

SPECIAL MEETING
Planning & Development Committee Meeting
Minutes of November 25, 2008
Council Chambers – 7:30 p.m.
Evanston Civic Center

Aldermen Present: S. Bernstein, D. Holmes, E. Moran, A. Rainey, E. Tisdahl

Staff Present: D. Marino, B. Newman

Presiding Official: Alderman Moran

I. DECLARATION OF QUORUM

Chair Moran called the meeting to order at 7:45 p.m., a quorum being present.

II. ITEM FOR DISCUSSION

(P1) Recommended Downtown Plan

Citizen Comment and Discussion on Proposed Traditional Districts of the Draft Downtown Plan

Chair Moran explained that this is a meeting of the Planning and Development Committee to discuss the Draft Downtown Plan that has been sent to the Planning & Development Committee by the Plan Commission. He explained that the Committee has received messages from people who have property in the Davis Street area and perhaps other areas that are located in the Traditional District. The meeting is a function of having received communications from them indicating that they would like to comment specifically with respect to the Traditional Districts. He explained that there would be a presentation, after which time the floor would be opened.

Mr. Dennis Marino introduced Mr. Tom Smith of Duncan Associates, saying that he is a very experienced expert in planning and zoning in the region, including being Zoning Administrator for the City of Chicago and working for many years with the American Planning Association nationally. He said Mr. Smith would present an overview of the Traditional Districts and how they evolved in discussion with the Downtown Plan Committee, the Plan Commission and now under consideration by the Planning & Development Committee.

Mr. Smith showed a PowerPoint presentation about the origins, goals and objectives of the Traditional Districts. He said they have been working for a couple of years on the Downtown Plan. He said they were directed by the Downtown Planning Committee of the Plan Commission that the traditional areas that have the 2 and 3 story building forms, were the pedestrian shopping districts. He explained that the overall plan divides the downtown into character zones: the core area, transitional areas towards the edge of downtown and the traditional districts, and that the districts are based on their existing characteristics. Through the process they identified some of the sites that were likely to be developed in the planning horizon for the Downtown Plan. He said the development framework ties the character districts to height limits and scale limitations and a public benefit bonus system, explaining that everyone within the downtown area has a base height that they work from and if they qualify for bonuses they can get additional height. He said that keeping the existing characteristics was the charge handed to them by the Downtown Planning Committee of the Plan Commission. They were instructed to establish these areas because they give a lot of character to downtown because of their lower height and density. Their

design features such as show windows and street store front access make them pedestrian shopping districts. They are older parts of downtown that people are most comfortable shopping and doing business in and are dramatically understood from the size and scale. He showed a slide of the northern most block of Sherman Avenue, explaining that they are distinctive in the downtown because they are smaller buildings whose uses are primarily for pedestrian shopping, they have good access to parking and there is not a lot of vacancy in the buildings there. There is a lot of pedestrian activity on those streets. Their use, form and shape seem to be very successful. He showed a representation of the Davis St. traditional district, capturing the lower scale buildings, some of which do have residential above, explaining that typically on these streets it is only 1 or 2 stories of residential above the retail shopping. He said in terms of height limits, as of right, not all but many of the traditional districts are currently D2. The plan allows a 42' height but there are some allowances in the current zoning system that allow buildings to go above 42' for parking and some other things. The proposed zoning recommends 38' of height in the traditional districts, allowing for a very tall retail space and a couple of floors of residential above it. If the developer does something extraordinary, like obtaining LEED certification, or if they provide some amenity to the public above and beyond what their service provides, then they can get a bonus of added height to 60'.

He concluded that the areas were established based on their current characteristics which are low scale buildings with pedestrian shopping orientation in areas that have historically been the City's primary shopping streets. The goal was to save that scale and use those characteristics.

Chair Moran thanked him for his presentation.

Ald. Bernstein said he is concerned that the Downtown Plan was set out to tell us what should be, not necessarily what is. He asked whether Mr. Smith was saying that it should be lower scale, yet in the first slide immediately south of the 1000 Davis block there was an 8-10 story condo complex. He said he was discouraged by Mr. Smith saying this was handed to them and they accepted it when the rest of the downtown was also handed to them with its existing functions, part of it is still very vital, part of it is not, but, he asked why they particularized the traditional zone to maintain the character.

Mr. Smith responded that what they heard from people in all the public meetings and charrettes was that downtown has both the opportunity for growth and development and it also has some areas that people who live in Evanston would like to see remain in some ways the way they are, that is, that they should stay pedestrian shopping areas, stay on a lower scale, and stay at a lower density. He said they heard that predominantly from all the people that participated in the public meetings, from members of the Plan Commission and in emails in response to the drafts of the plans. People said these traditional areas are really where the big effort should be made to preserve and protect some of that scale because they give such a quality and feel to the downtown.

