MEMBERS PRESENT: Jim Beneke, Imran Dagane, Lynette Dumalag, Matt Eckholm, Courtney Erwin, Jessica Kraft, Tom Weber

MEMBERS ABSENT: None

STAFF PRESENT: Jacquelyn Kramer, Sean Walther

Chair Kraft welcomed the two new commissioners to the meeting – Imran Dagane and Tom Weber – and thanked outgoing commissioners Johnston-Madison and Robertson for their service.

1. Call to Order – Roll Call

2. Approval of Minutes of May 20, 2020

   Commissioner Eckholm made a motion to approve the minutes. Commissioner Dumalag seconded the motion, and the motion passed on a vote of 7-0.

3. Public Hearings

   A. Union Park Flats (Union Congregational Church project)

      Applicant: Project for Pride in Living
      Case Nos: 20-03-CP, 20-04-S, 20-05-PUD

      Ms. Kramer, assistant zoning administrator, presented the staff report.

      Ms. Kramer stated Union Congregational Church currently owns the project site, which is guided for civic uses. If council approves the applications, the land will be sold to PPL, who will develop the site and operate the proposed 3 story, 60-unit apartment building. There will be underground parking and units along the ground floor level will have private entrances. The building will have a mix of studio, one, two, and three bedrooms with 30% of the AMI or $30,000 for a household of 4 to 80% AMI or $80,000 for a household of 4. This is a 100% affordable housing development.

      Ms. Kramer noted the developer is asking for a comprehensive plan amendment to change the future land use designation of the site from civic to a high-density residential; a preliminary and final plat; and a rezoning from R-3 two family residence zoning district to a planned unit development (PUD).
Commissioner Eckholm asked if the context slide showing the proposed building elevations with surrounding buildings and if the lower image of the street elevation study is a single-family home. Ms. Kramer stated yes.

Commission Beneke asked if there is additional parking in the area, aside from the on-street parking. Mr. Walther stated there are 5 spots on Alabama and 6 spots on Brunswick adjacent to the site which are included in staff’s parking counts. There is additional on-street parking that is permitted in the neighborhood; however, they are not counted toward parking spots for the development.

Commissioner Dumalag asked if the on-street parking on east and west of the site is intended for the residents or property use, or if it’s open to anyone. Ms. Kramer stated they are public parking spaces, and open to anyone, and they are allowed to be counted to reduce the off-street parking required for the development.

Commissioner Weber asked if the design of 37th Street will require any traffic calming measures. Mr. Walther stated staff did not find there was a need for any mitigation to the street due to the proposed project.

Chair Kraft asked about the height limit for a building for the R-3 zoning district. Ms. Kramer stated it is 3 stories or 35 feet.

Commissioner Dumalag asked where visitors can enter the building, on the north or south side. Ms. Kramer stated there is a public entrance on the south side in the interior courtyard, in addition to the main building entrance on the north side along 37th Street.

Commissioner Erwin asked the height difference between this building and the townhomes to the east. Ms. Kramer stated she does not know the exact height. Mr. Walther estimated the mid-point of the roof was 25-28 feet.

The applicant, Mr. Wilson, from Project for Pride in Living presented. He explained the PPL mission and stated they have existed since 1972. He also shared PPL’s goals for this development.

Chair Kraft opened the public hearing.

JW Starrett, 5825 Goodrich Ave., noted he is the neighborhood captain, adding they have appreciated working with PPL these last few months and do support affordable housing. We all care about St. Louis Park. He stated Elmwood is the most historic part of the city with some of the oldest homes, predating 1900. He added this is a diverse area of the city as well, with apartments and townhomes in the area as well. He stated this is the last developable area in Elmwood, and the areas residents are very engaged. He stated the majority are supportive of the affordable home project, but some are against. He stated right now the neighborhood wants the best project for the area, but the proposed project is not in compliance with the comp plan approved in 2019. He noted they want to create something new, but also keep the flavor of Elmwood, but noted it
just is not there yet. He stated it is too dense, doesn’t comply with parking and the overall the architecture of the project does not feel appropriate.

