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Home > Draheim Is ?Really Conflicted? about Park Place Proposal

Draheim Is ?Really Conflicted? about Park Place Proposal ^[1]

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By:

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Above: rendering of Park Place with Albert Avenue to the left and Abbot Road to the right.

East Lansing City Council Member Shanna Draheim is expressing concern about the wisdom of the Park Place redevelopment proposal ^[2], suggesting it may be too big for its location as it is currently envisioned.

Draheim says she is a staunch supporter of density and height "where it is relevant," but wonders if that part of town would be manageable with the Park Place redevelopment added on top of Park District and Center City, both already approved and now underway within a block.

Draheim's message — which she said at this week's Council meeting is aimed at both the public and the developers — is significant because East Lansing's current law requires that this proposal be approved by at least four of the five City Council Members. Council Member Aaron Stephens has already said he does not support the size of the buildings proposed in this plan.

That makes two members who have expressed dissatisfaction with the size of the development proposed. Both Draheim and Stephens have been clear they want the developers to understand their concerns now.

The developers, who have been talking about this project publicly for at least six months, finally submitted a site plan application to the City on December 17. That followed a legal agreement unanimously approved [3] by East Lansing's Downtown Development Authority aimed at moving the proposal forward.

Below: The Park Place development rendered in a recently revised set of plans [4].



Some members of City Council and City staff started moving to pave the way for this project before that site plan was even submitted.

In December, the Planning Commission was asked to consider a draft ordinance [5] aimed at allowing 140-foot tall buildings along Evergreen Avenue behind Dublin Square. In response, a 6-2 majority of Planning Commission indicated in December that they did not support [6] that idea.

Draheim's latest comments came at Council this week in response to another new draft ordinance [7] being sent to Planning Commission and aimed at helping the Park Place proposal. This one, called Ordinance 1449 [7], would allow the 160-foot tall building (coming in at 15 levels) that the developers want to build along Abbot Road.

Park Place, if built as designed, would add about 500 apartments including 82 owner-occupied condos, a 12-plex movie theatre, office space for about a hundred people, retail and restaurant space, and parking for 600 cars on land currently occupied by Dublin Square and properties just west, north, and south of there.

The Park District project is already approved to add three buildings right next door, including a 10-story hotel, a 13-story building, and a 5-story apartment building ? in all, 300 apartments plus a major hotel and retail space. The Center City project, now rising quickly just southeast of Dublin Square, is adding about 360 apartments, retail space, and a parking garage for 600 cars to downtown.



Similar to what many Planning Commission members said when they voted against recommending the last ordinance, Draheim said this week that East Lansing's recently-passed Comprehensive Plan envisions nothing this tall for the 'Park Place' properties.

But countering Draheim, Mayor Pro Tem Erik Altmann said that he believed the recommendation in the Comprehensive Plan for 10-stories in the downtown should perhaps be understood as a recommended *average* height, not a top height.

Draheim's view is that it's important to understand what the impact will be of Center City and Park District, as much as possible, before adding a third major redevelopment project within a block of where Abbot Road meets Grand River Avenue.

Draheim said there were aspects of the Park Place proposal that she likes, but that she finds it problematic to have major projects determining long-discussed planning and zoning, and not the other way around.

But Altmann countered that changing zoning to fit new major projects has turned out well. He cited the Park District and The Hub as two examples where rules had been changed to enable major projects.

Both agreed that it is "time to have a conversation" about height in the downtown. The main point of disagreement was whether the Park Place location is the right place for buildings that are 140 and 160 feet tall.

The discussion and debate between Draheim and Altmann is excerpted by ELi here:

We asked Park Place developer Paul Vlahakis his thoughts on the exchange at Council this week. He responded yesterday that he sees density in the downtown area as "a recipe to success for not only residential [downtown development] but retail as well."

He explained, "It is difficult . . . for retailers to survive without other retailers around them, again critical mass, without this critical mass retailers suffer a higher chance of closure as we have witnessed in our downtown."

Building up is the way to go, according to Vlahakis: "Studies have shown taller buildings don't feel like tall buildings at street level, for example a 16 story building doesn't look any different than an 8 story building at street level. Plus these high-rise buildings are usually designed with street retail and public places for pedestrians to enjoy."

According to Vlahakis, it is the exceptional height of Park Place's buildings that will attract people to buy condos downtown: "Anyone can buy a condominium in a 2, 3 or 4 story building, but having a view of the entire city landscape at 100 to 160 feet up will be a very attractive selling point for people making the decision to re-locate into our downtown. Residents will finally be able to enjoy a true live, work, and play environment."

He also believes "the height makes our downtown look impressive to visitors of our city and the University, which is a movement that is long overdue for our city and I am happy to see our City Council approving these developments. This change will finally allow East Lansing to be added to the ranks of impressive cities anchored by major Universities."

Below: Rendering of the 3 buildings (A, C, D) of the separate Park District project by DRW/Convexity, already approved for construction on land surrounding the Park Place properties. (People's Church is on the left-center.)



Yesterday Vlahakis provided a somewhat revised version ^[4] of his proposal to ELi, following our in-depth report on the project on Monday ^[2]. According to Vlahakis, the Abbot Road-side building would be 160 feet, not 176 as suggested in the drawings. He says it counts as 14 stories because the 15th level "has no residential/living space." It does include a fitness room and club room for residents.

He also told ELi yesterday that some of the stylistic elements have been tweaked, that parking has been increased to 615 spaces total, that an outdoor patio has been added along Albert Road for movie-goers (facing Peoples Church), and that the Evergreen Avenue green space would include a walkway. You can see his communications on the amendments here ^[8].

Vlahakis tells ELi, "I understand fully that sometime change is difficult for residents but once these projects are completed, I am confident those same residents will 100% enjoy the amenities these tall buildings and re-developed downtown will provide.?"

Read more: [Park Place Redevelopment Proposal Is Full of Surprises](#) ^[2]

This article was updated on January 13 to swap out the new rendering for the one submitted to the City on December 17. (See the updated plans here ^[4].) Disclosure: This reporter owns a house in the Oakwood historic neighborhood just north of the project.

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- [2] <https://eastlansinginfo.org/content/park-place-plan-surprises>
- [3] <https://eastlansinginfo.org/content/dda-unanimously-approves-contract-park-place-developers>
- [4] https://eastlansinginfo.org/sites/default/files/park_place_updated_plans_on_january_10_2019_from_paul_vlahakis.pdf
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