Mr. Marino added that the Downtown Plan Committee adopted Guiding Principles for Downtown Evanston in the spring of 2007, calling for the creation of traditional, transitional and core areas. Mr. Marino read from the Guiding Principles: "The traditional scale and character of these buildings (referring to the traditional districts) should be conserved through adaptive reuse and façade improvements. Any new development should be compatible in height, scale and pedestrian orientation, for example ground floor storefronts with glass that activate the street, setbacks for wider sidewalks and greenery. The new building constructed by Davis Street Land Company at 622 Davis is an example of appropriate re-development in these districts due to its design scale and materials, though a modern design could also have been successful." He continued that it then it made reference to a number of other enclosures within these guiding

principles. He explained that this was developed after about a year of the Downtown Plan Committee members discussing what their guiding principles should be and shortly before the consultants got involved. He explained that it was a focus on traditional districts as a balance to the taller, much more intense height and density that you see in the core and also recognizing the importance of the transitional districts, reducing the gradient from the downtown core into the surrounding residential neighborhoods.

Chair Moran opened the floor to the public.

Mr. Chris Mailing, owner of 1027 Davis Street and Turin Bicycle (at the same address), expressed his great appreciation for the Committee having this meeting to express the concerns of the public. He said he had written a letter about six months ago and had not expected to hear anything more about it. He had heard that according to the process, the downtown should look like a wedding cake, with the tallest buildings in the middle, stepping down as you get further away from the center, which was expressed in the downtown plan documents that he first saw about 6 or 7 months ago on the City's website. He said it seemed that given that goal, the west Davis traditional zone now called J (at the time of the letter it was called I), is consistent with that concept because that block is surrounded by: the central core to the east, where building heights range up to about 25 stories (Sherman Plaza), traditional zones G one block north and 1 block south of Davis permit 15 to 18 stories, and zone C to the west permits 6 to 8 stories. He said that unlike the wedding cake phenomena, where you would have the tallest buildings stepping down as you move to the outside of the downtown area, it appears they have a wedding cake w/ a slice taken out. He said he knows that the buildings that have been built downtown are sometimes controversial and that has stirred a lot of passion, in fact he was a party to some of the discussion relative to a 49 story tower that was proposed a few months ago, and his fear is that the traditional zone J is, maybe along with a couple of other places, being held out to those who would argue against further development as being something to keep them satisfied, while other areas will be developed more fully. He said it is true that in zones G and C, a lot of these developments had already happened, but on the west Davis block it has not already happened and he thinks that is because developers have picked the properties that may not be living up to their full potential, adding that he would do it that way too if he were a developer. He said he believes it has not been as quick to get developed because it has been somewhat more successful than perhaps a block north or south. He thinks that now that new development has not happened on west Davis Street, they are being penalized by having the opportunity in the future taken away from them.

He said in a world where we will be addressing global climate change and where gas prices will return to high levels and go even higher in future decades, there will be less and less auto traffic and green transportation will become a more important issue. Access to train stations will be key and he believes people will return to living in places like Evanston because it is connected to Chicago with good transit systems and that west Davis is the perfect place to have high rise development because it is located next to the CTA and Metra stations. He said it makes sense from a lot of perspectives that they should be able to go with a denser downtown close to the core. He said he is not suggesting the same height as Sherman Plaza, but in his letter he suggested that zone G should come all the way across and it would then fit with the wedding cake scenario. He thanked the Committee for listening to him.

Mr. Alan Zreczny, owner of 1012 and 1014 Davis Street and Audio Consultants (at the same address), said he would not repeat what Chris said, but to address some of the points, he said just because you give it a name, "traditional," with character, doesn't really make it so. He has been in Evanston since 1967, and has been an owner since 1979 and again in 1986, and west Davis Street was not the most desirable place to be. Over time because of all the businesses that came there, it became what it is now and during this time their property value has increased. He agreed

with Mr. Mailing that the developments started going up around them, not picking off Davis St. because of Davis Street's success. He said if you stand in the middle of Davis St and swing around, you see things way larger than what is proposed there, in fact, on their property, right at the property line there is the 10 story building that was mentioned earlier. So, he said, the Plan is asking west Davis to accept this contradiction. He said he found it interesting that when he read the City's initial consultant's proposal, outside the context of the plan, about how over the next 10 years since Evanston has got great transportation it will be able to absorb condos, office space and retail, he thought this would be great for Davis Street but the plan contradicts the underlying recommendations. He said another aspect of this issue is its affect on not only their property value but their ability to do business. For example, they are owner/occupiers who run Audio Consultants out of those 2 stores. A lot of people finance their business through lines of credit. If his bank sees that he has been downzoned, he will possibly have a smaller asset from which to borrow against. That affects his ability to do business and that is equally as troubling as the decrease in property value. He thanked the Committee.

