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## Big New Redevelopment Proposal Gets Mixed Reviews <sup>[1]</sup>

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**By:**

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The new development proposal <sup>[2]</sup> for the now-vacant lots at the northwest corner of Grand River Avenue and Abbot Road met with mixed reviews from East Lansing's Planning Commission at its meeting last night.

Although some commissioners were enthusiastic in their praise of DRW/Convexity's plans, questions arose particularly about the quantity of car parking included in the designs. Concerns were also raised about the vagueness of plans for the third building in the project area, an area known for the last several years as the Park District.

ELi broke the story <sup>[2]</sup> last month that the new proposal calls for three new major structures, including:

- Building A, a 12-story mixed-use building at the Grand River Avenue/Abbot Road corner;
- just west of that, Building D, a 10-story hotel in The Graduate chain;
- north of that, Building C, a new five-story residential structure with "affordable, moderate-income" apartments and parking on the first floor.



This map shows where these buildings would be. (Click here [3] to see a larger version.)

The image below, annotated by ELi, shows the area as if you were looking from above the MSU Union. Abbot Road is the street running up and down to the right. Grand River Avenue is in the foreground.



The last plan from Chicago-based DRW/Convexity for this area called for one very large building along Grand River Avenue, a building which would have eliminated the final block of Evergreen Avenue. This version of the proposal has two buildings (A and D) along Grand River Avenue and leaves in place Evergreen Avenue as it currently exists (shown below).



Leaving Evergreen Avenue open results in leaving the two unequal lot sizes along Grand River Avenue. According to DRW/Convexity representative Chris Oakley, that necessitated moving the hotel portion of the development (Building D) to the west, adjacent to Peoples Church's Memorial Garden.

Building A, on the corner of Abbot Road and Grand River Avenue, will now be the residential apartment building, with retail on the first floor and two levels of parking on floors 2 and 3. There is a total of 89 car spaces and 184 bicycle parking spots in a building with first-floor retail and 213 apartment units for about 350 residents.

Commissioner Dale Downes questioned whether that would be sufficient car parking for the number of residents. East Lansing's Senior Planner Darcy Schmitt responded that in the B3 zoning districts like this (B3 is the high-density downtown business district), the City's code calls for parking to be absorbed into the municipal structures.

In fact, developers are *not allowed* to build-in parking in the B3 areas according to East Lansing's zoning code, unless developers can prove there is not adequate parking in the City's municipal system or unless Planning Commission waives the prohibition. This unusual Code was developed to try to help the City's parking system. DRW/Convexity is still waiting for City staff's analysis of whether City lots accommodate their parking needs.

The Center City District is being built with no private parking, instead using a new municipal parking garage (funded with a \$58 million tax deal) for its anticipated parking needs, with discounted monthly permit parking for residents of Center City's apartments. The new building at 565 East Grand River Avenue <sup>[4]</sup> (shown below) was also built with no on-site parking and uses discounted permit parking in City lots. The Hub <sup>[5]</sup>, down Grand River Avenue, is being built with about .25 parking spots for every resident.



DRW/Convexity's design for the Graduate Hotel in Building D does not include any parking on site. DRW/Convexity has indicated that they will use valet parking and use municipal parking structures for hotel guests' cars.

At last night's meeting, Downes pressed the East Lansing's Director of Planning and Development Tim Dempsey about how feasible that plan was, especially on big MSU game days when the hotel would be full and the downtown would have many extra vehicles driving around and parking. Dempsey explained that those details were still being worked out.

Commissioners were also split on the aesthetic aspects of the designs, with Commissioner John Cahill criticizing the flat continuous facades of the hotel and the apartment building which face Grand River Avenue. The image below shows an architect's rendering of Grand River Avenue looking east, from the hotel towards Abbot Road.



Commissioner Leo Sell was enthusiastic about the façade design. “I’m tickled to death,” he said, praising the use of brick instead of “those garish buildings put up by another area developer.” Sell said that, “Every time I drive past SkyVue, I puke.” (SkyVue is the large new blue-accented apartment building near Frandor on Michigan Avenue.)

Commission Chair Dan Bollman, an architect, said part of the challenge for some is visualizing what buildings will look like from the human perspective (street view), rather than the imagined birds-eye view. He praised DRW/Convexity’s street-level renderings, like the one below, looking at the hotel entrance from Evergreen Avenue towards Grand River Avenue.



Bollman also commended the buildings’ design, especially the way they would be experienced by pedestrians at street level. The Grand River Avenue sides of the buildings would be set back 22 feet as required by City code, allowing for plantings, benches, and the like. There would also be plaza space along Evergreen Avenue. Widening of Abbot Road on the west side under the plans would allow for a southbound bike lane.

Several commissioners raised concerns about the vagueness of the design details for “Building

C,? the moderate-income apartment building that would be constructed at 341 Evergreen Avenue (shown below in its current state, looking toward Peoples Church). That property is adjacent to Valley Court Park, and Building C would be constructed two years after the larger buildings along Grand River Avenue are finished. The developer plans to limit rental of those units to people earning 80% or less than the Average Median Income (AMI) in East Lansing.



The developers? representatives say the vagueness around Building C is because the City has not yet decided what to do with nearby property owned by the Downtown Development Authority and the roads on either side.

Bollman and Commission Vice Chair Kathy Boyle both said they want more details regarding Building C, which the developers are counting on to meet the requirements for Ordinance 1384. That ordinance mandates that large developments in the downtown districts reserve at least 25% of their housing units to ?diversify housing opportunities in the neighborhood.?

Several additional pieces of information are needed before the Planning Commission can take a vote on whether to recommend City Council approve the new plan. A staging plan needs to be submitted demonstrating how building materials will be managed onsite, and, as noted above, City staff are still assembling information about the parking plan?s feasibility.

East Lansing?s Transportation Commission is also set to discuss the plan <sup>[6]</sup> on Monday, July 16. The Transportation Commission makes recommendations with regard to pedestrian, bicycle, and motor vehicle use.



Attorney David Pierson, representing DRW/Convexity, urged the Planning Commission to consider voting at their next meeting on July 25 since the developers are anxious to move the project forward. According to Pierson, if the project is not approved by City Council soon, the hotel deal with The Graduate could fall through.

If approval can be secured DRW/Convexity would like to break ground in January of 2019. That would be months before the Center City District project is complete.

Pierson told Planning Commission the plan would be to use Evergreen Avenue for construction staging in order to minimize disruption to downtown businesses. That approach was used, he noted, during demolition of the Grand River Avenue buildings on the sites.

There is still no word on financing plans for the project, including whether there will be tax increment financing (TIF), whether that means the prior owner/developer could again gum up the works with claims to the TIF, and whether there is some built-in solution for the \$7 million debt faced by East Lansing's Downtown Development Authority. (Read more about all that. [7])

No one from the public came forward to speak about the project last night. Citizens who want to weigh in can do so by attending Planning Commission or by writing to David Haywood [8], Planning Commission staff.

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