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Dear Council Members,

This Wednesday, the St. Paul City Council will consider whether to allow colleges to erect buildings up to 90 feet tall, whether they are in residential settings or not. Currently, colleges in residential areas must comply with the residential building height unless they receive a variance.

The difference can be remarkable. Limiting campus height preserves the residential integrity of the neighborhood so that the community is not overshadowed, literally and figuratively, by the adjacent college. In cities such as Chicago and New York, tall college buildings exist next to tall apartment buildings. In St. Paul, houses would be dwarfed by nearby 90-foot buildings.

While the city may limit a college's building height through a conditional use permit, CUPs are easy to change for the benefit of the college and do not meet the higher standards of a variance. This amendment would place the onus on the community to show why a college should not have 90-foot buildings, rather than on the college to show why it should not blend into the neighborhood.

Moreover, the amendment's language lacks clarity. It exempts colleges from the height requirements of the "underlying zoning district", but should say "underlying primary zoning district" to clarify that colleges may not exempt themselves from overlay districts that apply due to the specific location of the site (such as an environmentally protected area). Leg. Code § 60.302 distinguishes primary from overlay districts.

Many communities in St. Paul host a college, university, or seminary to which this change would apply. Yet the city did not notify its community councils of this proposal. The amendment is listed on the City Council's agenda only as a measure "to correct errors, and to update and clarify language." The City Council should not act without input from the community and should not approve this measure that would harm our neighborhoods.

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