



Meeting Summary September 22, 2021

Attendance

Panel Members:

Fred Marino, Chair
Robert Gorman, Vice Chair
Dan Lovette
Ethan Marchant
Sujit Mishra
Larry Quarrick
Vivian Stone

DPZ Staff:

Anthony Cataldo, Nick Haines, Melissa Maloney

Applicants and Presenters:

Howard Hughes: Gabe Chung, Todd Brown
Studio Red Architects: Cope Bailey
Gutschick, Little & Weber, P.A.: Carl Gutschick, Dan Sweeney

1. **Call to Order** – DAP Chair Fred Marino opened the meeting at 7:02 p.m.

2. **Review of Plan No. 21-10, South Lake Medical Office Building Columbia, MD**

Owner/Developer: Howard Hughes Corporation
Engineer: Gutschick, Little & Weber, P.A.
Architect: Studio Red Architects

Background

The 6.509-acre site is comprised of Lot 24 zoned New Town (NT). The site is currently parking lot adjacent to the Whole Foods in the Lakefront Neighborhood section of Downtown Columbia. The NT zoning accommodates pedestrian oriented, urban activity centers, with a mix of uses. The South Lake Medical Office Building proposes a new 4-story building constructed over a 2-story parking garage. The proposed structure covers most of the existing surface parking lot and the project proposes structured parking garage on the lower two floors that front Lake Kittamakundi. A new vehicular ramp is proposed to connect from Moore's Circle to the existing service area for Whole Foods. Level one of the medical building includes a covered drop off area and raised public terrace constructed over the two-story parking garage. It also contains the main entrance into the building, the lobby and leasable space. Levels two, three, and four are the main leasing spaces of the new building and necessary equipment on the roof is being screened with a louvered metal screen wall. Pedestrians are connected from the existing parking field in front of Whole Foods to the lake front via the proposed pedestrian walkway and terrace to an exterior stair from the terrace down to the Lake Kittamaqundi path system. Exterior materials include glass, metal accents and panels, cast concrete, brick masonry, and louvered screening elements.

Applicant Presentation

The building is located at the southern end of the lakefront district and has a great connection to the community, mall, lakefront and is viewed from Route 29. The site is an under-used parking lot that is adjacent to Whole Foods (iconic Frank Gehry building), which is the previous site of the Rouse headquarters. The Gehry building is a cultural landmark for Columbia and the building preservation guidelines state that future development be of equal likeness to preserve the views and compliment the Gehry building. Howard Hughes Corporation and the design team worked to design a building that fits the context of the site and its location.

The design guidelines allow for a 9-story building, however the design team felt that a 4-story building would be more appropriate and in line with the Gehry building. The building will be set on the south property line to maximize the distance between the Gehry building and the medical office building. The Whole Foods service ramp will stay in continuous use. There will be a bridge over the ramp for both pedestrians and vehicles. There will be a one way vehicular drop off from Moore's Circle as well as a pedestrian connection from the parking lot to the medical building and the public terrace which will be a multipurpose space. The terrace can vary in program from weekday to weekends and may host farmers or artisan markets, yoga classes or be a space for family to wait for a patient. The terrace will have movable planters and furniture and will be comprised of wood decking and cable handrails to promote visibility to the Gehry building and the lake. There will also be a south terrace that buffers the trees that will be for private use for the tenants. Visitors will access the lobby under the porte cochere, which will have a simulated wood material ceiling. The east end of the terrace has a stairway to the lakefront that will connect to the walking paths but will need to be approved by the Columbia Association.

The existing lot will be raised 2 feet above the existing floodplain and provide a chamber for flood storage at the ground level below the lowest parking level. The flood storage area is proposed to have 4x4 woven wire mesh with metal frames inset in the structure to allow water to pass through but prevent human access.

The building will take advantage of the existing landscape as the design is inspired by the simple geometries and consistent details of the Gehry building. The lower levels will be a 2-story concrete parking garage which acts as a mediator between the grade. Level one is structurally glazed glass and the other three levels are a combination of contemporary materials consisting of bands of aluminum composite panels with ribbons of window wall between. There is a façade application of extruded aluminum frames connected by pre-finished extruded aluminum louvers which provide solar shading for the exterior envelope. The window wall system includes vision glass which will be 10 feet floor to ceiling and will be incased in an extruded aluminum frame. Prefinished aluminum louvers overlay Spandrel glass.

