

John-Neil Thompson
2664 N. Hackett Avenue
Milwaukee, WI 53211
johnneilthompon0@gmail.com

Monday September 12, 2022

To the Members of the
Zoning, Neighborhoods and Development Committee
of the Milwaukee Common Council:
Ald. Michael Murphy, Chair (mmurph@milwaukee.gov)
Ald. Robert Bauman, Vice Chair (rjbauma@milwaukee.gov)
Ald. Marina Dimitrijevic: (Marina@milwaukee.gov)
Ald. José Perez: (jperez@milwaukee.gov)
Ald. Russell Stamper: (Russell.Stamper@milwaukee.gov)

Dear Committee Members,

This letter refers to the zoning change on the 2600 block of Hackett Avenue you'll be considering at your public hearing tomorrow. (File # 220401). The development proposed for the site has become a contentious issue among neighbors here, and has attracted press attention that has made those outside of the neighborhood aware of it as well.

My own opposition to the project has changed in recent weeks, especially after reading the 8/22 CPC Staff Report and the 8/25 Letter from the CPC to your Committee. I appreciate what the city planners are trying to accomplish, and the ways the project fits into the Northeast Side Area Plan (NESAP).

But the fact that this development was being planned for years¹ before being made public, and then in a few short months seems to be fast-tracked for a zoning change — and all this without an alderman in place for the district — is **a process that I can't support**.

Proponents of the project argue that the public was sufficiently involved, pointing to a "public meeting" the developers hosted in mid-June². The developers presented this meeting as a suitable replacement for similar meetings former Alderman Nik Kovac had held in the past with neighbors and community stakeholders, but there was little space in this meeting for genuine community input. Although great as a design presentation, its purpose was plainly to convince the public that they had thought of everything and come up with a great plan, rather than to listen openly to community input & critique.

At one point, one of the presenters said that they had met with and had obtained the support of Jonathan Brostoff, who will be unopposed in the November election for Nik Kovac's vacant alderman seat. Right now, we have no alderman representing us. If we did, I would expect him/her to solicit genuine community input before forming an opinion based on meeting with developers.

1 This is according to the words of the Pastor of St. Marks Church at the first public meeting (I think in June), hosted by the development team. St. Marks is the present owner of the land. If the zoning change is approved, they would sell it to the developer to raise money to demolish and rebuild their parish hall.

2 video of the meeting is available here: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1osVzo-Z0pprvdgAkvSnceMoQc7Aobr1a/view>

So one objection to the process is a lack of genuine community engagement in design.

Another problem with the process is the reactive nature of planners' involvement.

A single developer came forth with a single plan requesting a zoning change. The city is now reacting to this opportunity basically with a simple yes or no. Although this does provide some control, this process ensures that profit will be the main driver of the form of our developments. In itself, this isn't a bad thing at all -- it's how supply responds to demand. But if it's the only motive, it stifles the imagination, and it doesn't appropriately value the unquantifiable and the intangible.

If profit were the only goal historically, we'd probably have no parks. It's the role of leaders in the community – you – to ask if this is the best that can be done here, for all of us. This could potentially (but not necessarily) result in less profit for the owners. (A lot zoned at RM6 is certainly more valuable than RM3, so the zoning change more than offsets that). The only reason this should concern the city is if it would mean development wouldn't happen.

This is a rare opportunity -- a vacant lot in a great, relatively quiet, extremely walkable neighborhood. Should the city react to a single proposal from a single developer, or might some alternatives be considered? What other stated goals of the Comprehensive Plan could be addressed in this development? Homeownership? Affordability? When the city developed the riverwalk, some developers along it were required to provide a percentage of their dwelling units as affordable housing. What incentives could the city give the property owner and developer towards either of these goals?

Active Streets was a great success, and it's interesting that it took the pandemic to allow us to imagine it -- we didn't know what we were missing before. Could a creative transformation of this segment of Hackett be imagined? It would be an appropriate design idea in response to neighbors' objections to traffic, more delivery vehicles, etc. How could the proposed development fit into this vision?

Despite a recent traffic study ordered by the CPC, Neighbors still worry about impacts to traffic, increased deliveries, pedestrian and bicycle safety, etc. The study used quantifiable metrics to show negligible practical effects on traffic and safety, but the same objections continue. Why? Because they're AESTHETIC. The street will FEEL more hectic, busy, and noisy -- not as calm as it is now. There will also be more anonymity in the neighborhood -- it'll be harder to get to know more people. It'll maybe feel less child-friendly and family-centric than it does now.

So this development will change how the neighborhood FEELS. Zoning tries to preserve the existing character of neighborhoods, and this is regarded by most as a legitimate use of zoning. But should this stop a denser-than-RM3 development from happening in this location, considering all the good that will ensue for sustainability (density and mass transit), housing availability, city tax revenue, business on Downer, etc? In my opinion (and I think the opinions of those of most neighbors, even many of those who oppose the project), no. Should these Aesthetic issues be genuinely and imaginatively considered as part of the process? Definitely.

