

Regent Neighborhood Association Meeting
Best Western Inntowner Hotel
July 24, 2013, 7:00 – 8:30 pm

Neighborhood meeting to comment on draft University Avenue Corridor Plan

LD Oakley welcomed the group. She introduced the RNA board members in attendance: Mary Czyszczak-Lyne, Marcia Vandercook, Karen Christianson, Betsy Greene, Eric Steege, Dan O'Callaghan, and Mary Sarnowski, as well as Alder Shiva Bidar-Sielaff. Twenty-two people attended in addition to the board members.

Ms. Oakley said that tonight's meeting would not include a detailed review of the plan; the assumption is that all have read it. Ms. Bidar-Sielaff will talk about the city process for reviewing the plan. After that, each person who wishes to speak will have five minutes. Comment cards are available for more detailed comments, or comments may be emailed to Ms. Bidar-Sielaff or RNA president Jon Miskowski by July 31. Tonight the board members present will try to answer short questions. If an answer is complicated or needs to be researched, the board will have to respond later, possibly via the listserv.

The RNA board will review the plan in light of the comments tonight. Some things may already be addressed in the plan, and some issues may need to be clarified or changed. All comments will become part of an appendix to the plan. This is the last review before the document is sent to the city for technical review and printing.

Ms. Bidar-Sielaff introduced Jule Stroick, neighborhood planner for the city planning department, who will be working with the plan once it's submitted to the city. After the RNA board takes the new comments into account, the plan will be finalized and sent to the alder. Ms. Bidar-Sielaff will ask the city planning department to write a resolution to introduce the plan to the city. It will then be assigned to several committees, including the Board of Public Works, the Board of Estimates, the Economic Development Committee, the Long Range Transportation Planning Committee, the Pedestrian/Bicycle/Motor Vehicle Commission, the Sustainable Madison Committee, the Transit and Parking Commission, the Urban Design Commission, and the Joint West Campus Area Committee. The Plan Commission makes the final recommendation that will be submitted to the Common Council.

Each committee has staff members who will offer information and comments from the perspective of the committee. The committees may recommend changes to the plan. There will be an opportunity for public input at each of these committees, so if there is something that a person really wants to see changed or kept in the plan, there will be other opportunities to testify or submit written comments. Alder Bidar-Sielaff emphasized that citizens should speak up throughout the process if they feel strongly about something.

The city will give the plan a number that will follow it through the city process. On the city website, people can sign up to follow the plan (or any piece of legislation) and receive regular emails letting them know when hearings are scheduled or action is taken. (See Sign Up & Sign In" link at <http://www.cityofmadison.com/cityhall/legislativeinformation/>, "). There will also be a calendar created for the plan process. Ms. Stroick estimated that it will take about six months from today's meeting to complete the city process.

The question was asked, after the plan is approved, what is it? Is it law, guidelines, a collection of good ideas? Ms. Bidar-Sielaff said that in the new zoning code neighborhood plans have a stronger presence than previously. The plan's recommendations are not mandates, they're more like guidelines, a strong statement of what should happen. There is a good chance that the plan commission will follow them when reviewing proposed development. If there is a recommendation for the city to do something, such as installation of public infrastructure, the plan gives the alder a way to request the funding. The city capital budget is planned many years in advance, so the neighborhood can't expect to see changes right away. However, a plan can provide a basis for the alder to take advantage of other things happening in that area. As an example, when the Mullins property was redeveloped it created the opportunity to have the city change the streetlights in the 2500 block.

The meeting was opened for public comment.

Kathy Fullin expressed concern that street lighting be compliant with the dark skies ordinance. The corridor plan calls for commercial properties to be compliant but doesn't say anything about city streetlights. The streetlights in front of the Mullins building don't appear to be compliant. She also questioned whether traffic calming is needed at the corner of Grand and University. If traffic calming takes the form of a traffic island with plants, she doubts that a volunteer can be found to take care of it at that location.

Mark Sukowaty owns small buildings on University Avenue. Over the last 10 years many high-density buildings have been built. Ninety percent of the people who use the buses live in those buildings, so why aren't the bus stops located in front of them instead of in front of small buildings like his? When the bus stop was moved in front of his building he did not receive any notice, and he would have voiced an opinion. Bus stops are a detriment to a building because of the pollution and noise from the stopping and starting, cigarette butts, litter and people sitting on the steps. He would ask the city to put the bus stops in front of the high-density buildings.

Robbie Webber, former alder, responded to the earlier comment by Ms. Fullin. Her view is that there is substantial traffic at University and Grand. She said she would be willing to water the plants on a traffic island there.

