
**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

Property Address:	327 Cedar Street, NW	X	Agenda
Landmark/District:	Takoma Park Historic District		Consent Calendar
Meeting Date:	May 25/June 1, 2023	X	Concept Review
H.P.A. Number:	23-288		Alteration
		X	New Construction
			Demolition

TM Associates LLC and the Washington Area Metropolitan Transit Authority (WMATA) seek conceptual design review for construction of a seven-story mixed-use housing and retail development in the Takoma Park Historic District.

Property Description

The project site consists of 6.78 acres used as a bus loading and drop off area, parking lots, and a green space associated with the Takoma Metrorail Station. The property is bounded by the Metro station on the west, Carroll and Cedar streets on the south, Eastern Avenue on the east, and several mid-rise apartment buildings along Eastern Avenue on the north. The immediate area is composed of low and mid-rise retail and mixed-use buildings along Carroll and Cedar, detached houses across Eastern Avenue in Maryland, and mid-rise apartment buildings along the District side of Eastern.

Planning Context

The project has been submitted to the Zoning Commission as a Consolidated PUD with a related map amendment from MU-4, NC-2, and RA-1 to MU-5A. In February, the Zoning Commission agreed to set the project down for a public hearing in June.

The Comprehensive Plan’s Future Land Use Map (FLUM) indicates that the site is appropriate for Mixed Use, a combination of Medium Density Residential, Low Density Commercial and Local Public Facilities.

The Comprehensive Plan’s Generalized Policy Map indicates that the subject property is within a Neighborhood Enhancement Area. Neighborhood Enhancement Areas are areas with substantial amounts of vacant and underutilized land. They include areas that are primarily residential in character, as well as mixed-use and industrial areas. Many of these areas are characterized by a patchwork of existing homes and individual vacant lots, some privately owned, and others owned by the public sector or non-profit developers. These areas present opportunities for compatible infill development, including new single-family homes, townhomes, other density housing types, mixed-use buildings, and, where appropriate, light industrial facilities. Land uses that reflect the historical mixture and diversity of each community and promote inclusivity are encouraged.

In its set down report to the Zoning Commission, the Office of Planning found the project to be not inconsistent with the FLUM land use recommendation for the site and with the Generalized Policy Map’s Neighborhood Enhancement Area designation:

It would comply with the policy's guidance by improving an underutilized site with a building that would provide both market rate and affordable units. This would invite more households to the area and help to make the area more inclusive. The project also includes a public park that would provide a space for community gathering.

Proposal

The plans call for construction of a seven-story (76'-high) mixed-use building, with up to 440 residential units and approximately 15,000 square feet of retail. The building would be broken down to appear as two separate structures – a “V”-shaped building facing Carroll and Cedar, and a rectangular-shaped building organized around an internal courtyard providing access to parking and loading. The Carroll Street building would have ground-level retail storefronts opening to a terraced urban plaza for café use and informal public gathering. The rectangular building, with a setback for the upper two levels, would open to a 1.8-acre park on Cedar with recreation areas and bicycle and pedestrian paths. The buildings would be clad in a variety of brick, metal and cementitious panels with a variety of window sizes and balconies, and each with its own language and colors. The Carroll Street building would most notably feature panels in an orange/rust color, and the rectangular building would be primarily dark gray and black contrasted with off-white colored projections. The project would also result in a new bus loading and Kiss & Ride area for the Metrorail Station.

Evaluation

This site has long been recognized as an important gateway to the community and an opportunity to inject vitality and activity into the existing commercial center of Takoma Park.¹ Sitting directly adjacent to a Metro station, the project is a poster child for transit-oriented development, replacing surface parking with mixed-use development organized around public open spaces and enhanced streetscape and pedestrian connections through and around the property.

While the Zoning Commission will ultimately have to decide whether the height and density proposed is supportable from a zoning perspective, HPO believes a site of this size and in this location – at the heart of a commercial area that is being redeveloped with mid-rise buildings on Carroll and Cedar Streets – can accommodate a large building that is compatible with the Takoma Park Historic District, particularly with the site plan's proposed setbacks and public open spaces providing a slight offset from the surrounding blocks. To achieve a compatible design for the project, HPO has encouraged the project team over the past few months to consider the following design principles, which the Board has often cited in its review of how to relate larger projects to existing contexts:

1. Breaking the height and massing of the building into smaller component parts that relate to the scale of buildings in the historic district;
2. Providing the building with a variety of heights and rooflines;
3. Focusing on the base of the building to ensure it is visually interesting at the pedestrian level and of a scale that relates to the historic district; and
4. Considering how materials, colors and detailing can relate the building to the character of the historic district.

Since the design was initially shared with the Office of Planning, the applicants have made several revisions in response to these recommendations. The portion of the building facing the public

¹ Takoma Central District Plan, 2002

park on Eastern Avenue has been lowered in height to provide variety to the roofline and step down to the houses in Maryland across the street. The use of narrower vertical projections on this same elevation, which successfully breaks the building down into smaller component parts and lowers the apparent height, has informed revisions to the north and west elevations, where the projections have been redesigned as narrower vertical elements rather than wide large horizontal elements. As shown on A504, substantial revisions have been made to the design of the retail storefronts to break them down to a height and scale that is commensurate with the surrounding historic buildings. All of these changes have improved the compatibility of the design.

As the design continues to be refined and developed, further evaluation of how color, materials and detailing might further enhance the project's relationship with the historic district is encouraged. While the black/white palette of the rectangular building is certainly widely used today and could be seen as a product of our time, the sharp contrast of cool tones is quite different from the complementary warm tones that typify buildings in the historic district. While a large 21st century mixed-use building is clearly quite different from late 19th and early 20th century frame houses and masonry commercial buildings, there may be opportunities to use color, materials and detailing that could provide a stronger relationship with the context of the historic district.

The building facing Carroll raises compositional concerns. The use of a large white frame around the upper floors and capping the roof results in it having a boxy quality that accentuates the building's size and leaves the upper floors floating above and unconnected to the building's base. While appreciative of the design team's desire to provide the building with a strong presence facing the urban plaza, both eliminating or lowering the white frame by a floor and bringing the masonry of the building down through the first floor to ground the building are recommended to help ease the transition of height to the surrounding smaller-scaled buildings. Widening the frontage of the white corner tower by an additional window bay or two on Cedar might also more effectively break the composition down into small component parts.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Review Board find the general concept for the project to be compatible with the character of the Takoma Park Historic District but direct the applicants to continue evaluating how color, materials and detailing on the rectangular building and compositional changes on the V-shaped building could enhance the project's compatibility.

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