John Gleason, 5801 Goodrich Ave., stated he has been an active volunteer with PPL and resident of Elmwood for many years. He noted efficiency in land use is part of the ecosystem, and this information must be studied as it relates to this project. We all agree on affordability, and 50% of all Elmwood is affordable along with over 12 multifamily projects. He noted how the project fails on many points of livable community, land use, housing and historic preservation goals within the comprehensive plan, while stating the biggest failure is within the future land use designation. Studies for the site show it is almost two times the maximum density of units at more than 50 units per acre.

Heather Simmonet, 6232 Oxford St., stated they have frustrations with the architectural design of the project. She stated it has industrial components and the scale is 3 stories which overshadows the homes on Brunswick Ave. Additionally, she stated the structure should be 2 stories only, especially when facing the historical homes on Brunswick Ave. She stated this project is isolated and was not looked at holistically within the context of the surrounding area. She added the roofline does not match the home in the area and the structure should feel like a home and not an institution. She stated it overpowers a historical neighborhood. She asked the commission to think about their decision and its impacts on one of the greatest neighborhoods in St. Louis Park. She asked the commission to re-evaluate the design and stated we can do better.

The neighborhood representatives asked for one of the following three actions:
1. to not recommend the project,
2. to not recommend an action and direct staff and the developer to keep working on the project in order to match the comprehensive plan, or
3. to recommend denial of the project until they bring the project into code and with the comp plan, lower it to 2 stories, get all parking underground and ensure architecture and design are of superior quality.

Denise Engbue, 3850 Alabama Ave., noted the presenters are community representatives, but not community leaders and do not represent her side. She encouraged the commission and neighbors to welcome new people into the community in light of the housing crises and increasing economic inequity. She stated this project will help St. Louis Park lead, and this project will help advance ideals for folks trying to gain a foothold.

Barb Patterson, 4326 Wooddale Ave., and member of the city housing team, although she is not representing the team this evening, stated she is in favor of the plan. It supports the 2040 plan and she is pleased about the AMI and the units for families, proximity to parks and light rail and shopping. She is also happy with PPL and their response in revising the plan as needed. She stated she is impressed with the association with climate justice, the green plan and light rail, and reduction in parking. She stated she would be proud of this project in her city and thanked the commission, PPL and the church.
Mitchell Aldrich, 6016 Oxford St., stated he lives adjacent to the site. He stated the plan complies with some of the comp plan, but there are some major concerns. He is in favor of the development, and of it being affordable and of it having an impact on the housing crisis. However, he stated being immediately next door to the project, he has concern about the size, scope and architectural mismatch of the project. He stated the challenges are not eliminated by reducing the footprint, but it’s a start. He recommended the commissioners come to the site and stand east-west at Brunswick, and view the area in relation to the design. He would like to be in the conversations about the alleyway since he does live right next to the development.

Chuck Burrill, 5900 Oxford, stated at the March 10 public meeting with UCC and PPL, there was a need for 80 units. Now the development is 60 units vs. 80 units and the scope seems to have changed, and he asked what other changes could be made by the June 15th meeting.

Dan Albright, 8607 Westmoreland Ln., stated he is in support of the project as presented. He added he is a member of the city’s affordable housing team and is frustrated by the lack of affordable housing in St. Louis Park. He stated this is often due to intense neighborhood opposition. He added PPL has helped the neighborhood to understand the project and he encourages the commission to support it.

Ronald Hobson, 4156 Alabama Ave., stated he likes the walkability and reduction in parking, but he does agree with some of the issues noted by neighbors including the mass of the building within the single-family and duplex homes in the area. He added he would appreciate a way to step back the 3rd floor of the Brunswick side so it reduces the façade and blends in with the neighborhood to the west.

Andrew Sackrison, 6215 Oxford St., asked if amending the comp plan is a normal occurrence when a project comes forward, and added he is in agreement with the project as presented by PPL. He also asked if there is a formal process for changing the comp plan and noted the land use study is expensive to perform.

Tristen Ritter, 6319 Oxford St., thanked the Elmwood neighborhood for all their work on affordable housing. She stated her concern is to preserve the safety of the neighborhood. She stated the height of the building and the fact there is no slope and the density are concerns of hers. She added the walkability and traffic are concerns and streets will need to be plowed in the winter.