Ms. Webber said that the plan in quite a few places encourages more parking for residential units than the zoning code requires. At the same time the plan says that neighbors don't want any more traffic. Studies have shown that guaranteed off-street parking for residents increases the number of car trips the residents take because they know they won't lose their parking spaces if they leave. Requiring a developer to provide off-street parking also makes rental units less affordable and diverse by forcing people to pay for parking they may not use. The plan should not set any requirements for off-street parking and should let developers decide how much is needed for the profile of tenant the developer is trying to appeal to. If residents have bought houses without enough parking to take care of their own cars, that's their problem.

John Lindholm asked whether the plan sufficiently addresses economic development. He is concerned with the number of commercial spaces that have been built recently and remain vacant, such as in Old University Place and the Mullins building. Does the plan talk about how to address

first-floor retail by finding tenants and promoting businesses? Does the city get involved? Ms. Oakley said that in the early stages of the plan, the city sent someone to talk with business owners along the corridor for their feedback. The plan discusses economic development in several sections, under business development and the area recommendations. Alder Bidar-Sielaff said the city is always concerned about empty commercial spaces. She personally calls the businesses frequently to see how rental efforts are going, and they report that potential tenants are discouraged by the lack of parking. This is an ongoing issue for the corridor.

Jean Parks questioned the language in the plan stating that Area 3, the center block, is not likely to be redeveloped in the next ten years. She questioned how anyone could know that if they didn't own the property. There is a vacant lot in that block that seems likely to be redeveloped. Ms. Greene said that particular block is in the Paunack-Birge area, but the board will revisit the language that says no change is expected.

Jeff Schimpf asked if rental prices for the vacant retail spaces are appropriate. He had heard that the prices were above market, and he wondered if the developers were holding out in order to be able to convert the space to residential units. Ms. Bidar-Sielaff said that conversion of the space is possible but it would be considered a major change to a PUD and would require city approval. The city doesn't control what landlords charge, so all she can do is talk with them frequently about renting the spaces. She also talks with business owners in other parts of town to see if they're interested in opening up another location. Neighborhood residents can do the same thing. Ms. Oakley said that the plan makes it clear that the neighborhood wants to see the spaces filled and businesses succeed there.

Mr. Schimpf seconded Ms. Webber's recommendation not to suggest any more parking than the city requires. He noted that Lombardino's does well without much parking, but Ms. Bidar-Sielaff said they tell her that their customers complain. Ms. Greene said that parking is always a conundrum – neighbors don't want more people driving through or parking on the streets but they want the neighborhood businesses, and the businesses need the parking and the traffic. Even if that's just a perception, it means there has to be some parking to entice businesses to locate there.

Jean Parks commented that it takes a long time to get to Old University Avenue from western Madison and Middleton. People can wait 45 minutes for the right bus. Ms. Bidar-Sielaff said the city is sensitive to the relationship between Old University and Campus Drive, and traffic flow in the area is an ongoing conversation. Ms. Oakley said that the plan addresses the ease of coming and going from the neighborhood, but the board will look at the transit recommendations to make sure they're clear.

Colin Koffel, who lives near the new Brownlofts Apartments, asked about the role of the neighborhood plan in dealing with construction. Should the plan have guidelines that address noise, traffic, idling trucks, parking, loading and unloading? Ms. Bidar-Sielaff said that some of those things are covered by city ordinances. For hours of construction and idling trucks, residents can just call her and she will deal with it. However, it's also possible to add language to the plan about neighborhood expectations during construction. Staging, parking, and loading could be addressed, or there could be a more general statement that developers should be cognizant of the impact on the neighborhood. Ms. Stroick agreed this could be included.

Dan O'Callaghan said that the plan would be most useful if it's kept at a high level, to set the tone and vision for the future, rather than try to provide a blueprint for every square inch for the next 10 years. There is currently a lot of minutia in the plan. It's good to reflect general principles, such as the neighborhood desire for new growth and redevelopment that does not come at the expense of current residents. Rather than specify a particular type of traffic island at a particular intersection, the plan should address traffic calming as a goal, and require that it be done in a thoughtful way that doesn't create problems. He noted that the process for this plan started in 2006, so the neighborhood has been talking about a ten-year plan for eight years. He recommended that the plan focus on big picture ideas like "improve pedestrian safety and movement" rather than get down to the pavement markings. Ms. Oakley said the details are there to articulate the vision and give it meaning, so people understand what we're trying to do. The board can review the plan to make sure the vision still comes through.