Parking level minus 1 is accessed off the existing garage and there is no vertical circulation except stairs and elevators. New plantings will be put on either side of the existing ramp and they are working around existing underground utilities. The roof will have a screened mechanical penthouse and the will be designed to support solar panels.

The planting areas adjacent to the ramp will have native grasses that don't require a lot of water. Climbing vines will be on the east side, but the exact layout has not been determined. The applicant is striving to achieve the highest LEED certification and will include rainwater management, water use reduction, use of native and adaptive plants and rooftop solar panels to offset the energy consumption. Structural components will be selected to minimize climate change. Other components include a green wall, a dedicated DOAS outdoor air system and electric vehicle charging station.

Staff Presentation

The design team did a thorough job explaining the proposed design for this approximately 6.5-acre site and elaborating on the background provided. DPZ would like the DAP to make recommendations on:

- Edge treatments and transitions along the perimeter of the site and how it relates to the surrounding infrastructure.
- Building materials, scale, orientation and the relationship between the proposed site and the actual lakefront.
- Pedestrian connections through the terrace and stairway as well as the landscaping, including plant and design elements that tie into the natural setting.

DAP Questions and Comments

Site Design

DAP commented that the project was subject to of the Downtown Columbia Design Guidelines. There doesn't appear to be integration on the south side of the building which is a significant façade fronting the lake, and is a major visual connector. DAP commented that the project falls within an area in the design guidelines that is supposed to be a major visual connector from symphony overlook to the lake. DAP suggested that there should be landscape development and pedestrian walkways to bring visitors from Little Patuxent down to the lakefront.

The applicant responded that the area to the south is an environmentally sensitive area as determined by the Planning Board and so the constructability is something that must be looked at carefully. This is also the location of a 3rd identified interchange with Route 29 that is in the downtown plan. It is uncertain whether the interchange will be constructed and if so, what it would look like. The applicant advised that they did play with the orientation of the building and originally had it rotated but wanted to provide more separation from the Gehry building and enhance views of the lake.

DAP worried this could be a missed opportunity to make a significant connection to bring people and vibrancy down to the lakefront. Some felt it may be advantageous to shift the pedestrian plaza and connection to the south side of the building. The would connect pedestrians to the lake, in line with the master plan and if the future interchange is built, some buffer of trees would be left, or trees could be planted now, to maintain green space and buffering. Floodplain storage and its impact on the building was also clarified in the conversation.

DAP members feel that the major public terrace on the north side is facing the backside and service entrance of Whole Foods which is not, necessarily inviting or attractive. They question if it will really be used as a multi-functional space as planned. If a green roof/terrace were incorporated with significant vegetation including trees and plantings the terrace would have a different feel. DAP also commented that once the purpose of the terrace is defined the team could start to design it, as it just feels like a rooftop over a garage at this time. DAP also inquired if the applicants have thought about a stepped down terrace toward the lakefront that can better connect the lakefront and the building and feels as if this element is missing.

The applicant responded that the Whole Foods loading area needed to remain the same so trucks could go in and turn around. As a result, the edge of the property was as far away from the Gehry building as it could be. The terrace elevation is about 22 feet from the loading area and as visitors are sitting there, they would be looking across to the Gehry building or the site line out to the lake. The applicant feels the it does improve the current condition. Two of the objectives from the design guidelines included preserving the view of the lake from the Rouse

building and to enhance the use of the lake. In addition, by setting the building back from the Gehry building views of the lake are maintained.

DAP members discussed the possibility of shifting the building to the north and using the south terrace for public use instead would allow for the desired pedestrian connection to the lake and relation to nature. The north terrace could be for private use and possibly enclosed. Some members disagreed with switching the terraces and felt that openness may be lost between the two buildings and it would create a more unfriendly space and a pinch point. DAP commented that whether the building is shifted or not the design exploration should be completed to address the intention of the master plan. Regarding the pedestrian connection DAP commented that the site needs a more universal approach to the ADA connection to the waterfront. It would be discouraging for a person in a wheelchair to have to go through a garage while avoiding cars to get to the lakefront and there needs to be a more thoughtful approach to that. If the main corridor to the lake was on the south side an accessible ramp could be constructed to easily get down to the lake as was done at the play area outside Whole Foods to allow anyone to get down to the lakefront.

