

The garage wars Jefferson's parking plan would deaden Chestnut Street inexcusably

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Thomas Jefferson University wants to plop an ugly, eight-story, nearly block-long parking garage right on Chestnut Street, one of the key east-west streets in William Penn's grid.

On Wednesday, the Philadelphia Zoning Board of Adjustment should give the plan, which requires seven zoning variances, an emphatic no.

Then the medical university, with more help than it has gotten so far from the city, should go back to the drawing board. It should work out a plan to flip the locations of the garage and a planned medical building on the now-vacant block between Ninth and 10th Streets. The garage belongs on the back of the block, facing narrow, secondary Sansom Street; the ambulatory surgery center should go on Chestnut.

This issue is about more than just a garage - which is why it has provoked passion from organizations such as the Design Advocacy Group, an architects alliance, and SCRUB, a civic group that made its name fighting billboard blight.

This fight is over the soul of Center City, about preserving its stature as the most walkable, well-designed downtown in America. The 10-year-old zoning ordinance from which the university seeks relief was aimed at reducing the spread of massive, dead-ending garages on major Center City streets.

Despite that ordinance, garages keep popping up all over. No doubt, this colonial-era city must find new ways to accommodate the automobile, but not at the expense of what makes it special. A city planned so brilliantly by William Penn, with a legacy of great design created by famed homegrown architects such as Frank Furness, Louis Kahn and Robert Venturi, can and must do better.

What's painful about all this is that it's not a case of good guys vs. bad guys. It's good guys vs. good guys.

Jefferson has two partners in the garage project, which has no public subsidy. One is Interpark Corp. of Chicago.

The other is Lubert Adler Partners, a local developer. Dean Adler is the white knight who stepped up to save the marvelous Victory Building, which sits catercorner to the garage site. He needs more parking for the tenants and customers of his project, and thinks the ground-floor retail space planned for the garage could add some energy to the moribund Chestnut streetscape.

Meanwhile, Thomas Jefferson University is a vital cog in the city's life sciences sector, which is in turn a key to the region's economic future. Dr. Paul Brucker, the university president, needs new parking quickly so that he can proceed with another important project, a medical research center. That project on Locust Street requires tearing down two parking decks.

Still, those factors do not give the partners a pass for wanting to stick this squat, unlovely rectangle on a key city block for the next 50 years.

The Design Advocacy Group (DAG) makes a strong case for moving the garage to Sansom, which plays home to garages throughout Center City.

Jefferson officials offer several objections to that idea. If the garage disgorged traffic onto Sansom, which is one-way west, it could create unhealthy congestion around Jefferson's emergency room at 10th and Sansom. And putting the garage on Sansom would complicate plans for an aerial walkway across 10th Street to a hospital building. DAG and others say those are merely design problems requiring a dash of skill.

Sansom could be widened on that block to allow a dedicated lane for garage traffic to turn left and exit via Ninth Street, away from the ER. In return for taking on such extra expense, the project partners could be allowed to add more spaces to the garage.

Plus, it would be worth the city's while to offer some public subsidy to avert this design disaster. Another university argument - that somehow its proposed ambulatory care building would be "too tall" for Chestnut, a major street with large buildings on adjacent blocks, yet just right for narrow Sansom - is bizarre. Jefferson is also wrong to claim that ground-floor retail never works when combined with this kind of medical use.

A deeper issue here is the university's failure to develop a master plan for its campus. To be fair to Brucker, his institution has neither the clout nor the endowment that Judith Rodin enjoys at the University of Pennsylvania. But Jefferson could learn a few things from how Penn has worked strategically with neighbors to bolster their combined futures.

Interpark and Jefferson have tried to respond to community complaints about the garage by dressing up its design slightly. But adding some brick to the facade amounts to little more than putting lipstick on a pig. Here's the real tragedy: The plan is likely to be approved. The planning commission has already passed it.

And Interpark's attorney for the case, Carl Primavera, is from a law firm politically wired to the Street administration. But if a zoning approval is met with a court challenge, Jefferson's progress toward that needed research center could still be delayed.

A better result would be a zoning rejection, followed by a concerted City Hall effort to help Jefferson come up with a plan more worthy of William Penn's city.