There are some other criticisms I and others have of the project that I'll list here:

Front Setback: The front of the building protrudes significantly beyond the building to the north, making it more visually prominent on a block it's supposed to fit in with. Compare this with the buildings across the street, which all have consistent setbacks. I can't find the source now, but I know there are urban design handbooks that mention consistent setbacks as an important design feature. The Northeast Side

Area Plan mentions scale transitions from residential to commercial³, and I would argue that the building stepping out in this way works against this aesthetic goal. Admittedly, even the current RM3 zoning would allow some of this (see Exhibit A), but I think this was a significant oversight of the HPC, and it's something that was not explained in the CPC communications with you, either in the Letter⁴ or the CPC Staff Report⁵.

Rear and South (side) Facades, Light-Colored Brick: The reason for using this brick historically was to bring light into the interior of a dense block of buildings, and the architect used this to tout the building's historic appropriateness. But it doesn't actually make sense here -- the back of the building faces the back yards of single-family homes, and the light-colored brick will be glaring on sunny days. Likewise on the south -- St. Marks Church is there, and there are and hopefully never will be plans to tear it down and erect a large building on that lot. In other words, there is no practical reason for that brick, and the neighbors don't like it.

So, what can you do now as the ZND Committee?

Determine what remaining neighborhood objections can be addressed, and ask the developer to do that. Ideally, city planners and/or our next alderman could run a community meeting with the developers and neighbors (for and against) and mediate the discussion.

Acknowledge that the process, at least, should be different. Michael DeMichele is well-connected and has done several well-regarded projects in the city. Perhaps he had been talking with the city planners, which gave him confidence enough in the zoning change to have spent significant time & money designing the building and lining up the team to build it. I think he even said at one public meeting that he was ready to break ground in a few months. I think his expectations should have been different. If they're applying for a zoning change, they should be more transparent and open to community involvement.

In similar situations in the future, you could recommend or expect that city planners hold a community meeting like the recent one in Bay View to gather community input⁶, and solicit proposals from multiple developers.

I realize that at this point, the development will likely go forward, hopefully with some changes. It does seem largely in-line with the goals of the NESAP. But I hope you will do something to set the expectation that developers and planners will open up more to community input when zoning changes are needed. This would establish a healthy precedent going forward for our city.

Sincerely,

John-Neil Thompson

³ as mentioned on page 5 of the CPC staff report

⁴ 3rd paragraph: "[the building] falls within the allowable height, rear and side setbacks" - the front is not mentioned

⁵ pg. 2, under "Zoning Analysis" - "the RM6 setback has a maximum front setback of 15 feet ... [this] setback is contextual with the adjacent church building, and the existing multi-family buildings on the opposite side of Hackett, which were constructed with minimal front setbacks". This "analysis" is not objective & unbiased -- it doesn't mention the building to the North at all, omitting the obvious fact that the front of the proposed building would stick out past the front of the building to the north.

⁶ see attached Sept. 5th article from Milwaukee Business Journal, "New Bay View Plan to address Affordable and Missing Middle Housing"

**FOR THE EXCLUSIVE USE OF
JNTHOMPS@GMAIL.COM**

From the Milwaukee Business Journal:
<https://www.bizjournals.com/milwaukee/news/2022/09/05/bay-view-housing-neighborhood-plan.html>

New Bay View plan to address affordable and "missing middle" housing

Sep 5, 2022, 10:00am CDT

Milwaukee's Department of City Development is in the midst of crafting a new plan that would set the agenda for future development in the popular Bay View neighborhood.

In the last 12 months, the city's planning staff conducted three community meetings and recently wrapped up an online survey designed to gather neighbors' feedback.

"Housing has absolutely emerged as one of the most important issues residents are interested in," said city of Milwaukee senior planner Monica Wauck Smith. "One thing we've been really trying to take a look at is ... both housing options and affordability of housing."

Residents want newer housing options with modern amenities, Smith said. There's also support for "missing middle" housing, which straddles single-family homes and



SEAN RYAN

Housing has emerged as one of the most important issues Bay View residents are interested in, city of Milwaukee senior planner Monica Wauck Smith said.

large apartment buildings, she said. It could include townhomes and accessory dwelling units such as above-garage or backyard units.

On the affordable housing front, Bay View is underserved by programs such as low-income housing tax credits compared with the rest of Milwaukee, Smith said.

There are concerns some residents could get priced out of the neighborhood as housing prices rise, Smith said. The median household income in Bay View is more than \$10,000 to \$20,000 higher than in the city, county and south suburbs, according to DCD.

The city has identified three focus sites for potential future new development: The city-owned former Army Reserve property and two privately-owned parcels, one currently occupied by a BMO Harris Bank branch and another on Chase Avenue.

The BMO Harris site has previously attracted development proposals — including apartment plans from Milwaukee's F Street Group in 2018 — but residents objected to the density. The plan DCD is drafting is an attempt to "get ahead" of future proposals for that site by collecting feedback from residents about what they'd like to see there, Smith said.

In addition to housing, the plan will also include recommendations for transportation, and business and economic development, among other topics.

Before the end of the year, the department plans to publish a draft plan and conduct a final neighborhood meeting, Smith said. Then it would require public hearings with the city's plan commission and the zoning, neighborhoods and development committee before it could go to the Common Council for approval.

If adopted, the city's planning staff would use the final plan as a guide when evaluating development proposals, Smith said.

Teddy Nykiel

Reporter

Milwaukee Business Journal