DAP asked if the applicant looked at designing the lobby so that at drop off visitors could see through the building west to east to the lakefront. With the current orientation, views of the lake from within the building will not be available to the public but will mainly be from the medical offices on the upper levels. To achieve this the applicant may need to rotate the building. The building is right for the site and is very compelling with an urban design. The challenge would be to open up the views and create those connections. One way to accomplish this would be to move the elevator and stairs to the side of the building without having to rotate the building.

DAP expressed concern over the size of the ramp and the ability for delivery trucks and fire trucks to come down the slope beneath the ramp. They inquired if the minimum required space will be available considering the height from the terrace to grade is only 22' 6" and requested the applicant look at this in further detail.

DAP commented that in past meetings the panel had approved a Final Development Plan (FDP-DC-L-1) that designated this site as residential¹. By adding this office building, they were disappointed that it was creating another dead space on the lakefront where there is no one there at night or on the weekends. With a residential site there would be people there 24 hours a day. The need for office space in Columbia on the lakefront was questioned. One recommendation to activate this building and the Lakefront was that the ground floor of the building have a café or restaurant to attract visitors and bring life back to the lakefront after office hours. DAP also advised that the 1st level could be leased out for use in the evening and have more of a public function with medical offices on the other levels and asked that the outdoor space near the lake be made more friendly and habitable. A pergola structure influenced by the wood-like louvers could be incorporated along the corridor and entrance to the lakeside façade.

DAP inquired how many parking spaces were originally onsite and how many will be created with the new plan and advised they would like to see the actual number of the parking spaces on the plan. DAP inquired if the parking garage will be open 24x7 for public access and the applicant confirmed it will be.

DAP inquired what LEED certification the applicant was trying to reach. The applicant confirmed that they are going for Platinum certification.

¹ FDP-DC-L-1 noted the parcel to contain residential units. The commercial use however is a permitted change per the Final development plan approved by the Howard County Planning Board.

DAP inquired about the floodplain and the team discussed that the floodplain in Columbia is currently at 5 feet and goes diagonally through the existing parking lot. The site is several hundred feet away from the Little Patuxent River and as proposed, the only portion of the building left impacted by the floodplain is the water storage area at the ground level under the parking. Once the structure is built the cars would be 2 feet above the floodplain on the lowest level. DAP inquired if a CLOMR (Conditional Letter of Map Revision) to FEMA will be submitted. The applicant advised they will be going through that process to modify the floodplain so that it follows the geometry instead of the diagonal line.

DAP asked for an overview of the storm water management plan. The applicant advised there is a treatment tray that is proposed that will address both quality and quantity. The at grade parking on the northside will be asphalt with soil underneath and a suitable site for maintainable stormwater facility. The applicant advised they are managing to a higher level and are picking up unmanaged run off from the Whole Foods parking lot. There will be 2 quality components including a hydro dynamic device that filters out types of pollutants and the storage area that will release the water very slowly through a storm filter to improve the water quality as well.

Architecture

DAP commented that the idea of the plinth of the building floating above the plinth is strong. The automobile entry point and cantilevered porte cochere is powerful. DAP inquired if a similar cantilevered option could not come out beyond the footprint of the parking garage in some form and offset the flat elevation on the lakefront. This site is a huge billboard for downtown Columbia for passers by on Route 29. They commented that the building will transition between day and night with the lights and by using the louvers and the glass behind and will be viewed as an ethereal floating volume as it hovers above everything else. Restricting the height of the building even though the master plan does allow for 9 stories, was positive, noting the height is still a little higher than the Whole Foods building.

DAP was concerned that the elevation at grade level on the lakefront is not very pedestrian friendly and perhaps some of the louvered screening elements could be used at the lower levels as well. The building is sitting on top of concrete and different materials could be used to cover the garage. Additional design of the elevations at grade that face the Whole Foods building and Haven on the Lake entrance as well as the elevation that faces the lake is needed. DAP commented that those views of the building façade are of the parking garage and should have an architectural treatment or screening to break up the view. DAP did note that there is a pinch point at the lakefront and there is not a lot of room for pedestrians to have usable elements programed there. They believe that the parking area needs to be less foreboding, potentially through the use of landscaping or screening elements.

DAP stated that this is an incredibly important building to Columbia, and has a tremendous amount of potential, and reinforced that the DAP comments today are to make it even better.

