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By:

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Above: Artist's rendering of the proposed project.

[NOTE: FOR AN UPDATE FROM MARCH 23, 2017, CLICK HERE ^[2].]

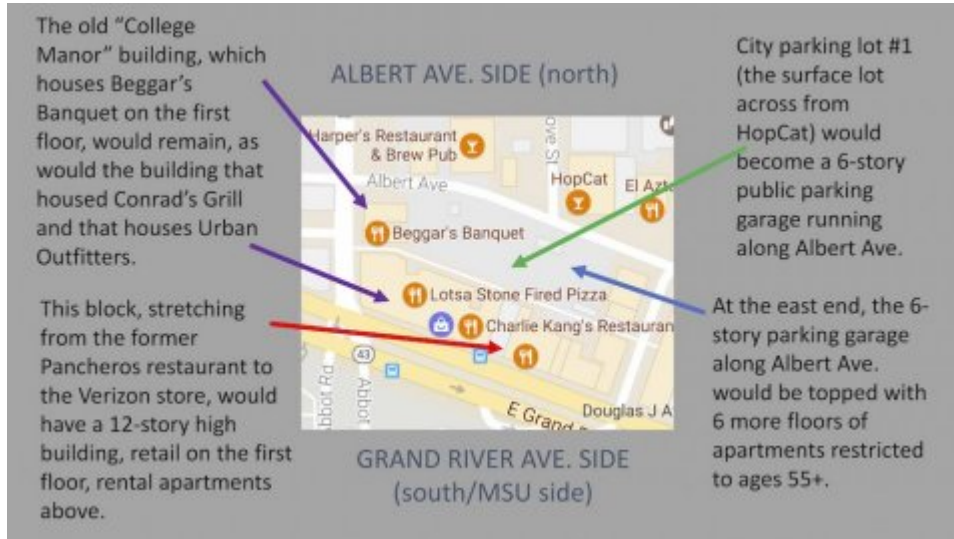
Tonight (March 8) marks the public hearing at East Lansing's Planning Commission for the Center City District redevelopment proposal. To help our readers decide if they wish to weigh in, we're providing this reader guide based on our ongoing reporting on this project.

The basics: Harbor Bay Real Estate Advisors in conjunction with the Ballein Family business are proposing to redevelop a section of downtown East Lansing that includes properties the Balleins own along with publicly-owned property, including City Parking Lot #1. (Lot #1 is the surface lot on Albert Avenue across from HopCat that has traditionally been used for festivals.)

The project is estimated to cost \$132 million. The degree to which there will be public funding (e.g., tax-increment financing or state-level tax credits) to support the project has not yet been determined.

This project is separate from the Park District redevelopment proposal for the blighted corner downtown - different land, different developers. That said, the two projects may be competing for limited resources. We explain that in a special report [3].

The site: The Center City District project would stretch from Grand River Avenue all the way to Albert Avenue, as shown in the map below. (You can click here to see a larger, clearer version of this map [4].) It would include two major new structures, one a 12-story building along Grand River Avenue, the other a 6-story parking garage along Albert Avenue, with 6 additional floors of rental housing above one section of the parking garage, resulting in a second 12-story building.



As noted in the map, the site of this project does not involve the businesses along M.A.C. Avenue. That means that it does not involve the buildings housing Pinball Pete's, The Riv, Exscape, Blades Hair Studio, Twitchell's Cleaners, Mackerel Sky, Underground Printing, Campbell's Smoke Shop, or Potbelly Sandwich. It also would not involve the buildings along Grand River Avenue housing G.N.C., Pita Pit, East Lansing Threads, Pitaya, or Lou and Harry's.

The site of the project also does not involve the buildings on Grand River Avenue housing Urban Outfitters, Rally House, or Lotsa Pizza, nor does it involve the building at the northeast corner of Grand River Avenue and Abbot Road that until recently housed Conrad's and still houses P.T. O'Malley's and Landshark. The project also doesn't include the Abbot Road-facing building that stretches from the alley to Albert Avenue and houses Beggar's Banquet, Rick's, the Ink & Needle tattoo parlor, and the College Manor.

The redevelopment would mean tearing down the buildings currently housing the following businesses, which the developers have indicated are moving somewhere nearby: Charlie Kang's Restaurant, Noodles & Company, Sundance Jewelers, and Verizon. Clever Clover is also in the project area; plans for that store have not been announced, nor has mention been made of what will happen to the businesses on the second floor of this stretch.

The following image shows the stretch of buildings on Grand River Avenue that would be demolished and replaced by the 12-story south tower:



The alleyway running behind the Grand River Avenue stores from Abbot Road to M.A.C. Avenue would remain because it is needed for deliveries of goods and removal of trash.

Impact on locally-owned small businesses: Owners of locally-owned small businesses have expressed concerns about what the construction of this project could mean to them. Read our special report on that [5].