Mr. Scott Steinman of Studio Media at 1030 Davis Street said Chris and Alan were eloquent and thoughtful at expressing their feelings and what they discussed at their meetings. He said in terms of charm, please stand on the street and spin around. Not only will you see height in back, but you will see that their buildings are not really very charming. He said, going forward, the traditional district, because of their location, doesn't quite make sense for west Davis. They are close to great transportation. He said he shares a corner with the post office and if there's ever a place in Evanston where you would want to see density, where there are one way streets and traffic is already controlled very nicely, west Davis Street would be it. They are walking distance to the theaters, great for residents and close to the trains. He added that given the office space concerns in Evanston, they are a great block for offices because of the transportation and traffic flow. He feels it would be a missed opportunity to keep it how it is. He said he runs a recording studio and he can't reach very far out of his locale in some ways. People come to him to do remote things that are interesting, but basically they're coming to the site. He said the businesses on that block could be in other places, but they've stayed there because they've been there a long time. They haven't been bounced out because they're doing okay. The opportunity is to put the density on their block so they save energy, use the public transportation that helps circumvent the parking situation and maybe use that block to build offices and make their location more central for a wider range of uses than traditional. He added that the bakery is great and has been there a long time. He said all the businesses there are great but there are a lot of other areas in downtown Evanston that are underutilized that also have a lot of traffic, for example, Orrington could use fabulous traffic. It's almost all vacant and it is right in the heart. He said he is not sure what the causes are or the plans to work around that but he would hate to see the opportunity missed to use Davis Street to its best ability. He said in his own self interest, it hurts their property values to limit what may happen, adding that though it is hard to say what the market will do in the future, he would not want to see a lost opportunity for the building owners, especially with the contributions they make through their taxes, which are Evanston commercial taxes, which are twice the residential multiplier. He concluded that the west Davis Street businesses are making a good contribution and they've been there a long time, so he would not want to see them limited in that way. He thanked the Committee.

Chair Moran said he appreciates the speakers sharing their thoughts with the Committee. He said the process will take some time to get through, but the Committee values the opinions and outlooks presented tonight. He assured them that the Committee will take them into serious consideration as they deliberate.

Ms. Judy Fisk who owns Fit and Frisky pet shop at 1016 Davis St., said this block on Davis Street works really well. She said it is a holistic approach to retail shopping. She supports the

traditional zone and the sensitivity that the consultants have shown in their approach to this block, adding that there is not one vacancy on this block, and that their business waited for space. She said her business is across the street from the veterinarian, but more importantly there are successful businesses that they feed off of and a lot of pedestrian traffic. She said they asked for no money from the City to set up their brand new start-up retail store which opened in April of 2007, and that they have worked very hard and have invested their life savings in it and have been very successful. She said their trust and confidence in the citizens of Evanston to support a home grown business has really proven to be well founded. She said the parking on this block is wonderful and none of their customers have ever had to make more than one trip around the block in order to find parking near their store. Like Lemoi's hardware, they sell very heavy items. She carries 40 lb. bags of dog food out herself and doesn't want to go too far to do that, nor do her customers want to park in a garage to buy dog food and toys for their dogs. She said the turn around on the street is really important and works. She added that just as important for the retail is that west Davis Street has parking in back of the stores for the employees. She said that she stands in the middle of Davis Street all the time and thanks heaven that they have this wonderful shopping area that is community oriented. Unlike the rest of the folks who have moved in and bought their buildings over time as their businesses have prospered, she would love to buy her building, which has been in the same hands since 1950. Their landlord lives upstairs from their business. She said they pay their share of the taxes, so she is sensitive to the taxes in this area.

She concluded that she does not think what is proposed is down zoning for this block and disagrees with the concept that it is, but feels that if this area is allowed to develop, you can say goodbye to small home grown businesses like theirs. She invited everyone on the Committee to come and spend an hour at her store and listen to their customers because they love having a place like this to shop in Evanston and they get that same experience at Audio Consultants, Lemoi's, Bennison's, Turin, the Veterinarian and Hallmark. They are all places where people feel comfortable and they feel really define Evanston to them. She asked the Committee, before they consider up-zoning Davis Street, to think about the tenants who pay their share of taxes, saying that the changes they would be inviting would be a height that is totally inappropriate for it. She added that she thought it would be very helpful for the Committee to spend some time at her shop.

Chair Moran thanked everyone for their remarks and assured them that they will be considered.

Ald. Bernstein announced that there will be a Special Meeting of the Planning Development Committee on December 4th at 7:00 p.m. on the Downtown Plan and it is also scheduled for the regular Planning & Development meeting on Monday, December 8th at 6:30.

III. ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 8:17 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Bobbie Newman