

Let me begin by saying I'm hoping to write about this several times over the next weeks, and that said, I don't tend to be a great "deadline" writer... I'm not particularly prolific... So while I'll try to be "timely," it will take me a while to digest and communicate what I think I learned, and what I think has happened, since The Planning Commission voted 4-2 in favor of that version of The Gassen Building. But here we go...

What happened at Zoning and Planning, Thursday morning in Council Chambers:

Two distinct appeals were presented yesterday -- both were turned down, by an immediate unanimous vote.

I want to begin by saying that both appellants have shared a common concern about size and mass of the building.

In the end, I am heartened by what I see as a Great Potential for Collaboration and Shared Success -- between our group and The Gassen Team Developers -- such that we will now work together for the common good of Linden Hills.

The Details: *from my perspective* --

Constance Pepin was the lead rep for the Concerned Residents of Linden Hills, which included Walt Pitt, Maria Franklin, Kristin Tombers from Clancey's, and several others who represent a large number of people who believe that "four stories is completely inappropriate and out-of-character for Linden Hills."

I was the lead rep for the second group, which, *for lack of a more excellent name*, was called the Famous Dave's Design Group (FDDG). We've used this temporary name because -- as our appeal stated - - our mission was to affect the design of the building.

"Our goal is to meet with the City and the Developer and the Developer's architect to address elements of the building design and its impact on the

neighborhood. We believe the result of that collaboration will be a building that is significantly more appreciated by significantly more people.”

On the developer side, in attendance at the Z&P Meeting for the Gassen Group, were both financial partners, two architects, and three or four local community members, who spoke in favor of the building, and “on behalf of business in Linden Hills.”

Mei-Ling Smith, the City Staffer, was also there, of course, and she spoke first.

Then Connie and her group spoke, and they presented their case. I’ll do my best to concisely sum up their argument:

- A four-story building in Linden Hills “is totally out of proportion” to the nearby areas of Linden Hills.
- A four-story building on that site does not conform to the SAP.
- The SAP process was terribly and perhaps criminally hijacked.

Their attorney spoke, Connie spoke, others spoke, Walt Pitt spoke.

It was intense. The tone of this group’s presentation was --- well, it’s hard to describe, but the Sound and the Tension in the room... was hard to bear. Some city council members left during Walt’s presentation. Chair Bender asked him to “please stop,” and a little while after that, he did.

After the Concerned Residents were finished – it was my turn.

I referenced my experience as the Chair of the Linden Hills Zoning Committee, and my 18-month position on the Small Area Plan Steering Committee. I also referenced how hard Connie and Grant Hawthorne and many others of us have worked *together* to try to get “the right building” for this critical commercial node. That in fact, until very recently, Connie and I had been on the same team.

But since the Planning Commission's vote on September 8, I've been leading a group with a new goal – *to work with the developer to build the building he is going to build.*

In my opinion, since the Planning Commission's vote in September, our group has achieved a significant amount of success.

We met with The Gassen Team on Monday. High noon, as a matter of fact, at the 43rd and Upton Dunn Brothers: The Developer, the Financial Partner, Two Architects, two of us from the FDDG, and also a seventh "impartial observer." We had a very productive conversation.

On Tuesday, we received new renderings from Gassen's architect. I responded by email, and Clark Gassen called me on the phone. Clark and I had a 20 minute conversation, and later that day his architect sent me a second new set of renderings -- this time with even more significant changes to the building's exterior look.

I know this can sound like some kind of "sell-out" – but we have found the Gassen Group to be highly motivated toward working with us.

And to this point I would like to point out that immediately after the Public Testimony period of the Thursday meeting, the Zoning & Planning Committee *unanimously rejected the appeals without any discussion at all.* The fight is over.

Granted -- There were things that Linden Hills wanted that we didn't come close to getting. And there are elements to this "Modern Design" that some people think do not fit into Linden Hills.

That said – *MY experience* is that Gassen Development is not only willing to listen, but is willing to spend money and time building something here that Linden Hills residents will appreciate.

He tells me -- and I believe him -- that he is not disappearing after he builds this. He says he wants Linden Hills to be proud of this building, and he told me that he wants this to be a “World Class Building, the best four-story, mixed-use building from here to Chicago.”

*

“Yes, *but can we trust him,*” people say...

“*I hear he has a terrible reputation,*” people say...

Speaking for myself... I’ve only just met him. All I know for sure about those other things is that they are in the past.

I believe Mr. Gassen’s on the level with me -- so I am moving forward with that.

The White, Picture-Frame Popouts

It’s clear that one thing people don’t like about the design are the “Picture-Frame Popouts” -- Those Navajo White rectangles coming out of the Black Field of the building.

As local Illustrator Eric Hanson has eloquently said, “This Post-Modernism is Too Loud for our quiet neighborhood by the lake.”

Speaking for myself, one thing that always bothered me about those Popouts were the *high-contrast* of it. The Black-and-Whiteness of it was overbearing.

Meanwhile, we in Linden Hills have been saying... We want “red brick.” We’ve been saying that we want “traditional / classical.”

But here’s a thing... and I didn’t always recognize this.

The upscale, 21st century *residential* tenant wants big windows.

The *interior* experience has to be one where the tenant has large, almost floor to ceiling windows...

Here is a fact: You can't build "red-brick classical" when the windows are 5 times larger than they used to be.

In some ways – You Need Modern. It's unavoidable. Because Modern Gives You the Glass and Spaciousness.

So – Here is one bit of progress.

After FDDG discussed how BLACK the building looks with Mr. Gassen and Jesse Hamer, the building's architect — they responded with the idea of using a new material – a coppery-red-brown tile, to replace all the black on the first floor...

They also replaced black metal on the upper floors with hardwood... thus *warming* the look of the building, taking it from black to red-brown.

We loved the copper-red tile. So then I suggested this: What if the Navajo White Frames also have a warmer, more Oakey, Orange or Rose Color... so it's not so bright-white...

The Gassen Group responded immediately again –

Same building – Yes -- But now with a color palette that's more muted and in a more "traditional red." Not so LOUD.



previous version



current version

I mention this as *an example* – of what we CAN DO.

We now have a building coming to the vacant lot. We can be mad about it – or we can join in to make it the best building possible.