Eric Steege said in light of that, how do we clarify the vision of the neighborhood with respect to parking? Does the neighborhood want more parking or not? Ms. Fullin and Ms. Weber agreed that residential parking and commercial parking are two very different things and do not call for the same solutions. There are many variations and many tradeoffs that can be made. Ms. Oakley said the vision of the plan is to maintain a livable, walkable neighborhood. She observed that with increasing density it gets harder just to cross the street. The board will look at what the plan says about residential parking requirements and make sure it doesn't cause unintended consequences.

Karen Christianson commented that requiring underground parking would make a residential project unaffordable for developers. Some projects may not require parking at all. Ms. Fullin said that the Village of Shorewood requires underground parking and developers agree to provide it.

Gary Brown, UW director of campus planning, said that he recently submitted written comments to Ms. Bidar-Sielaff and to the RNA president. His oral comments relate to Area 6, the east end of the corridor where several university properties are located. He asked about the where the height numbers for "the continuously shrinking church" are coming from. He believed there was an earlier agreement that the height of First Congregational Church is 80 feet at the ridgeline of the nave, as measured at the front of the building. It was his understanding that when the Wisconsin Energy Institute was built, the neighborhood's concern was for protecting the viewshed of the church and not detracting from its presence. That's why the east end of the building was used. The UW needs to know what height is expected; it's unrealistic to think the university properties will only hold two-story buildings. Additionally, the other heights in the plan are inconsistent in terms of how the number of stories translates to the height in feet.

LD Oakley said that the RNA will look at the stories/feet again and will make sure they are consistent throughout the plan. Betsy Greene agreed that there should be a solid number for the height of the church. In big picture terms, the real issue is about protecting the view of the church and making sure there isn't a 12-story building behind it. Ms. Bidar-Sielaff suggested that the number to use for height could be found in the Wisconsin Energy Institute documents.

Mr. O'Callaghan reiterated that the plan should articulate broad principles such as preserving the viewshed, rather than bogging down in details. A neighborhood plan is not a law, it just needs to set a vision. Ms. Oakley said that the plan still should be clear and consistent. The document has been written by many volunteers, so copy-editing is still needed. Ms. Webber said that while she agreed

somewhat with Mr. O’Callaghan, vision is in the eye of the beholder and developers still want detail. Ms. Greene agreed that the detail is there to illustrate how the vision applies.

Mr. Brown asked about the design guidelines in section 12 of the plan, which refer to residential and commercial properties. Since the university is neither, should he assume they do not apply to UW buildings? Ms. Bidar-Sielaff thanked him for pointing out the omission and said that UW would be included.

Ms. Webber talked about the “auto-oriented” businesses at the Walnut node. She is not certain that the three businesses there are the best use of that parcel, even though she likes them personally. Mr. Brown noted that an eastbound on-ramp for Campus Drive has been discussed as an alternative use for that area. Ms. Webber suggested that the plan clarify if it is seeking to retain specific businesses or just support businesses generally. She added that the north side of University Avenue could take a lot more height next to Campus Drive, although she knows not everyone would agree.

Mr. Koffel said that overall he was excited about redevelopment in the neighborhood and the possibility of higher-quality buildings in some areas that need them. He thought the design guidelines would help promote that.

Patrick Corcoran noted that the plan is much more restrictive with rear setbacks than the zoning code requires. The code says that the rear setback should be 20 feet, while the plan says it should be 20 feet or 20% of the lot, whichever is greater. He cautioned that if the plan shrinks the footprint of the buildings too much there might be no redevelopment at all, since a smaller building would not be profitable. Some lots on the corridor have environmental cleanup costs that have to be factored in. There are a number of buildings in poor condition that should be replaced, but developers won't bother with this neighborhood if the plan is too restrictive – or they may come in with a planned development and go around the plan requirements altogether. Ms. Oakley said that the plan would be re-examined to make sure it didn't create an unintended cumulative effect.

Mr. Corcoran agreed with Ms. Webber that the plan should not ask for more residential parking spaces than the city does. He developed a building with no parking that has been full ever since. Developers know what they need, so it's best not to be too restrictive in that respect.

Alexis Garrett commented in writing, suggesting that the plan should promote shared parking between businesses with day and evening schedules. This would address retail and business parking needs without interfering with residential uses.

No one else wished to speak. Ms. Oakley thanked everyone for the comments. The RNA board will go over the plan in light of the comments and make changes. It will be posted on the RNA website when it's ready to be submitted to the city. People are welcome to submit written comments until the end of July.

Meeting summary submitted by Marcia Vandercook, RNA secretary.