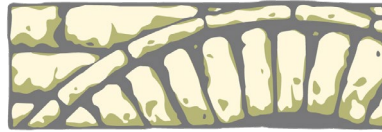


MADISON TRUST



for Historic Preservation

Advocacy News

March 2022

Another Big Change to State Street?

by Kurt Stege, Advocacy Committee Co-chair

When Madison issued its Downtown Plan in 2012, it articulated what many already knew:

State Street is widely considered to be Madison's premier street — a unique and special environment created over the past 40 years by innovative local merchants willing to take risks. . . . It is a lively corridor comprised mostly of two- to four-story, small footprint buildings housing ground floor shops, restaurants, and bars, with upper story residential and office uses. The diversity of businesses, the architecture of the buildings, and quality of the streetscape work together to create vibrancy for the district. *Downtown Plan*, p. 44

Location of the proposed project

Joe McCormick of JD McCormick Properties owns three contiguous parcels, each with its own building, next to the Link Peace Park in the middle of State Street's run between



the Capitol and the Campus. Two of the buildings (428-430 State St. and 432-436 State St.) were constructed in the 1890s and the third (440-444 State St.) was built in 1962. The current commercial tenants include Sencha Tea Bar, B-Side Records and Freedom Skateboard Shop. The adjacent Peace Park provides a pedestrian connection between State Street and West Gilman Street.

Three buildings that would be demolished on 400 block of State Street, Photo by Kurt Stege

(Continued)

What is the desired character of this part of State Street?

In its current iteration, State Street includes buildings in a range of sizes. However, most of us think of the street's character in terms of its smaller structures that front the street and differ widely in terms of their style, texture, and shape. Madison's *Downtown Plan* suggests this smaller scale and variety are key to the street's character:

The vibrancy and intimacy of State Street is largely attributable to the rhythm of its buildings, with their typically narrow, small first floor commercial spaces that accommodate a wide variety of small businesses; and it is essential that both the scale and rhythm of the buildings and the diversity of uses be retained. . . . This *Downtown Plan* supports limited development of some larger commercial spaces in the State Street district, but only if the buildings are carefully designed to maintain the predominant small-scale rhythm of the street frontage. *Downtown Plan*, p. 44-45

The *Downtown Plan* goes on to identify nine distinct recommendations for State Street, including one that ties "sound older buildings" to State Street's character:

Encourage the preservation, rehabilitation and adaptive reuse of sound older buildings that contribute to the district's character.

Few would contest the statement that State Street is now under significant development pressure to increase residential rental options designed primarily for students attending UW. There is strong political support within Madison to substantially increase the city's stock of affordable housing. While many of the recent development proposals downtown have been advanced as a means of increasing Madison's population density, very few have made any effort to offer any affordable units.

The McCormick proposal



Image from [McCormick proposal](#), Knothe-Bruce Architects

(Continued)

The plans submitted to the Urban Design Commission (UDC) during an informational presentation on February 9 proposed a six-story building that included 3,200 square feet of undivided commercial/restaurant space on the first floor, a similarly-sized commercial space in the basement, plus either 23 or 26 housing units on the upper floors. An [article in the Wisconsin State Journal on February 4](#) by Dean Mosiman indicated the developer was “working” to find new locations for the existing tenants, but this was disputed during the public hearing before the UDC. The Planning Division Staff Report noted that the proposed building did “not meet the four-story height limitation in the Downtown Plan and Zoning Code along State Street.”

There were six written submissions to the UDC in opposition to the project and in his testimony, Benjamin Pierce stated that the proposal reflected a “huge net loss” and “a blindness to what stands to be displaced” by the project. Seven members of the UDC who offered their reactions voiced some level of dissatisfaction with the proposal. Several mentioned the undesirability of replacing several small shops in separate buildings (with narrow facades) with a much larger undivided commercial space and noted how the addition of a single large building would break up the “rhythm” of State Street. Most expressed dissatisfaction with the design as well as the scale. There was some disagreement between the Commissioners in terms of whether the buildings to be razed were “historic.”

The Mansion Hill District of Capitol Neighborhoods, Inc. (CNI), now has a steering committee that is evaluating Joe McCormick’s redevelopment proposal. It has met once but has additional meetings scheduled for Tuesday, March 8, and Wednesday, March 16, both at 5:30 pm. Alder Patrick Heck of District 2 is keeping tabs on the steering committee’s progress. You can read his most recent blog entry [here](#).

Does all of this sound a little familiar?

Joe McCormick’s new project would be located just a baseball throw away from the site of an earlier proposal he had submitted less than 20 years ago. In 2004, he proposed to tear down the Woman’s Building at 240 W. Gilman St. That structure is directly across West Gilman Street from the back of the Peace Park.



Woman’s Building photographed by Kurt Stege

(Continued)

The Woman's Building, seen in the photo above, served as the meeting place for the Woman's Club of Madison founded in 1893. The building was designed by a noteworthy Chicago architect and constructed in 1906. It included a large banquet room with seating for 300 and was a mix of the Spanish Colonial, Mission Revival, and Arts and Crafts architectural styles.

McCormick sought to demolish the Woman's Building in order to construct a new six-story building for student apartments. The proposal generated strong opposition and he revised his proposal to retain the front 40 feet of the building in an effort to increase his project's viability.

The reaction in opposition included recruiting the mayor, the county executive, a couple of city alders, the lieutenant governor and a state representative to sign a petition with 1,200 others to oppose the demolition. The organizers also nominated the structure as a local landmark. Once the Landmarks Commission recommended approval of the nomination, the organizers wrote a strong op-ed piece in the Wisconsin State Journal before the City Council took up the issue. The landmark nomination was successful, and the entire building continues to grace West Gilman Street.

What is next for the most recent proposal?

There is little question that Madison's Common Council generally supports efforts to increase density in downtown Madison. Some recent votes suggest that historic preservation arguments hold little sway over the Council. This most recent redevelopment proposal in the 400 block of State Street is encountering some headwinds but the process is often a lengthy one and substantial revisions can be anticipated.

If you are interested in participating in the Madison Trust's historic preservation advocacy efforts relating to this topic or on other issues, please connect with us by completing the [volunteer form](#) that can be found under the "Support" tab for the Trust's website.