and not a cent in taxes over the past hundred years? Will they have to pay taxes? Will there be payments in lieu of taxes? How is this fair to the rest of us? Why doesn’t the City, by way of some well needed reparation for its continued high degree of housing segregation, buy the land, and sell it to a charitable organization which will build beautiful affordable housing? With green spaces? Landscaping? Trees? Maybe 8-9 condos/townhouses? Will we ever have the privilege of living amongst the people of the majority of this city?

Historic Preservation and friends of our Milwaukee, the four groups promoting this development, St Mark’s, the DeMichele Company, Hammel, Green and Abrahamson, and Catalyst Construction are all able and respected entities. Aspects of both proposals have merit. The problem is that the bottom line for all of this is money. If St Mark’s were to revise its planning to benefit the neighborhood, the money would absolutely flow to them. Not from the land per se, but from the people. I know this. This project will tarnish the long held reputation of St Mark’s for being a good neighbor. One is reminded of the parable of Christ and the money lenders in the Temple.

Speaking as the (former, in the absence of any) Alderperson, I believe I have a duty to say these things. Milwaukee can do better. St Mark's can do better. We all can do better. Please do not grant a Certificate of Appropriateness to either project until revisions are made.

I authorize any neighbors who wish to endorse my comments to do so. And, I speak for the St. Regis, as President of the Board of the Condo Association.

I would ask that this letter be sent to all members of the Historic Preservation Commission.

I would like to speak at the meeting on Monday, July 11, 2022.

Thank you for your time and attention.

Respectfully submitted,

Lorraine McNamara-McGraw,
Former Alderperson of the Third District