Claudia Oxley, 2931 Vernon Ave. S., stated she is in support of the project. She is interested in the AMI range and family orientation and the location by light rail station are important, and she feels the density is important in that area. She asks the commission and PPL team to look at reducing the units on the Brunswick side to reduce height. She stated PPL brings strength to this project and the commission needs to acknowledge them from a long-term management of the project and stability and the kind of residents that will be part of the city. The need is urgent and we need to do this now, with a great partner.
Cindy Larson, 4321 Coolidge Ave., stated she is a 20+ year resident, and has acted as the environmental commissioner in the city and has been a board member for TC Habitat for Humanity. She stated this is a special opportunity for the city that is very rare and does not come along with support services typically. She supports a 68-unit complex and believes the architecture fits in well.

John Heider, 7609 Lake St., stated he is a construction worker and stated the size of the project is too large. He agrees with affordable housing but does not know why it cannot be spread all over St. Louis Park vs. all in one area.

Xavier Varecka, 5900 Oxford St., stated he was at the March meeting and asked when the crime rate issues will be addressed in the area, especially with light rail coming in. How asked will this development upset the crime rate in the area.

Del Lewchuk, 5900 Oxford, stated he is in favor of the project. He bought in the community because of the culture and historical aspect of the neighborhood. He states the project is in violation of the comp plan, and he recommends the commission not rush this and look at the project in depth, so it meets the city’s long-term objectives.

Aaron Fisher, 6313 Oxford St., stated he is supportive of affordable housing and is needed in the city and area. He stated the traffic restrictions in Elmwood are a consideration with traffic flow and parking and designation for bikeways in the city plan. Also, the parking restrictions near the roundabout are a consideration, as well as the narrow streets in the area which are also a safety issue and unique to the neighborhood.

Shannon Sackrison, 6215 Oxford St., echoed what has been said this evening and they need to scale back the size on the Brunswick side.

Sue Budd, 3204 Hillsboro, stated she is in favor of this project and it will bring positive changes, especially with the light rail station. She is impressed and does not think it has been rushed. She is hopeful the commission will support the plan as it.

Alex Fracassi, 6220 Oxford St., is concerned with the scale of the elevation. He stated it does not show the project will be on a hill, and there is a hill there, which makes the building too tall. He asked for a two-story design instead of three-story.

Lisa Hasting, 3828 Joppa Avenue South, stated it’s easy to approve something not in your neighborhood. She added we do need more affordable housing, but asked how they can ensure will be only families living there and not just individuals. She hopes the building can be two-story, and keep the charm of St. Louis Park, within the design.

PPL addressed the concerns of the public. Mr. Wilson presented information on the crime rates with affordable housing, showing that affordable housing owned by a non-profit agency does not increase crime in the area of the housing.

He added the height meets the zoning requirements of the city and the images shown are accurate, as that was called into question. He stated the height will not overshadow
the surrounding buildings, and no one other than Jonny Pops will be shadowed. Also, the closest house is 132 feet away from the projected building. He added the density is actually one of the best ecological features of the building. Building 20 less units means 20 more families have to travel a much greater distance to get to light rail and walkable and bikeable trails, adding the density is a good thing. He noted a traffic study was completed and there are only 30 more trips per day projected.

Peggy Johnson, 2846 Zarthan Ave., asked if the hill will be removed and 30 feet will begin at street level at Brunswick.

Abbie Loosen with PPL stated the 33 feet is from the curb cut and up from there.

Mike Ritter, 6319 Oxford St., asked if it is possible to see the sources on all 33 studies.

Mr. Wilson stated yes, he will forward that information to the city.

Xavier Varecka, 5900 Oxford St., stated he has concerns about the crime rate. He hopes the commission will consider placing this information into the record, adding there is no proof or evidence of the information Mr. Wilson provided.

Chuck Burrill, 5900 Oxford, noted he was told at March meeting that PPL needed to build a minimum of 80-unit building for this project to be financially helpful for the church. He asked what has changed since then and will it go back up to 80 units.

