

At issue: Jefferson garage 'Wrong' location

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The Philadelphia Zoning Board of Adjustment is scheduled to continue a hearing today on variances for the eight-level, 700-car parking garage proposed by Thomas Jefferson University Hospital and InterPark, a Chicago-based parking developer. It is to be located in the 900 block of Chestnut Street. Here are excerpts of the main issues concerning the project prepared by Wallace Roberts & Todd, a local planning firm working with Jefferson, and two members of the nonprofit Design Advocacy Group, William P. Becker and George L. Claflen Jr.

Jefferson University is an extremely important institution in the Philadelphia region, and its parking needs deserve attention, but there are less harmful and downright positive design solutions that would meet them. We believe this project would have a disastrous impact on the public environment, and we urge that it be redesigned.

We believe the current situation is likely to lead to extensive, time-consuming hearings that could invite legal action that would benefit neither Jefferson nor the public. Jefferson should prepare a new design that takes the following into account:

The building is in the wrong place. The long axis of the garage is along Chestnut Street, presenting an essentially lifeless facade for most of the block. Since Jefferson, with its partner (InterPark), controls the entire block, other approaches are possible. The opportunity to design an entire city block is a chance of a lifetime in urban development, and we believe the current plan does not adequately address this civic responsibility.

The garage will put the entire block in shade throughout the day for much of the year. The 50-foot height limit provision in the zoning code is there to preserve some sunlight on this important retail street.

A 700-car garage is huge and, with the potential to expand to 900 cars, it could be even worse. It will concentrate too many vehicles in one location, resulting in a very high rate of ingress and egress, movements that are dangerous to pedestrians.

The proposed mid-block curb cut will interrupt the natural flow of pedestrian movement. The provision in the zoning code prohibiting such curb cuts is there to avoid such interruptions. Currently, there are no mid-block curb cuts on the south side of Chestnut Street between the U.S. Customs House and 19th Street.

The project will damage the visual character of the public environment. It will be completely out of scale with the typical single storefront buildings that give Philadelphia's best retail areas their inviting pedestrian character. The zoning code limits individual buildings in this area to a width of 100 feet to preserve this character. In the 1000 block is another Jefferson building that already exceeds this limit.

The project will undermine preservation efforts by diminishing the physical context for several outstanding historic buildings immediately adjacent. These include the Victory Building, the old Federal Reserve Bank, the Post Office and old Federal Court House, and the Benjamin Franklin House.

A ground floor of retail does not justify eight levels of parking above. Jefferson claims that a garage with retail on the first floor is necessary to bridge the "retail gap" on Chestnut Street. This would be true for any project built in this block, and there are many other upper-story uses, such as residential or office, that would attract high-quality retail. Retail in parking garages usually is considered second-class space because the constraints of the garage function overwhelm the diversity associated with a good shopping street.

We are concerned about Jefferson's previous record with Chestnut Street retail. If the character of retail that will exist on the ground floor is anything like the retail in Jefferson's other full-block building on Chestnut Street in the block directly west, between 10th and 11th Streets, it will further diminish the public environment. Most of the storefronts in the existing building have been given over to offices or other medical uses.

The project will undermine efforts to revitalize Chestnut Street. The city needs a thriving, diverse, pedestrian-friendly retail street to link the historical district with the Avenue of the Arts.

We feel that there has been inadequate public review of Jefferson's development plans. The block taken as a whole offers an opportunity for a mix of uses, and its planning is of great importance to the public. We would hope that, as one of Philadelphia's most important corporate citizens, Jefferson would exemplify the highest standards of disclosure and clarity in its master planning and development.

We believe there are no hardships that would justify zoning variances. This is a flat site that extends for an entire block. There is plenty of space and access to deal with the functional requirements.

We fear that approval of the variances requested would deprive the public of the benefits of accepted urban-planning principles, as reflected in the zoning code. One of the main reasons for having a zoning code is to regulate the quality of the built environment. This project would violate carefully developed planning recommendations that were made to preserve the public interest.

William P. Becker is chairman of the Design Advocacy Group and George L. Clafien Jr. is chairman of the group's Jefferson Garage Subcommittee. The Design Advocacy Group promotes high-quality urban design, architecture, and preservation in the city.