

Dave Zweifel: Let's get moving on 'Capitol West'

The Capital Times
By Dave Zweifel
June 17, 2005

It's been more than a year and a half since developer Randy Alexander proposed turning the old Methodist Hospital (later a part of Meriter) property just west of Capitol Square into a new urban neighborhood of condos and townhouses coupled with retail and commercial space to add to the city's already vibrant downtown.

So it's about time that a decision is made on whether it should become reality.

Alexander's "Capitol West" plan encompasses the block bordered by West Washington Avenue, South Henry, West Main and Broom streets that now consists of some underutilized buildings and a massive parking ramp eyesore. It's one of the most underused pieces of the rapidly developing downtown and, as many will attest, not an inviting place to be walking alone at night.

Alexander would remodel the old seven-story hospital building at the corner of Washington and Henry and add three floors, plus build a seven-story addition to the south of it, all for condominium units. There would be three-story townhouses, with rooftop decks, built along West Main that would effectively hide the parking eyesore, plus a string of more townhouses along Broom Street.

The old Jackson Clinic at 345 W. Washington Ave., which now houses state offices, would be retained while the center of the block would be turned into pedestrian walkways and grass promenades that would create a synergy with the rest of downtown - Capitol Square to the east and Lake Monona, an easy walk to the south.

Architectural landscape consultant Eduard Freer claims that the Alexander project is precisely what urban planners nationally are advocating to take advantage of what makes downtown living unique. He says that instead of showing a building's "back door" to the neighbors as is currently the case, the development would show the "front door."

And, Sonya Newenhouse, president of the Madison Environmental Group, has signed on with Alexander to counsel his firm on building "green," including rooftop gardens, vine-covered trellises along walkways, and a storm sewer and water retention system that keeps run-off to a minimum.

In short, it sounds like a project that the city might like to embrace. Indeed, it appears that the city and the developer are close to an agreement not only on a



The proposed design for part of the first phase of Randy Alexander's \$110 million Capitol West project features a glassy, 10-story and six-story residential and retail building at the corner of West Washington Avenue and South Henry Street. (Alexander Co. and Miller Hull architects illustration)

reasonable amount of TIF money, but on the number of "affordable" housing units required by Madison's inclusionary zoning rules.

But, what's holding it up is a decades-old city transportation plan that requires a 30-foot setback on Broom Street. Back in the '70s the city was considering widening Broom Street into a major thoroughfare. But that plan was scrapped long ago.

Alexander has asked that the city alter that to a 12-foot setback from the existing sidewalks along Broom. Some in the neighborhood are objecting to that, insisting that the 30 feet should be retained as "open space." Exactly what that open space could be used for is questionable, especially since the city, if it should ever want to do something with it, would have to purchase it. Other Broom Street blocks to the south have no setback from the sidewalk because the buildings there were grandfathered from the provision.

Further complicating the picture is a proposal some are floating as a compromise on the setback - 15 feet, for example. That would require that the townhouses be reduced in size, making them less valuable and, hence, affecting the TIF agreement. Alexander insists that would put everything back to "square one," delaying the project even further.

The Plan Commission will try to settle the issue Monday night. It would be a shame to derail this project that looks so right for Madison's downtown.

Dave Zweifel is editor of The Capital Times. E-mail: dzweifel@madison.com

Published: 5:48 AM 6/17/05