Landscape

DAP is concerned about the visibility of 2 levels of parking garage to pedestrians down on the lake front. DAP advised that the applicant is planning to have vines and greenery, but it would be better to have some sort of architectural screening material to hide the garage from view while still allowing ventilation. The vines were questioned as they will take years to grow and mature, if they survive at all.

DAP commented that a landscape plan needs to be further developed and the team confirmed they have a landscape architecture on board. The studio is called Unknown Studio. DAP advised that the plan does show naturalized areas that include materials such as grasses, perennials and trailing vines but it does not show where these items will be incorporated. Significantly more work is needed on this item.

DAP Motions for Recommendations

1. DAP Member Ethan Marchant made the following motion:
That the southside of the building be studied to address a connection to the waterfront either physically for pedestrians or visually in compliance with the Downtown Columbia Master Plan; including flipping the public terrace from the north side to the south side of the building.

DAP Chair Fred Marino seconded.
Vote: 7-0

2. DAP Member Larry Quarrick made the following motion:
That the applicant incorporates a pedestrian way (connection) that includes centralized plantings and potentially artwork to make a special connection to the lake and the main trail.

DAP Chair Fred Marino seconded.
Vote: 7-0

3. DAP Member Ethan Marchant made the following motion:
That the applicant returns to the DAP with an updated presentation.

DAP Chair Fred Marino seconded.
Vote: 7-0

4. DAP Chair Fred Marino made the following motion:
That the applicant develops a better plan regarding the landscape and pedestrian experience, circulation on all sides of the building, and how it connects along the lakefront to make it a better experience for everyone along the lakefront and inside the building.

DAP Member Ethan Marchant seconded.
Vote: 7-0

5. DAP Member Vivian Stone made the following motion:
That the applicant studies the visual connection from within the building to the lakefront.

DAP Chair Fred Marino seconded.
Vote: 7-0

3. Other Business

- a. Review and comment on submitted updates to the stairs and landscaping for the Cross Keys Inn Addition.

In 2019 DAP reviewed the plans for the Sheraton hotel, but the plans for the exterior patio and connection to the lakefront and pathway were not complete. One of the comments from the previous motions was for the DAP to see the plans, in an unofficial capacity, when they became available. This informal discussion with DPZ and DAP was in response to that request. DPZ staff noted that due to time constraints, the applicant was not able to integrate the patio plans with the stairway, landscape and ramp design into one drawing/document. The materials presented reflect the previous patio design as reference with the new pathway/ramps drawings for discussion.

DAP advised that the rendering of the patio does look inviting and liked the colors and materials. Low planting areas are included, but no water features are indicated. The DAP thought the natural rocks and naturalized transitions shown in the original terrace drawings were appealing as a smooth transition area. DAP thought that there may be a pinch point with the stairway going down to the water and noted that there is a significant grade change. As a result, the retaining walls with each terrace are significant and recommended the applicant use some of the rock formations to form a cascading transition that helps to subdue the 15-16' foot walls. They commented that the applicant could step the wall and put planters that could cut the wall in half. The walls are not human scale, but instead are 3x the human scale and once the stairs and ramp are put in, DAP was concerned that the the natural setting will change significantly. DAP was also concerned if the plantings under the ramp would not survive without sun or water.

DAP suggested that the primary pathway could be the ramp with the elimination of the formal stairs. A secondary route could then be designed so if the ramp was not chosen a more natural path is taken (i.e. the natural stone steps in the Kimmel studio rendering). The main comment was that the applicant needs to find a more gracious way for pedestrians to get down to the Lake. Additional ideas to mitigate the overbearing nature of the proposed wall was the inclusion of some material banding, climbing vines, or even artwork which could help break up the tall vertical elements of the walls. One member suggested that they could create a pier that goes out 40 feet from the patio and has an elevator down to the bottom instead of a ramp.

DAP commended the team for following through with the pedestrian connection in this location and believes it will be a positive addition to the plan. There is significant concern that the design is split between two landscape architects and lacks cohesion. DAP members advised it would be preferable to design the garden like ramp because when done well, they are an enjoyable experience for everyone, regardless of disability.

These comments will be passed onto the applicant.

4. Call to Adjourn

DAP Chair Fred Marino adjourned the meeting at 8:55 p.m.