The south building: The south tower would be a 140-foot-tall building along Grand River Avenue, across from the MSU campus, stretching from just west of what is now Charlie Kang’s Restaurant to what is now the Verizon Store, as shown in the image directly above.

This is what the building would look like if you were looking straight-on at it from MSU across the street. (This is an architectural drawing; the developer has not provided an artist’s rendering of what this south building would look like if you were looking at it straight on, so this is the best we can provide.)



Just to the left would be Urban Outfitters. Just to the right would be Lou and Harry's bar and grill.

This new building on the south side of the site would have about 22,000 square feet of retail on the first floor. The developer says it would be a "medium-box" retail store. The developer has said the store would include an "urban grocery" including "dry goods."

Rumors indicate this retail space would house an "urban Target," which would make sense because, since last year, Target has been actively building smaller "urban" stores in college towns like Columbus, Ohio, near Ohio State. According to the Orange County Register, an "urban Target" built near U.C. Irvine includes such things as "a curated assortment of dorm and apartment essentials; food selections, including grab-and-go items like sandwiches, salads, beverages, snacks and more; health, personal care and beauty products"; portable technology products and accessories; select apparel, accessories and merchandise from local sports teams"; and a flexible format that allows for localized product provision.

The developer has provided this rendering of what the retail space of the south building would look like from the street level along Grand River Avenue:



The upper floors of the south building would be dedicated to market-rate rental apartments. The project calls for 271 apartments in this building, including 61 efficiencies, 60 one-bedrooms, and 150 two-bedrooms, for a total of 421 bedrooms in the building.

There was at one time a possibility that MSU would rent many of these apartments for visiting scholars under a "master lease," but on March 7, MSU's administration said it is not pursuing that option at this time. We brought you a report on that and explained why this move suggests the apartments will be predominantly rented to MSU students; read more ^[6].

The staff report on the project says that the residents would have access to "an outdoor amenity courtyard facing north and indoor amenities including a fitness room, clubroom, computer lab, study rooms, and a theater all on the second floor. The top floor would provide another clubroom and an outdoor terrace."

For some perspective on the height of this proposed structure, this 140-foot-tall building would be

15 feet taller than the new Sky Vue apartment building being built on Michigan Avenue near Frandor.

The north building: The developers are also proposing a second 12-story building, also 140-foot high, fronting Albert Avenue. This would have a six-story parking garage at the base, with a total of about 20,000 square feet of small-store retail space wrapped along the street level. The sidewalk along Albert Avenue would be widened, according to City Planning staff, "to as much as 23.5 feet to allow for outdoor dining and to create a lively street atmosphere." This is the developers' artist's rendering of this part of the plan, looking from the north. (Imagine you were looking at it from the HopCat building.)



As shown in this drawing, for the north building, above a portion of the six-story parking garage would be six floors of apartments. There would be 93 apartments in this building, including 50 one-bedroom units and 43 two-bedroom units. All would be restricted to people aged 55 and older. Staff reports that "an outdoor amenity courtyard will be provided on the 7th floor."

The new parking garage would replace surface Lot #1 and would have 715 parking spaces. Some of these would be leased to the residents of the new structures. According to the Planning staff report, "A decorative covered walkway will be constructed from Albert Avenue to the back entry of the major retailer in the Grand River building."

A confusing rendering of the whole project: The developers have provided the rendering below to show what the project might look like if you were floating above the project looking at it from the northwest (so looking southeast), with Albert Avenue shown in the foreground and MSU shown in the distance.



We've inserted an arrow to show where the "outdoor amenity courtyard" for the north building would be. It's worth noting that this drawing appears to show the project going all the way east to M.A.C. Avenue, but that's because the proposed building is large enough that you cannot see the buildings that would remain on M.A.C. Avenue (including, for example, the Riv).

We have provided for our readers an annotated version of this rendering noting what it shows erroneously in terms of existing nearby structures that will remain:



To see a larger version of this annotated rendering, click here [7]. As noted in our annotated version, the drawing erroneously shows two generic residential buildings on Albert Avenue where there are actually two parking garages (including the brick-faced City Center lot above Buffalo Wild Wings and the colorful ramp sometimes referred to as the "hamster cage?"), and erroneously shows a park with mature trees instead of the existing 7-11 store and Harper's Brewpub. It also shows "The Residences" (HopCat) building as four stories shorter than it really is and as being of a different style and color.

How long would it take to build? Material submitted for the proposal indicates that, if approved, the project would take about two years to complete. The plan shows work starting in early July 2017 and being completed in August 2019.

City Lot #1 would become a staging area before becoming a parking garage: According to Mayor Mark Meadows, Lot #1 will be used as a construction staging area for this project. That means the parking now available there will be unavailable for up to two years, and the income from the lot will be lost to the City for that period.

