

Dear Members of the Downtown Design Review Board, Mayor John Hieftje, Members of the City Council, Members of the Planning Commission and Planning Commission Staff:

The Downtown Design Guidelines Citizens Review Committee, an independent group representing eight near-downtown residential neighborhood organizations, is very distressed with the proposal recently submitted to construct a 14-story student apartment building at 401-413 East Huron Street. This structure will fill a large portion of the Huron Street corridor in a very prominent location. The site presents an opportunity for a "signature building" expressing the design vision stated in the city's planning documents, including the Downtown Plan and its Design Guidelines, as well as the Central Area Plan. Unfortunately, the proposal submitted to the city by Carter Development is nothing more than a student warehouse. Its massive, unarticulated fourteen story block shows no consideration for its important context.

On Huron Street, the proposed building offers no amenity to pedestrians, although the city's Design Guidelines expressly states that for the East Huron Character District, "*Generally, structures are set back from the sidewalks, with landscaping in the foreground, either in the form of a lawn or landscaped plaza or planter.*"

The Division Street frontage includes a flat 14-story high wall with a large garage door directly facing the sidewalk. Note that the 411 Lofts building and The Varsity, two new student high-rises very nearby, both offer wide sidewalks with setbacks to accommodate cars and the desired pedestrian experience.

The east facade presents the same monotonous face to residents of Sloan Plaza, a well-designed high-rise structure that better fits the desired pattern of the East Huron corridor.

Most egregious is the structure's north elevation, which is directly adjacent to one of the city's most significant residential historic districts. The 14-story mass overwhelms the character of its nineteenth century two-story neighbors. The sketch attached to this letter represents how the structure will completely destroy the character and sense of neighborhood of some of the city's most historic homes.

Every Ann Arbor resident should be concerned about the impact of such a poorly designed development on the long-term character of Ann Arbor's downtown. Each new structure must recognize its role in the city's planning and how it will shape the city's future; this project does not. Even those residents not involved with the project's approval process should realize they will be driving by this eyesore for decades to come.

The proposal for this building goes first to the city's Design Review Board. In our opinion, the members of the Review Board should make it clear to the developer that this structure completely ignores the city's Design Review guidelines. For example:

Guideline 3d: Describe how the project responds to the Design Guidelines for Context and Site Planning. *A.1.3: Corner sites are an opportunity to express an architectural gateway or focal point and a dominant architectural feature.*

A.2.2: Site designs should accommodate solar access and minimize shading of adjacent properties and neighborhoods.

A.3.4: Place an urban open space in a location that serves as a focal point on a site.

The proposal meets none of these guidelines.

3e: Describe how the project responds to the Design Guidelines for Buildings.

B.1.1: Design a building to minimize its impact on adjacent lower-scale areas.

B.1.2: When a new building will be larger than surrounding structures, visually divide it into smaller building modules that provide a sense of scale.

a) *Vary the height of individual building modules.*

b) *Vary the height of cornice lines.*

The building's designer has made no effort to recognize the scale of adjacent structures.

The city's Central Area Plan recognizes potential conflicts in areas where the downtown commercial core meets low-scale downtown residential areas. *"These areas are not now a positive, attractive experience, and neither buffer the residential areas from downtown nor signal the proximity of the lively commercial core. . . Conflicts arise in these areas as commercial encroachment makes residences seem less stable and desirable, and the neighborhoods tend to become neglected."* The document continues, *"In various locations, houses are overshadowed by larger commercial, residential or institutional buildings that are out of scale with existing surrounding development. In addition to being aesthetically displeasing, out-of-scale construction alters the quality of living conditions in adjacent structures. Often it is not so much the use that impacts negatively on the neighborhoods, but the massing of the new buildings."*

The Central Area Plan includes Goals for the city's Central Area, which surrounds the downtown. Objective 31 of Goal A recognizes the conflict resulting from the proposed project: *"Protect, preserve and enhance the character, scale and integrity of existing housing in established residential areas, recognizing the distinctive qualities of each neighborhood."* Objective 7 of Goal B is even more explicit: *"Encourage the construction of buildings whose scale and detailing is appropriate to their surroundings."* Objective 5 of the Historic Preservation Goal states: *"Where new buildings are desirable, the character of historic buildings, neighborhoods and streetscapes should be respectfully considered so that new buildings will complement the historic, architectural and environmental character of the neighborhood."* Each of these objectives is ignored in the design of the proposed highrise.

Although the design of the building has caused great anxiety among neighbors and others, there is concern that the proliferation of student-based apartments throughout the city is unsustainable. As stated in the Central Area Plan, *"The transitory nature of the residents of student neighborhoods may contribute to conflict relating to lifestyle differences between students*

and other residents." In recent years Ann Arbor has had surprising growth in the number of highrise student apartment buildings. Four large structures have recently been built or are under construction, two are being proposed, and one more proposal is likely to be submitted. With a total of seven highrise buildings, this market segment has become oversaturated and unsustainable with very limited offerings to diversify options for downtown living.

Our group has other major concerns. Although the adjacent historic houses have been lovingly maintained and restored by their owners, the reward for their effort will result in a devaluation of the historic significance of these nearby properties. In contrast, the project's out-of-town developer is concerned only about his bottom line and obviously has no long-term interest in maintaining the integrity of those properties or of the adjacent neighborhood.

The Citizens Review Committee has been active in reviewing other proposed new projects, offering suggestions for how they may better conform to the city's design guidelines and zoning overlay character districts. However, in this case, we feel this project's entire design must be challenged. The project will contribute positively to the cityscape only when it incorporates relevant elements: a distinctive architectural design at this important downtown intersection; using less mass on all four elevations (perhaps submitting a new design as a "Planning Project"); visually dividing the structure into smaller building modules to provide a sense of scale; including a significant public space for pedestrians; providing solar access and minimized shading of adjacent properties and neighborhoods; and recognizing and responding to the two-story scale of adjacent properties along Division Street on its northern elevation.

In summary, we find the proposal for the proposed highrise student apartment building at 401-413 East Huron Street to be completely unacceptable and are especially concerned with the precedent it sets for out-of-scale and inappropriate development. We recommend the mayor meet with the developer as soon as possible to insist on the submission of a proposal that builds on the character of Ann Arbor's downtown district, rather than destroying it. We also recommend that the Design Review Board process does not result in suggestions for improving the project, since that would indicate the proposal is basically acceptable with modifications, which it is not. As members of the Citizens Review Committee, we intend to

discuss this project individually with each member of City Council, encouraging them to find a way to insist on a project at this site that will meet the high goals the city has established for our downtown. We encourage all citizens concerned about the impact of this project to express themselves at the Citizens Participation session to be scheduled soon after the Design Review Board meets.

The proposal presented by the Carter Development Company should be rejected before any approvals are given by city representatives. As a first step, the Design Review Board should postpone their deliberations on this project until there is more time for all parties to carefully review its long-term consequences for the city. This project must not be permitted to move forward as it has been presented; the precedent it would set will haunt the city for decades.

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