

As residents and friends of Starr Hill, we write to register our concerns over the proposed mixed-use development on sites between West Main and Commerce streets currently occupied by two architecturally significant buildings, a small green space, and a car park (425, 501,503 West Main Street; Tax Parcel 320175000, 320176000, 320177000; William H. Atwood applicant/The Sutton Group, Owner).

Background and Summary

The Starr Hill neighborhood straddles West Main Street and has historically and locally significant buildings within its small geographic footprint. Development on this site has the potential to strengthen ties across West Main Street and contribute to revitalizing West Main St as well as Commerce Street and the adjoining quiet residential neighborhood.

As residents, we have welcomed the recent refurbishment of the Jefferson School and other buildings in the neighborhood bringing an influx of new residents, businesses and customers. These efforts demonstrate that preserving the neighborhood's historic charm can contribute to sustainable long-term economic development. We believe a development on this site could create something that fits the needs of the developer *and* embrace the sense of culture, community and connection embodied in Starr Hill.

For these reasons, many of us chose to meet with the developers when this development was first proposed in May 2014. Unfortunately, the potential suggested during those early meetings remains unrealized with no fruitful communication recently between the neighborhood and the developers. There have been no meetings since the development went from four lots to three. Nevertheless, members of our community have consistently come out in response to the various proposals before the Board of Architectural Review (BAR) because we care about what happens to an important connecting piece of the Starr Hill community.

During this time the composition of the BAR has changed, but many of our concerns have not. In particular, we have yet to hear how the plans specifically engage with the historical, cultural, aesthetic, and commercial contexts in which the site is embedded. Consequently, we articulate our concerns and suggestions in this open letter in hopes they are given due consideration.

We group our concerns around three crucial issues:

- 1. Preserving and celebrating the History, Legacy, Culture and Connections of the historical heart of Charlottesville's African American community;*
- 2. Scale of the Development;*
- 3. Impact on the Traffic*

Preserving and Celebrating the History, Legacy, Culture, and Connections of the Community

Our community includes residents of the Starr Hill neighborhood, many from families who have lived here for generations. Others come to Starr Hill on a regular basis to work, worship, shop, dine, and learn here. They access Starr Hill's resources, including two historically significant churches, the new city community center and African-American Heritage Center located at the former Jefferson School; and the long-standing and newer businesses on West Main and

Commerce. All of us cherish Starr Hill as the last remnant of the historical heart of Charlottesville's African American community to have survived prior city development policies.

We must never forget that in 1965, a year after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the City of Charlottesville demolished the Vinegar Hill neighborhood just a few short yards away from this proposed site of development. For many, Starr Hill is all that remains to represent the vibrant community they came from and where their memories live.

In order to mark the degree to which our sentiments are shared more widely, we circulated a flyer that garnered more than two hundred signatures in 3 short days from a diverse representation of Starr Hill residents and friends who share the belief that future development of this sensitive site should not obstruct, obscure or overshadow the historical heart of the African American community in Charlottesville.



Recommendation:

While we know that bulldozers will not delete Starr Hill as they did her sister Vinegar Hill, we strongly recommend that any development on this site must maintain our community's visibility and accessibility within Charlottesville, a city that has turned its back on segregation politically, as it should do architecturally as well.

Development on this site should acknowledge its rich historical setting, parts of which are older than UVA, and should avoid dominating, obscuring, or marginalizing the surrounding historically and locally significant buildings. Rather, the scale and design of any development should present a pedestrian friendly streetscape with articulated facades that echo neighboring buildings. Strong consideration should also be given to an inviting pedestrian access from West Main St. to the Jefferson School, which the city uses for voting, daycare, healthcare, education, cultural activities, recreation and other forms of community engagement.

Scale of the Development

We understand that the developers' various proposals have been within their "by-right" massing, and yet we also understand that the full massing need not be filled. Some developers choose to design in a manner that is sensitive to a specific site, including a substantial reduction in scale. At least on Commerce Street, this site faces a quiet residential neighborhood and the immediately adjacent buildings have street-fronts that are one-to-two stories tall with the spire of Ebenezer Baptist Church being one of the tallest points visible. None of this has been represented in the architectural renderings that we have seen produced to date.



Recommendation:

The Developer should produce an accurately scaled, physical model of the site and surrounding environment so that everyone can understand the proposed massing and its relationship to the surrounding built environment in Starr Hill.

Impact on Traffic and Parking

The built environment of Commerce Street, already constrained, does not represent contemporary road widths and right of ways for sidewalks. Already there is traffic congestion on Commerce, which is used as a short-cut by drivers seeking to avoid the traffic light at West Main and 4th Street. Currently, it is common to have to pull over onto the sidewalk by the Jefferson School to make enough room for two cars to cross that stretch at the same time. Inadequate drainage contributes to flooding and hydroplaning with heavy rains.

Fifth, Brown and Sixth Streets also are very narrow. As is, emergency vehicles and waste/recycling collectors can just make it through our neighborhood. The current residents know to drive slowly and pull aside or back-up to allow passage on our narrow streets. Cut-through drivers go too fast.



Traffic problems will worsen with the opening of the Marriott hotel on 4th St and should be taken into consideration with any further development on this site. Potential traffic increases and patterns need careful consideration. Bad choices could increase noise, pollution and frustration in this important part of the West Main and Commerce revitalization as well as in an otherwise quiet neighborhood with very narrow streets and residents that require on-street parking.

Recommendation:

It was noted at the BAR work session on March 09, 2016 that the property is in a Parking Modified Zone, which would allow for parking to be reduced to *one* space per unit. Any development should design to this allowance in an effort to minimize the impact of the development on traffic in the neighborhood.

The city and developer have a shared responsibility to plan responsibly for traffic. As residents of an old neighborhood with narrow streets and on-street parking requirements, we request that consideration be given to designating the residential streets for “local traffic only” as other cities do for old downtown residential neighborhoods with narrow streets. As community members, we request an analysis of the impact of increased traffic in the vicinity of Commerce, Brown, 4th, 5th, 6th and West Main Streets. We also request that the study assess the impact on traffic patterns of various potential strategies, including requiring directional entrance and egress designs for the new parking structure, making changes to the traffic direction, and installing a traffic light at the intersection of Commerce and 4th Street, among other options.

Conclusion

Due to its central location on the corridor connecting UVA to downtown, the development of this area will have a significant effect on the impression both residents and visitors have of this city. The decisions made in this regard will therefore become a long-lasting comment on how we view the entirety of our city’s community and how we wish to be viewed by others.

We believe the city as a whole should embrace development on this site that does us all proud by both respecting and renewing its rich history. The developer and city have an opportunity to create a legacy that honors our complex past and welcomes a vibrant future for Starr Hill and Charlottesville as a whole.

Copies to:

Members of Charlottesville City Council

Members of Neighborhood Development Services

Members of Board of Architectural Review

Members of Planning Commission

Other City Governmental Agencies

Members of the Press

Any other concerned parties