Meadows says that the project would be likely to start before the City parking lot under the Marriott garage is reopened (it is being reconstructed), so the City would be down two major parking areas in that area at once.

The plan calls for the City to continue to own the land of Parking Lot #1 and to own the parking garage that would be built on that land. The developers would presumably lease the air rights required for the apartment building above the parking garage.

A change in the approach to festivals downtown: The developers have indicated they see the proposed widened sidewalk of Albert Avenue as offering space for the festivals that would be lost with the replacement of Lot #1 with a parking garage. Because the parking garage would presumably have to stay open during festivals, the area where Abbot Road meets Albert Avenue could not be closed for festivals as it currently is. The festival area could not be moved east because then the CVS parking lot would be blocked.

Here is an artist's rendering of what the new area of Albert Avenue would look like:



Project review timeline: The proposal for this project is following an irregular and seemingly accelerated timeline. Atypically, the announcement of it began on Wednesday, February 22, with a press conference hosted by Mayor Mark Meadows, who praised the project and the developers, including the Ballein family with whom he has had a long and warm relationship.

(See our report [8] on how the mayor has approached this project differently from his approach to the Park District project so far.)

At the press conference, Meadows said that, "in the coming months, the proposed project [will run] through the City's extensive public vetting process and our approval process, which is designed to specifically encourage and consider community input at every level of consideration."

The press conference happened in the morning, and that evening, the developers were allowed by staff to give a special "warm-up" presentation to Planning Commission. We have not seen this kind of "warm-up" meeting arranged before. Chair Laura Goddeeris of the Planning Commission limited conversation on the project that night then because she said she thought it important to try to follow the normal process.

Now, rather than the project going to Transportation Commission first for review before it reaches Planning Commission (as is typical), the project is making its first official review stop at the Planning Commission on March 8. This means the public will not have the Transportation Commission's review available to them before they are asked to comment at the public hearing.

City staff has indicated they'll have Transportation Commission review the project on March 20, and hope to then bring the project back to Planning Commission on March 22. This will give Planning Commission members about one day to digest any recommendations from Transportation Commission before they're asked to possibly decide on the project.

Meadows is expecting to then have the project proposal come the very next day, March 23, to the Downtown Development Authority (DDA) and Brownfield Redevelopment Authority (BRA) for consideration of possible public financing. (Meadows serves on both the DDA and BRA by virtue of being mayor. He says he will be in Florida the week of these meetings.)

All of this suggests the project may reach City Council for a final decision as soon as April. The developers' proposed timeline, which has work beginning in early July, suggests anticipation of quick approval at all levels.

How can you weigh in for or against?

Public meetings of the various Commissions that will consider the proposal include public comment periods. So far we know that this project will be on the following agendas:

March 8 at Planning Commission (public hearing), meeting starts at 7 p.m. in the courtroom at City Hall

March 20 at Transportation Commission

March 22 back at Planning Commission

March 23 at Downtown Development Authority (DDA) and Brownfield Redevelopment Authority (BRA)

You can show up at public meetings to speak. You can also write to:

- Planning Commission via the City's Director of Planning, Tim Dempsey:
tdempse@cityofeastlansing.com [9] (specifically indicate you want your message conveyed

to Planning Commission)

- Transportation Commission via the City staff secretary to that Commission, Steven Roach: sroach@cityofeastlansing.com ^[10] (specifically indicate you want your message conveyed to Planning Commission)
- Brownfield Redevelopment Authority (BRA) about a possible tax incentive for the project, via its staff resource, Lori Mullins: lmullin@cityofeastlansing.com ^[11] (specifically indicate you want your message conveyed to the BRA)

You can also write to City Council, which will have the ultimate say on all these matters: council@cityofeastlansing.com ^[12].

Voters will get no vote on this project because the project doesn't appear to involve selling city-owned land (i.e., Parking Lot #1).

As you can tell, ELi's staff put a lot of work into this kind of information provision. We read a lot of documents and ask a lot of questions and then we put it all together with maps, photos, and more. Find this article useful? Share it with someone else! Have a question we didn't answer? Send it to us! ^[13] Want us to keep providing you this service? Pitch in a few dollars to help fund this public service reporting! It's easy to donate online or to send a check. ^[14]

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- [9] [mailto:Voters will get no vote on this project because the project doesn?t appear to involve selling city-owned land \(i.e., parking lot #1\).?subject=Center%20City%20District%20-%20message%20for%20Planning%20Commission](mailto:Voters%20will%20get%20no%20vote%20on%20this%20project%20because%20the%20project%20doesn%27t%20appear%20to%20involve%20selling%20city-owned%20land%20(i.e.,%20parking%20lot%20#1).?subject=Center%20City%20District%20-%20message%20for%20Planning%20Commission)
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