

Gaius G. Nelson, Member  
Saint Paul Planning Commission  
206 South Wheeler Street  
Saint Paul, MN 55105

July 7, 2011

Jon Commers, Chair  
Saint Paul Planning Commission

Cc: All Planning Commission Members

Re: #11-239-001 Victoria Park Master Plan Modification

Chair Commers and Fellow Planning Commissioners,

Please excuse my absence from the July 8, 2011 Planning Commission meeting due to a previously scheduled out-of-town business obligation. Although I am unable to attend, I wish to present the Commission with an explanation of my reasons for voting “No” to the major modifications to the Victoria Park Master Plan.

I believe there is a disconnect between the text of the Master Plan and the design of the plan modifications as demonstrated in the master plan diagrams (Plates 1 through 11) and that the modifications *are not* consistent with the *Core Design and Planning Principles* of the original Victoria Park Master Plan in the following instances:

(Note: References correspond to the June 2011 Master Plan Draft for Public Review as provided to the Planning Commissioners).

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***Core Design and Planning Principles***

The plan does not provide an urban *block size or block arrangement or connected street network* (Items 1 and 2), nor is *access to the Mississippi River provided through maintaining view corridors* (Item 6).

***Neighborhood Elements***

The plan does not contain *A block system where blocks are generally 300’ by 300’* (Item 1) and instead provides large, oddly shaped parcels with building footprints that interrupt the pattern of the urban block grid.

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The plan does not maintain *Views of the river valley along public rights-of-way* (Item 9), instead, the plan eliminates a street right-of-way (Madson Street) that serves this important function for existing residents of Victoria Park.

***Previous developments relied upon the existing Master Plan***

The Shaller Family Sholom East Campus was specifically design utilizing the framework of the April 2005 Master Plan. Views to the Mississippi River bluffs are one of the elements that drew the Sholom Community Alliance to develop on this site.

Each floor of the assisted living building contains a sunroom lounge that was specifically located within a five story glass element aligned with the Madson Street right-of-way. This location was chosen specifically because sightlines to the river bluff would not be obstructed by future buildings. *Views of the river valley along public rights-of-way* (Page 6, Item 9) served as an integral concept in the design of buildings that have been occupied for the past three years.



View of Senior Living Campus (2008 drawing with Views to River Bluff labeled). The five-story glass element containing a sunroom lounge on each resident floor is aligned with Madson Street right-of-way.



View northwest from center of Madson Street.



View from fourth floor (approximately 35 feet high).

Hundreds of current and former residents and family members of the Shaller Campus obtained great pleasure and fulfillment in watching the changing of the seasons and nature beauty of the distant river bluffs. These views will be forever blocked for thousands of future residents under the current master plan that allows buildings of 65 feet in height to be constructed across previously defined public right-of-way.

***Location of the Institutional Use is detrimental to surrounding development***

The Victoria Park Master Plan encourages retail and commercial use (uses which most closely resemble an institutional use in intensity and scale) along *West Seventh Street, Otto Avenue and Montreal Circle* and *parking should be behind the building or below ground* (Page 3, Item 2).

The proposed location and scale of the institutional use creates a barrier between the existing neighborhood and the Mississippi River corridor. Views of the river bluffs add little or no value to an institutional use. An institutional use would be far better sited away from the bluff and closer to higher intensity uses.

Views to the river bluffs add significant value to housing developments. The proposed location of the institutional use is not only detrimental to existing housing developments, but will be detrimental to and diminish the value of future housing development.

***Lack of stakeholder participation in master plan modifications***

There was extensive participation in the original master plan by a large number of stakeholders including the Planning Commission (Page 3, Background) and the guideline states *that the community should continue to be involved in advising the ... HRA and City Council on key issues throughout the redevelopment process* (Page 4, Item 5).

