

April 22, 2015

Please Read;

I am disturbed by what I see occurring with the Zoning and Planning Commission regarding the former US Bank property. Having moved into the city from a large suburban community, I expected due diligence by city leaders when a developer proposes **changing the complete landscape of one of its jewels, the historic river valley.**

Since Johnson Brothers first unveiled their plans, I have been strongly opposed to their proposal. A six-story building does not belong within feet of the bluffs. They want to build a **73-foot building in the River Corridor that has a height restriction of 40 feet.** That is a variance to almost double the current allowable height for this area.

Their phase-1 proposal is part of a broader plan (drawings unveiled although not formally submitted) to build a complex of 73-foot buildings along the whole length of Shepard Road from Highway 5 to Davern Street. Ultimately, they are trying to **build a high-rise city within a low-rise community.** They spin their variance proposal as only one building to cover an ugly parking garage, although anyone can see the intent to establish a precedent for the broader property plan.

The neighborhood is in favor of development on this lot, but not this design. Neighbors have been very open to joint meetings with Johnson Brothers to find a solution whereby Johnson Brothers can make money on their property without destroying the community and River Valley vistas. This was discussed in meetings with St. Paul City Councilmember Tolbert. Johnson Brothers decided instead to force this ill-conceived plan through to get city approvals.

The Highland District Council recently had an open meeting with the community for Johnson Brothers to present their plans. It was obvious to everyone at the meeting that Johnson Brothers architected their building and **plan based on maximizing Johnson Brothers revenue on the property, regardless of multiple-entity's zoning requirements and the City Council approved Shepard Davern Area Plan.** When asked specifically about why they did not consider the District Plan in their design, they seemed oblivious to the plan and responded with "I guess we can take a look at it". There is plenty of space on their property to meet zoning requirements without this height variance. As one Highland Council Member accurately stated at the meeting, "(Johnson Brothers is) just being greedy".

The Zoning Commission staff report reads as if written by Johnson Brothers. It contains all of their slides and is strictly based on their architects spin on why the City should allow them to move forward. **The Zoning Commission staff report does not present an objective view of the proposal and is almost verbatim of the presentation by Johnson Brothers to the Highland District Council.** When presented for approval by the Zoning Commission, it was quickly passed. The impact of this zoning variance is significant and will have a permanent impact on "the Gateway to the City" and future generations.

This is not a neighbor asking for a 6-inch variance on a fence height - this is a group asking to put up a 73-foot wall between the river and a community. There is a reason why this plan was opposed by groups including the Highland District Council, Department of Natural Resources, and Friends of the River.

I ask anyone reading this letter to take a minute to:

- drive across the river into Mendota Heights to imagine the new skyline with a building sticking out 25 feet above the tree line,
- enter the city from the Mendota Bridge and imagine the change to the gorgeous vistas along the river-scape into the St. Paul,
- go to historic Fort Snelling area and imagine how the 6-story building will block sight-lines into St. Paul, or
- imagine sitting on the balcony in your apartment or condominium and suddenly someone puts up a 73-foot wall, blocking your picturesque river view.

I sincerely question why this project is being “fast-tracked” through to approval and if there is another (hidden) agenda. With the magnitude and future ramifications of this plan, this “under-the-radar” project should be exposed to all St. Paul and neighboring community residents for a complete vetting. I believe the project, as designed, is only a benefit to the pocketbooks of Johnson Brothers at the expense of everyone else.

Thanks for reading,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Tom Diamond".

Tom Diamond

Resident
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