

BALTIMORE CITY DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING
URBAN DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE ADVISORY PANEL
MEETING MINUTES

Date: June 22, 2023

Meeting #79

Project: 50 W. Oliver

Phase: Schematic

Location: Mount Vernon

CONTEXT/BACKGROUND:

Al Barry, the Planning Consultant and Yonah Zahler, the developer and CEO of Zahlco introduced the project team and described their development and design ethos of Zahlco.

Scot Foster with BCT then began the presentation with a review of a variety of diagrams describing the context of the site. The team proposes site improvements outside of the boundaries of the project including reducing the size of the intersection at W. Oliver and Maryland Avenue, creating a gateway at the intersection, clear path and connection to Penn Station, and enhancements of the surrounding greenspace.

Ryan Janes continued the presentation with a closer look at the proposed architecture which is intended to be completed in two phases the first phase utilizing the existing building as a base with a vertical addition. Phase 2 would be further north along the JFX accessed by a curb cut to the drop-off and lobby of both phases. Retail would be located in Phase 1 within the existing building.

DISCUSSION:

The Panel thanked the team for the clear presentation, and expressed appreciation for the detailed contextual diagrams. The Panel then moved into clarifying questions and comments.

Clarification:

- *Can you walk us through the site grade changes?* The building is at grade at the current access to the USPS building along W. Oliver Street, and along Maryland Avenue, further north near the bridge.
- *Do you have a landscape architect on the team?* Not yet, but we will be engaging with a landscape architect soon, and when we return to the panel we will have them fully integrated.
- *Why are you retaining the existing building instead of demolishing it and creating a brand-new building?* It's certainly not a historic building, but there are some great elements within the building, such as the concrete trusses, that we want to retain and express specifically at the corner. Additionally, we always look to salvage existing buildings as much as possible. Not only is it sustainable, but it maintains a relationship with the site and surroundings.
- *What is the proposed use at the ground floor of the existing building?* The ground floor will be retail along the street fronts with a few service bays accessed from the drive to the west.

Because this was designed as a vehicle maintenance there's plenty of height. Two lobbies will be located at the north and west edges of the building.

- *Along Maryland, are you penetrating the façade?* Yes, we will be creating many more openings to the retail space along both Maryland Avenue and W. Oliver Street.
- *Have you considered utilizing a single building mass rather than two phases with separate buildings?* No, as its not realistic given the amount of residential units intended for the site, and the need to work to be a cohesive part of the community.

COMMENTS:

Site:

- A landscape architect will be a critical member of the team, urge you to bring them on as soon as possible. They will add color to the design and influence the direction of the design, also making sure that landscape doesn't become a filler.
- Consider removing the parking the
- The placemaking and the pedestrian experience is starting off well. Hold on to those elements that strengthen the pedestrian experience.
- Create a powerful arrival sequence facing Maryland Avenue – create a pausing point or node as one crosses the bridge and then another further south.
- It is critical that ADA access is purposeful and intentional and built into the arrival sequence along the edge. We would love to see universal access that is woven into the design early allowing for a more gracious entry.
- How can you truly activate the intersection? Consider how the Fitzgerald addresses the corner it sits on – will the elevated retail be able to create the necessary activation? If not, how else can you create the energy needed for this critical gateway?
- The use of two buildings, with the entry toward the back creates a challenge in activating the intersection. There's a certain kind of importance and announcement that needs to be created.
- How does one enter the building from west on Oliver? Consider a grander entrance her, off of Maryland that will continue activation of Oliver that stems from Bolton Hill to Penn Station.
- The residual area is all asphalt, would have loved to see a pedestrian plaza of sorts for the residents of the building.
- What is the relationship across the street to encourage pedestrians to use the crosswalk at the corner? These type of subtle design elements should be reviewed in the next iteration of the design.
- The proposed 16' sidewalk next to the new building on Maryland Ave is great but needs a more layered streetscape in order to provide a buffer between pedestrians and moving cars. Explore developing a more robust planted edge in the absence of parking lane, then street furniture for a better transition between vehicles and people.
- How can the proposed park be better integrated with the new development to mitigate potential safety issues? There are no 'eyes' on it from the ground use of the new building across the street or many direct connections. Robust planted edge may be welcome as it helps soften and humanize the heavily trafficked streets but may have a negative impact with respect to visibility in and out of the park. Would this be a safe place during the day or at night.

Building:

- Part of the challenge stems from needing to work with the existing structure. How can you shift the entry? Can it be accessed from the less busy street of Oliver? Could there be a scenario where there is a central access?
- When you think of how the massing works, many of the “jewel box” buildings you mentioned took advantage of the divide created by the JFX to make a big architectural move and redefined what the area looks like, appreciate that this is recognized, and you’re beginning to sculpt the building massing to work with that. One concern is how the building is compressed against the Fitzgerald. There’s still a human relationship to consider between these buildings. How can you provide relief without compromising the design?
- The two-story scale of the Maryland St facade without any breaks or activity presents an inhospitable environment because of the solid wall at pedestrian level and proposed supergraphics. The example images all involve facades that have a more pedestrian friendly scale than the proposed design. How can the building use along that edge promote a stronger urban experience?
- The architectural articulation of the phase 1 building appears uniform around the entire periphery providing a monotonous interface with the urban surroundings. Study differentiating the primary and secondary sides/facades by modulating the amount of architectural articulation and developing a sense of hierarchy that responds to the varied urban edges.
- Phase 2 building appears somewhat top-heavy. Continue to study its articulation to find better proportions and the develop a language that is complementary to phase 1 building.

Next Steps:

Continue working with Planning staff to address the panels comments prior to returning to UDAAP.

Attending:

Yonah Zahler – Zahlco Development LLC

Scot Foster, Bryce Turner, Ryan Janes, Rajesh Gulati – BCT Architects

Al Barry – ABA Consulting

Barbara Aughenbaugh – University of Baltimore

Brandon Brooks, C Jett, Chase Hoffberger, Dennis Richter, Ed Gunts, Kirsten, Krista D Green, Melody Simmons, Reni Lawal, Ryan C. - Attendees

Anthony Osbourne, Sharon Bradley* - UDAAP Panel

Ren Southard, Caitlin Audette**, Marie McSweeney Anderson, Matt DeSantis, Eric Tiso - Planning

* UDAAP Chairperson

** Assigned Planning Staff