

From: Michael Gelb, Chairman Planning Commission
To: Vienna Town Council
Meeting Date: May 23 and June 13, 2018
Re: Public Hearings and Planning Commission Action on Proposed MAC Rezoning 444 Maple

Overview

The Planning Commission held two public hearings regarding the proposed MAC rezoning at 444 Maple, where applicant proposes to replace the Tequila Grande restaurant and the Wolftrap Hotel with a four-story mixed use development. The proposed development would provide retail/commercial space on the first floor and 160 apartment units on the top three floors. The residential component would be a mixture of studio, 1-bedroom, and 2-bedroom apartments.

The Commission heard approximately 50 pieces of oral testimony at the two hearings, primarily from neighbors of the development site on Roland St., Wade Hampton Drive, Glen Avenue, Mendon Lane, Millwood Court, and Ceret Court. Several individuals spoke at both hearings. In addition, we received a dozen or more email communications from citizens regarding the 444 Maple development and the future of the MAC. Town Council was copied on some of these communications and all were entered into the public record.

The Commission voted 6 – 1 on June 13 to close the public hearing and then voted 4 - 3 to recommend that Council approve the rezoning request. Commissioner Kenney recused himself because of a prior business relationship between his firm and the applicant. Commissioner Basnight excused himself from the meeting because of illness, but later submitted a letter to the Commission that he would have voted in favor of the rezoning. That letter was forwarded to Town Council by Chairman Gelb.

Public Concerns

Although several members of the public indicated that they supported the MAC and/or new development, every witness voiced some concerns about the 444 Maple project.

In particular, witnesses said that the proposed development was not in keeping with the “small town” character of Vienna and violated the spirit of the MAC, was too big, appeared monolithic (especially on the rear side facing the neighborhood), would add too much traffic to Vienna’s main streets at an already problematic/dangerous intersection, and would encourage cut-through traffic (especially on Roland Street, Wade Hampton and Glen). They also feared that the proposal did not provide sufficient parking and that overflow parking would spill into their neighborhood. A number of the public witnesses said the Nutley streetscape was too narrow and should be widened. There also were concerns about the impact of construction on groundwater, and several residents asked for additional landscape screening along the rear property line. In addition, a number of witnesses suggested that the Town revisit the MAC ordinance to ensure that it is properly designed to promote a small town environment, protect residential neighborhoods, and encourage walkability. Finally, several residents said that Town Council and Planning Commission should take account of the cumulative impact of MAC development on traffic, town infrastructure and town

population when considering individual projects. At the second hearing, several members of the public noted that changes made by the applicant between the two sessions improved the project.

Planning Commissioners generally echoed neighbors' concerns and pressed the applicant for design changes to create more variation in height, reduce massing by increased indentations and other adjustments to break-up the building façade. Commissioners also suggested a reduction in the number of residential units and/or internal reconfiguration of the residential units to allow for more external variation in height and façade, especially on the rear side facing the neighborhood. Commissioners urged the applicant to work with neighbors and Town staff to address traffic concerns with a special focus on discouraging cut through traffic. Commissioners suggested that the applicant provide shuttle service between the development and the Vienna Metro station.

Applicant Response

Applicant responded to public and Planning Commission input and BAR recommendations with significant changes to the plan following the May 23 hearing. Indentations in the building façade were deepened from 2 feet to 5 feet in a number of locations and the top of the building was set back to six-feet in several spots, changes that the applicant said will make the building read like three stories from street level and reduce the impression of building mass. Perhaps most significantly, the applicant adjusted the rear of the building by cutting down height at both the east and west corners. Applicant also eliminated an elevated rear court yard, a change that created a large break in the rear façade and reduced the building corners at this midpoint break. Applicant also enhanced the variation in building materials in the rear.

The differences can be easily seen by comparing renderings presented on May 23 and those displayed at the June 13 meeting. Finally, the applicant revamped the Nutley streetscape to provide a better pedestrian experience and agreed to staff's suggestion to add additional screening with evergreen trees along the entire rear property line. Although the number of residential units was unchanged at 160, the mix of units was reconfigured to enable the exterior height and massing adjustments. The applicant said it eliminated 3500 square feet of residential area, 216 square feet of retail space, and seven bedrooms. Presumably that will mean somewhat fewer residents in the building, which may modestly reduce traffic impacts. However, the additional screening resulted in the loss of nine retail parking spaces.

Also, in response to a Commissioner's suggestion on June 13, the applicant orally agreed to reduce potential damage to resident homes by drilling piles rather than driving them.

Commission Discussion

Like the residents, Planning Commissioners voiced significant concerns about massing, traffic, and the monolithic appearance of the initial proposal. While generally pleased with the applicants' subsequent architectural adjustments and the additional screening, Commissioners continued to press on traffic. In particular, Commissioners asked applicant to consider expanding its proffered shuttle service to include retail employees as well as residents and to commit to a longer period of time than three months. In the course of the discussion, applicant appeared to agree to a six-month initial run for the shuttle service with continuation dependent on usage levels and to generally reexamine the offer.

Commissioners also suggested increasing the value of Metro farecards that applicant pledged to provide to new building residents. If the application is approved by Town Council, Commissioners generally agreed that the Town and the Applicant take advantage of the construction period to pre-emptively address traffic issues and seek to mitigate the possible impact of cut-through traffic on neighboring streets. Several commissioners noted that access to the development will be limited for drivers heading west on Maple Avenue and south on Nutley Street. They urged Town staff and applicant to explore possible adjustments that might enable left turns into and out of the project from Maple and Nutley, which could alleviate the impact on the neighborhood. Commissioners observed that a number of concerns with the proposed development are matters for the Town and not the developer. In this context, Commissioners suggested that the Town consider a broad analysis of traffic patterns on and along Maple Avenue and review the capacity of town infrastructure, such as water and sewer, to support future MAC development. Commissioners also noted the challenge of balancing contradictory priorities in reviewing any MAC application (e.g. additional landscaping and open space v. additional parking on site) and the varying perspectives on how to define “small town character”.

Commissioners differed, however, on whether the application should move forward. Although acknowledging remaining concerns regarding traffic, the majority of Commissioners believed that the project would be a net positive for the town and vastly improve usage of the site. They noted that the applicant met or exceeded all code requirements under the MAC and responded to public and Commission input to address concerns about building mass, heights, streetscape and screening. Supportive commissioners said the project would add needed diversity in the town housing stock and would represent the first new residential rental options in memory. Although noting that affordability would remain a challenge in Vienna, they hoped that proffered discounts might enable some town employees and local school staff to reside in Town. While recognizing that Council may seek additional improvements, the majority believed the revised application was worthy of a positive recommendation to Council for approval.

On the other hand, several Commissioners indicated that despite improvements, they were not yet ready to recommend approval of the application. There was some thought that delay was in order because further review at the Commission level might identify changes to further address concerns about density, massing, and traffic. Some Commissioners also expressed disappointment that the traffic study was based on two-year-old data that made it difficult to assess real-world impacts. Finally, one of the Commissioners who voted “no” observed that geography and the road layout created an inherent obstacle for the applicant because the development is just “on the wrong side of the street.” A second Commissioner who voted “no” said “it’s a great project at the wrong intersection.”

The Vote

Ayes – Cole, Couchman, Gelb, Meren. Nays – Baum, McCullough, Miller. Recused and not voting – Kenney. Absent and not voting – Basnight.