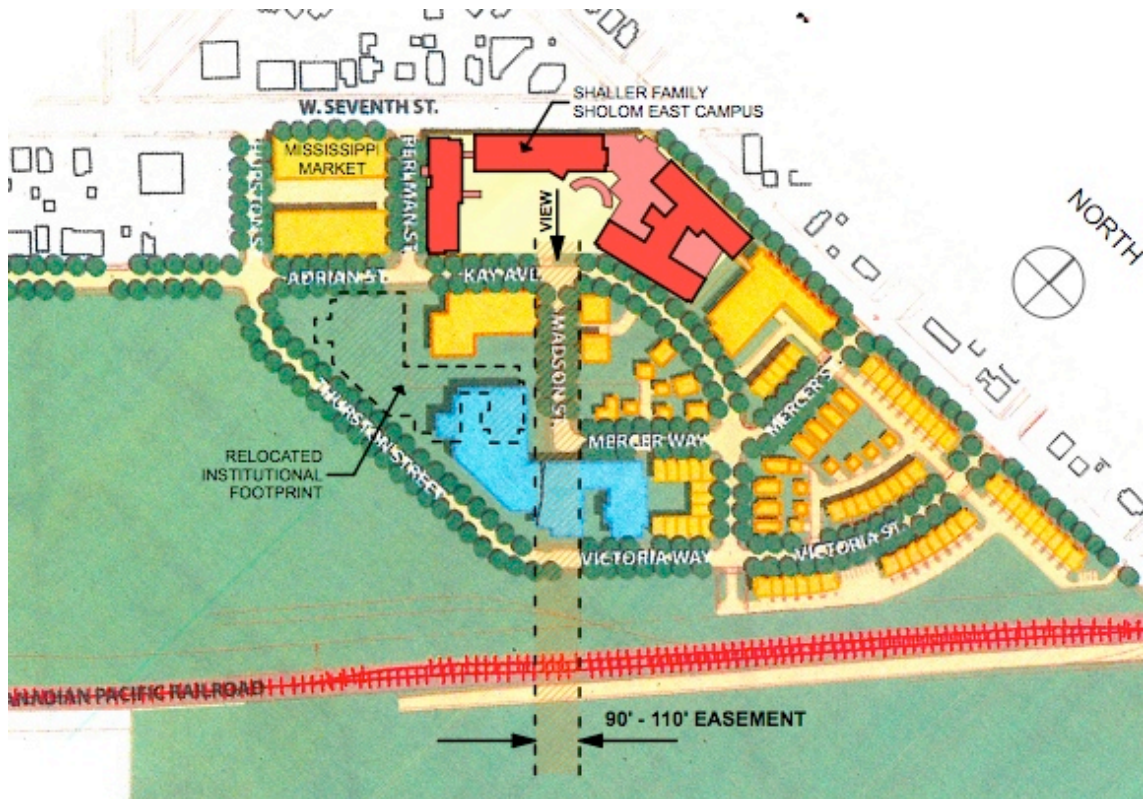
Unfortunately, it does not appear that the advise of new stakeholders, with significant investment in Victoria Park was solicited in a meaningful way. The proposed modifications to the master plan deserved more robust participation and outreach to new stakeholders that have worked hard to create a new urban neighborhood

***Proposed amendment to Zoning Committee approval***

The Victoria Park Master Plan Major Modification could be made consistent with the original master plan provided the following condition is added to the zoning committee's approval:

***A ninety foot (90') wide easement shall be provided through the site, following the original master plan's alignment of Madson Street from its intersection with Mercer Way, southeastward to the river bluff. The purpose of this easement is to maintain the view corridor that was previously provided by the 60 foot (60') public right-of-way combined with the minimum fifteen foot (15') setbacks (each side) for residential structures as originally envisioned by the adopted Victoria Park Master Plan.***

With this amendment, the proposed major modifications to the Victoria Park Master Plan could be made consistent with the *Core Design and Planning Principles* of the original plan, and would serve to preserve the integrity of the original Master Plan while minimizing negative impacts to current and future residents and landowners within the neighborhood.



Plan indicating current Senior Living Campus; Proposed easement along alignment of Madson Street; and Relocated institutional footprint (demonstrating scale only).

***Alternative approaches are available to create a less detrimental plan***

There are many alternatives that could contribute to a plan that creates a good urban framework. Several ideas that come to mind include:

- Shift location of institutional use farther from the river bluff
- Modify alignment of Victoria Way and Thurston Street
- Create taller, smaller building footprint
- Provide underground parking
- Share play and ball fields with city park
- Swap land for better site zoning of uses

The goal should be to create a master plan that demonstrates good urban design, not just a plan that responds to circumstance, expedience or forced timing.

Thank you very much for your consideration.

*Disclosure: I served as the design architect for the Shaller Family Shalom Home East Campus. Daily involvement in this four year long project provided me with significant insights into the neighborhood, planning issues and design concepts embodied in the project and its relationship to the urban context of the area. I have no ownership or financial interests in the campus.*