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Plan Commission OKs East Johnson apartment project

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May 5, 2009

A three-story, 83-unit apartment project aimed at working people and families will move forward despite requiring demolition of 11 older homes on the 600 block of East Johnson Street.

The Madison Plan Commission Monday night unanimously approved the "City Row" project from landlord Michael Matty and Stone House Development.

The project had faced opposition from historic preservationists and those lamenting the loss of smaller downtown properties, some dating to the 1850s.

It also conflicted with the 1-year-old Tenney Lapham Neighborhood Plan, which calls for a maximum of 25 dwelling units per acre. City Row has a density of 55 units per acre.

"This looks like one of those large apartment buildings you see out by Menards," said neighbor resident James Roper.

"It's going to completely change the character of the neighborhood," said Joe Lusson, who owns 2 older homes on the same block.

But the project enjoyed the support of newly-elected east-side Ald. Bridget Maniaci and others who said it was a needed improvement for the area.

"I'm here to support this because the neighborhood has worked so hard on it," she said.

The Tenney Lapham neighborhood association did back the project, despite conflicting with its own plan to limit the size of new buildings.

"This will be a high-quality, workforce housing project with below market rents," said Richard Linster, a 25-year Tenney Lapham advocate.

Matty's Renaissance Property Group in 2007 purchased 32 properties in the area from landlord Bill Kozak and initially proposed 115 apartment units on East Johnson.

That plan faced neighborhood opposition, however, so Matty then teamed with Stone House Development on a smaller project. Stone House

specializes in federal Section 42 housing credits and used the credits to build the Madison Mark and Park Central, two other affordable apartments in the downtown.

The new plan calls for renovating eight houses on Gorham Street that are included in a national historic district. The homes to be demolished are not in the historic district.

The plan also replaces backyard parking with green spaces and community gardens.

Stone House vice president Rich Arnesen said the project will provide a variety of housing options for longer-term residents. It includes nine 3-bedroom units that would rent for \$885 a month for those falling below 60 percent of the county median income.

"Nobody else is doing 3-bedroom apartments in the central city," said Arnesen. "This is a chance to even bring some new kids into the Lapham School district."

A studio apartment at City Row would rent for \$550, Arnesen said, comparing it to the \$975 market rate rents at the new Pinkus McBride apartments two block away.

Commission members Ald. Julia Kerr and Michael Basford both voted for the project but spoke about the loss of older homes in the downtown and criticized the city for allowing properties to deteriorate.

"In some ways, this makes me feel profoundly sad," said Basford, who once lived in the neighborhood.

Also Monday night the commission:

-- Approved a general development plan from Meriter Health Services to construction several new buildings and expand others at its Park Street area campus over the next 10 years. The plan includes a new high-rise office and parking structure at Braxton Place, across Park Street from the main hospital.

-- Approved a new Steinhafels furniture store at 2100 East Springs Drive between the Interstate 39/90/94 and East Towne Mall. The project includes 274 surface parking spaces and two additional retail sites.

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