Mitchell Aldrich, 6016 Oxford St., asked about the elevation and the hill. He asked for further explanation on this and the street level at Brunswick.

Sue Basill, 6028 Oxford St., stated density seems to be a common theme and she suggested if the church could lower their asking price for the land, all could arrive at design all could be helpful with. She added PPL has been very flexible on all of this, whereas the church has not.

Mr. Wilson answered the follow up questions. He noted the church is being paid the appraised value of the site, and PPL typically does not bargain back and forth with churches, so a third party was involved. The church has been consistent on this and this all seemed fair to both sides. He added the feasibility of 80 units was sent to the neighborhood, and that information is available for anyone who wants to review. He stated the costs were too high for each of the 80 units, so it would have been difficult to gather the financing. He added when going over costs, the state will not approve because it makes the project unaffordable.

Mr. Walther noted there is no physical change for the parking lot at the site and existing conditions will be allowed to continue on. He added with regard to amendments to the comp plan, there are 1-15 amendments each year, and it is relatively common.
Lisa Hasting, 3828 Joppa Avenue South, asked for an explanation of affordable housing. She asked how we will know it will be families that live the city or are singles coming in from other cities.

Andrew Sackrison, 6215 Oxford St., wanted to confirm there are 6-7 comp plan changes each year. He asked PPL about including the park across the street within the design elements.

Chair Kraft closed the public hearing.

Commissioner Dumalag asked if this property will be self-managed by PPL and if they are going after 9% tax credits with the properties.

Mr. Wilson stated they are going after 9% tax credits, which will be the primary funding source and they will be doing the property management for the project.

Commissioner Beneke asked if there are any important deadlines coming up related to the project.

Mr. Walther stated there are two coming up. He stated the city has up to 120 days to respond to an application. The only way to extend the deadline beyond that is if the applicant requests more time. PPL requested an extension and the deadline for the city to act on the application is now July 7, 2020. He stated the planning commission must make a recommendation tonight to advance this to city council for their June 15 meeting, and a second meeting of the council on July 6. The second is the annual application deadline for low income housing tax credits that PPL is trying to meet which is in mid-July.

Commissioner Beneke stated he wants to support this project in light of the affordable housing crisis. His only hesitation is in the last revision presented seems the most appropriate for this site and he wondered if there is any other public process appropriate for the project.

Commissioner Eckholm stated hearing the compromise on the table as it stands has already put the project at risk and lowering the units to 60 has now lowered the number of folks that can live here. He stated PPL and UCC have made concessions to come to agreement, and he thinks the project needs to move forward as it stands today.

Commissioner Dumalag stated she is also in full support of the project, adding she reviewed all of the statements from neighbors. This project now happens or it doesn’t, and there are economies of scale that need to be taken into consideration. She stated this project aligns with the city’s strategic priorities and the comp plan. Related to the tax credits, there are many guidelines and compliance that developers need to go through, and the family’s incomes must be reviewed each year. She is in full support of the project.
Commissioner Erwin is also in full support of this project as well. She stated she lives in a very diverse area and she agrees St. Louis Park needs more of this. She thanked residents for their civic engagement as well.

Chair Kraft added she supports the project as well and she visited the site today. She stated there are taller buildings on three sides and then viewed the homes on Brunswick as well. She stated the project seems in scale and is appropriate and she appreciates the compromises that were made on the height also. She sees further change and development in this area as light rail moves along also.

Commissioner Eckholm added with light rail coming and changing building codes allowing for taller buildings nearer to the light rail station, locking in with this three-story project here is important now.

Commissioner Dagane stated there is a need for affordable housing for employees in the area and also fully supports the project, and he thanked PPL for this great development.

Commissioner Eckholm made a motion, Commissioner Beneke seconded, and recommending amendment of the comp plan, approval of the preliminary and final plat and the PUD subject to recommendations by staff.

The motion passed on a vote of 7-0.

The proposal will be recommended to the city council.

4. Other Business - none

5. Communications

Mr. Walther stated the June 17 meeting will be cancelled and the next regularly scheduled meeting is July 1, 2020. He also recognized the new commissioners.

6. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 8:51 p.m.