

# Architecture Field Office

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## **City of Edina**

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To

From

Mic Johnson, FAIA

Date

August 10, 2022

Cary:

At your request, we reviewed the PUD submission for the proposed redevelopment of 7200-7250 France Avenue South based on our experience working with the Greater Southdale Work Group to craft a physical vision for how their guiding principles may translate to the built environment. The resulting vision for development in the district is to create an enhanced human experience along existing major and new connector streets, with overall experience shaped via landscape setbacks, building step backs, a hierarchy of street typologies, transparency at street level, minimizing the impact of the car, and managing storm water as an amenity. The outcome of our collaborations with the Work Group is described in the urban design chapter of the Greater Southdale District Plan and resulted in the Greater Southdale District Design Experience Guidelines (DEG).

The DEG were developed with the understanding that larger sites may yield multiple blocks to be developed, potentially with infill projects that follow the initial phase of development. Every site has a program that is relevant to its own successful operations, and should stay within that footprint to ensure flexibility for future adjacent infill development. On grade parking is strongly discouraged – particularly a full block of on-grade parking. Unless all of a site's parking and broader site infrastructure needs are addressed in the first phase of a PUD, we believe it is in the best interest of both the developer and the City for each block to be independently developed – without program needs for one site being accommodated on an adjacent one. This means that in the future there is not a conflict that would inhibit a site to be fully realized. The proposed phasing of this master plan, especially as it relates to parking, blurs this line and makes us uncertain of the site's future flexibility.

This particular site is unique in that it is influenced by four street typologies (Typology 1: Promenades and Transition Zones; Typology 2: Cornelia Overlay Zone; Typology 3: New Local Streets; Typology 5: Boulevards), which makes it more important that the development of each block be approached separately. Each façade of each block has a different role to play. And, each block has a different role to play in the larger development, the north half of this property has the retention pond; this should be a different consideration than the south half. The master plan should be clear about those distinctions, but in this case the master plan for the PUD is not clear as there is not a clear division between the two blocks.

The woonerf experience illustrated in this proposal offers no transparency into buildings, but rather views of blank walls, lots of stairs, ramping, a parking access door, a typical ramped parking entry, and no pedestrian sidewalk. All we can imagine is that approach would be duplicated in the design framework for Phase 2. These elements are not in the Design Experience Guidelines for a reason.

The kind of space they create is not human-centric, does not promote equity of experience, and does not encourage people to 'come to and stay at' a place. The following comments and questions are intended to guide clarification from the applicant as to why this is the best solution for this site, located at a very important gateway at Gallagher and France and a transition into the neighborhood to the west.

### **Site Topography and Building Organization**

Throughout the report, and by example, the PUD submission itself, it is mentioned that the grades on the site are extreme. The existing topography is 10-20 feet below the level of the surrounding grades. However, when one considers Gallagher Drive (elevation 859' per ESG drawings) and West 72<sup>nd</sup> Street (elevation 855' per ESG drawings), and the south floor elevation of the proposed new Phase 1 entry (beginning at 857' per ESG drawings), this represents a 3-4 foot difference across the site's north-south axis, which stretches 560 feet—making the experience of walking around the site on West 72<sup>nd</sup>, France and Gallagher Drive a relatively flat one. The DEG goal was to use the woonerf as the fourth street that connects Gallagher to 72<sup>nd</sup> (3-4 foot difference in elevation) to make it easy and comfortable for bicycle and pedestrian use. Filling in the empty holes left by the previous buildings with below-grade parking would bring the grade of all of the building footprints up to street level, allowing that to be the starting point for vertical construction. The woonerf would be a true woonerf (ADA compliant) and would be constructed roughly at the same grade as France Avenue. The exterior car ramps, parking garage access doors, stairs, and ADA ramps shown in this proposal all seem unnecessary in a phased master plan for this site.

### **Transition to Residential Neighborhood**

The DEG goal is not to move density away from the adjacent neighborhoods but to create a transition that is framed by the scale of the neighborhood. In this part of the district, one-, two-, or three-story buildings are envisioned to be fronting on a street (West Promenade), defined as a woonerf – meaning combined pedestrians, bicycles and vehicles with pedestrians having the greatest influence. New buildings on the east side of the woonerf would then be scaled to transition from the West Promenade in the form of stepbacks. In this proposal, above the proposed 24-foot first floor at the edge of the woonerf, the building could step back to the proposed final height of the building. This would comply with the spirit of the DEG and meet the characteristics of the woonerf as a transition street within the Cornelia Overlay Zone.

### **Proposed Danila Street**

The DEG recognizes the space between buildings can provide more opportunities for expanding the public realm and in some cases, to introduce pedestrian-oriented streets into sites. There are other options such as woonerfs (reduced thru traffic, pedestrians and bicycles having priority) and an opportunity to create – by linking multiple blocks together – a network of pedestrian-oriented pathways throughout the district. However, in this instance, using Danila as a pedestrian-only space may create limitations in how the street network, with the addition of the West Promenade, may evolve in the future. This is discussed further under Phasing, on the following page. (Woonerfs are ADA compliant by design if they are to accommodate all residents and visitors equitably.)

### **Proposed Stormwater Retention Basin**

It is unclear what the variation in the basin water level will be from day to day, or after a heavy rain event, so as an amenity it might have restrictions that would need to be clearer if it were to become a valued part of community infrastructure. We also note that the use of sunken gardens in urban settings has historically been mixed, with their location below street level leaving many people feeling unsafe for use as part of daily life.

### Observations on Phasing

- a. Woonerfs are shared streets with pedestrians having precedence over vehicles. Generally, vehicles move through the street at approximately 5 miles per hour. The City of Edina already has an example of this type of space in the Nolen Mains development at 50<sup>th</sup> and France. The DEG's use of woonerfs on both the East and West Promenades is to provide a physical redefinition of the street to become pedestrian and bicycle oriented, with vehicular traffic to serve new development. The woonerf becomes the primary element in organizing transition zone spaces that link the entire Southdale district from north to south. New buildings are intended to frame and characterize the woonerf as a safe pedestrian environment. They are intended to house new services that support the neighborhood, along with new commercial programs that create an experience that is shared between building occupants and residents of the adjacent neighborhoods.

The 'woonerf' illustrated in this proposal is essentially a parking garage entry ramp with trees in the middle of the road with no pedestrian access. As it relates to PUD phasing, if Phase 1 of this proposal were to be a self-contained development as described above (i.e. not dependent on any use of the Phase 2 site to meet its program/parking needs), the south half of the woonerf would be constructed as part of Phase 1, with Danila Street completing the woonerf and providing access to below-grade parking. A future Phase 2 would complete the north half of the woonerf and share parking access to below-grade parking from Danila Street with Phase 1.

- b. It is unclear how the future Phase 2 will work if its site is developed initially with a 115-car surface parking lot dedicated to meet the parking requirements/program of Phase 1. Given that the construction duration for new buildings is generally 2-3 years, approximately one-third of Phase 1's parking would be taken out of commission during that time. The DEG recommends no new on-grade parking in the district. It also intends that each building takes care of its own services, parking, etc. The hybrid approach outlined in this submission puts restrictions or a possible future covenant on development of the north parcel based on its proposed initial use as a surface parking lot. Should this 115-car surface lot be necessary to meet the required parking counts for Phase 1, it seems highly unlikely that this important gateway site into the Cornelia neighborhood would ever be developed beyond a surface lot that is more than 10 feet below the level of surrounding sidewalks. Also of note, this surface lot is accessed solely via a ramp down from 72<sup>nd</sup> Street, not from the "woonerf" roadway shown in the proposal.
- c. It is unclear from the information provided whether the two below-grade parking levels are interconnected within the Phase 1 building or if the access to Phase 1 parking is via the surface lot. Should the latter be the case, the construction of Phase 2 may limit access to one level of Phase 1 parking—which again, could be an impediment to future development of the site.

#### Other details not addressed:

- a. A building service plan has not been discussed; no building facades or plans show service access point beyond parking access. The Design Experience Guidelines provide considerations into the how the form of buildings and width of streets impact the public realm. As it relates to buildings, important factors influencing the experience in the public realm include the transparency of walls at the ground floor, and the location of drop offs and parking entries, service vehicle access, and on-site utility equipment—all of which, if not taken into consideration at the earliest in the

## Architecture Field Office

sketch plan and reflected in all phases of the review process, can become unwanted surprises in the later phases of design and construction.

Additional questions we would encourage the applicant and the Planning Commission/City Council to consider addressing include:

- On grade parking is expressly discouraged in the Design Experience Guidelines. Why does the current plan ignore this important guideline?
- Each building should be able to meet its own internal parking requirements and not depend on on-grade parking or district parking. Why does the current plan use on-grade parking to meet parking needs for a Medical Office Building in Phase 1?
- In this proposal, there is no discussion about the possibility of extending below grade parking or basements under the public realm/streets (the woonerf) as an option to expand the parking footprint without creating a surface lot.
- Has the applicant considered adding a level of parking above the ground floor of Phase 1 to meet all of that building's parking requirements within its site constraints without limiting future flexibility of the north parcel? This is a common way to increase parking on a site when there are limitations to below-grade parking.
- District parking, as the on-grade parking implies, should be reserved for districtwide needs, not those of individual buildings. Is District Parking part of the proposal?
- Why does the north elevation not show the full depth of the surface parking lot below France?
- Why is there extensive investment being made in the North on-grade parking lot, to be removed by a future Phase 2?
- Why are the sites for Phase 1 and Phase 2 connected by a series of 3 ramps that descend 15 feet down from Gallagher into a surface parking lot and access to 2 levels of below grade parking before ascending back out to W. 72nd Street?
- We understand that Phase 2 is not designed, but it is unclear how the applicant would reach 501 parking stalls, unless they envision adding a P3 level to the Phase 2 project? In addition, based on the sections provided, it appears that Phase 2 ground floor would be constructed approximately three feet above grade on 72<sup>nd</sup> Street.
- Why is the roadway not a woonerf as described in the DEG for the West Promenade?
- Why are there no provisions for pedestrians on the proposed west roadway – only bicycles and cars?
- Is the road there to only provide access to the Phase 1 below grade parking and on grade parking and (potential) Phase 2 below-grade parking?
- What is the strategy for building services – loading dock, garbage and recycling, medical wastes (assuming a medical office building), access from the public realm, etc.?

Thank you for the opportunity to review. Please let me know if you have any questions.  
Mic