

## **Eye on Evanston: Thoughts on Design | Design Evanston reviews proposals for 1300 Chicago Avenue., Legacy buildings**

by Jack Weiss, Design Evanston September 25th, 2024

In July 2023 I wrote about Design Evanston's practice, dating back to 2012, of hosting project reviews of prominent architectural developments in the city. As stated in our mission statement, Design Evanston tries to "instruct the public on subjects useful to the individual and beneficial to the community." This important activity directly addresses that portion of our mission.

Until now, Design Evanston has shared our project reviews only with city staff and the project teams. But sharing the reviews with the larger Evanston community is critical to advancing our mission.

Timing of project reviews is important. To ensure that Design Evanston's comments might be actionable, the organization tries to meet with project teams before or after they appear at community meetings and before they meet with the Planning and Development Committee and Land Use Commission.

In recent weeks Design Evanston has conducted two project reviews. On Aug. 28 Design Evanston professional members reviewed the [1300 Chicago Ave. project](#) proposed by Big Shoulders Development. On Sept. 19 the team reviewed, for a second time, [The Legacy project](#) at 1621-1631 Chicago Ave. by the Horizon Realty Group.

For readers who are not familiar with standards of review, I should explain that some years ago Design Evanston crafted project review standards that were based, in part, on those already established by the city's Land Use and Preservation commissions.

The standards for review that Design Evanston uses in evaluating proposed projects are enumerated in the project reviews that follow.

### **1300 Chicago Avenue**



A rendering of the seven-story building proposed for 1300 Chicago Ave. Credit: Chicago Development Partner, Hirsch MPG Architecture

### **General comments**

Overall, the conceptual approach of the design is a viable one – to retain existing pedestrian scale, and local tenant retail along Dempster, and then to utilize the north parking lot for a taller residential apartment building. The specific façade articulation, fenestration and material finishes need further investigation.

### **Criteria comments**

**1. The project should address a perceived need in the city and its respective community.**

Yes. There is a need for residential TOD [transit-oriented development] in this area and the project provides 20% of units as affordable units.

**2. The project should be of an appropriate and beneficial use within the project’s geographical context.**

Yes. Adding new residential and retaining existing retail in the south building and adding additional retail on Chicago Avenue is very beneficial.

**3. The project should be of appropriate and complementary size, scale and proportion for its physical context.**

The existing low scale retail is retained. The new 7-story height apartment building is justified given nearby development to the south. Placing the 7-story building to the north of the old retail building and setting floors 5 thru 7 back on Chicago Avenue helps reduce its height impact and improves its scale in the context.

**4. The project should reflect current progressive, creative and sustainable design goals and practices.**

The project is reported to be all electric, energy saving and of at least LEED Silver status. The use of glazed brick could be an appealing feature.

**5. The project should provide for current and future economic growth.**

It does. Retaining existing retail and significantly increasing the residences in the area will be of good economic benefit.

**6. The project should provide for good city revenue generation with as low as feasible infrastructure burden to the city.**

The increase in tax base is significant – converting a parking lot to a 60+ unit apartment building. Utility infrastructure appears adequate. There appears to be very negligible increase in vehicle accommodation required given the very few parking spaces provided.

**7. The project should provide for a positive, engaging experience at street and pedestrian level.**

The retention of the existing low-scale retail is a plus. The effect of the 7-story height is mitigated by a stepping back of the façade at the lower floors which will align with the top of the adjacent four-story building. The potential conversion of Sherman Place to a one-way northbound street will provide for an added sidewalk adjacent to the site.

**8. The project should complement the practices and goals of “Complete Streets” [the city policy is [here](#)] and encourage multi-modal transportation use.**

The area already possesses many of these characteristics and they will only be amplified and further utilized by this project. Rail, bus routes and walkways have long been in place. The addition of 60+ residences will further increase the use and profitability of the existing mass transit services.

**9. The project should be a contributor to the city of Evanston’s goals to be energy self-sufficient.**

This appears to be a goal of the project. Its use of all electric service and pursuing LEED Silver status are steps in the right direction.

**10. The project should provide a tangible complement of public benefits.**

The project will further vitalize this Transit Node area, increase customer traffic at the local businesses and increase CTA ridership to warrant the retention and renovation of this station, and improve the viability of existing retail in this area.

**Adding an appearance review**

Design Evanston’s project review of The Legacy on Chicago Avenue brought about a subtle shift in the organization’s review process. It was felt that the 10 existing standards for review were missing an important piece – appearance. How the proposed project looks from an aesthetic point of view. Some neighboring communities like Wilmette have appearance review commissions.

Two former City of Evanston committees, SPARC (Site Plan & Appearance Review Committee) and DAPR (Design & Appearance Review) used to address the topic of appearance. It is now likely that a Community Design Commission will be proposed in the city’s new Comprehensive

Plan. Therefore, beginning with The Legacy project, evidence-based “design comments” have been added to the review process.

**1621-31 Chicago Avenue (The Legacy)**



A rendering of the current 12-story proposal for The Legacy at 1621-31 Chicago Ave. Credit: Horizon Realty Group

**General comments**

Overall, the general consensus of the reviewing group was that the proposed project is of appropriate height and massing within the confines of current zoning regulations and the observed current contexts of immediate and neighboring sites. The proposed project provides much-needed residential housing in a viable area of the city. The design intentions at sidewalk level are to create an appropriate small-scale streetscape experience in keeping with much of Evanston’s downtown. The project provides significant benefits to the city with minimal burdens on its existing infrastructure. The specific execution of the façade treatment of the project, particularly at the street-front three-story portion, needs further study.

**Criteria comments**

**1. The project should address a perceived need in the city and its respective community.**

Yes. There is a need for increased residential development in the city and in this specific area. Increased residential occupancies downtown will replace lost office workers and provide better support for existing and future retail, commercial and entertainment interests.

**2. The project should be of an appropriate and beneficial use within the project’s geographical context.**

Yes. See above. The additional first-floor retail, if employed as a restaurant, will further enliven this area.

**3. The project should be of appropriate and complementary size, scale and proportion for its physical context.**

The proposed size, height and massing are achievable within the requirements of current zoning. The proposed configuration of the project is significantly smaller than prior proposals and is very complementary to its context. The perceived height of the building at all public ways will be very compatible with current, recent and past developments in the area and the current streetscape experience.

**4. The project should reflect current progressive, creative and sustainable design goals and practices.**

The project will be executed with the intention of achieving LEED Gold status. The project will be all electric. Glazing will be state of the art and conform with recent bird-friendly practices.

**5. The project should provide for current and future economic growth.**

It does. The increased residences will support existing nearby commercial establishments, e.g. Whole Foods, and provide a market for other nearby establishments. It will increase the tax base of the area with a minimal burden on the existing infrastructure.

**6. The project should provide for good city revenue generation with as low as feasible infrastructure burden to the city.**

The increase in tax base is significant at a time when city and school district funds are in such demand. This will be accomplished with little burden on the existing infrastructure of this area. There appears to be a negligible increase in vehicle accommodation required given the relatively few parking spaces provided (given current statistics on auto use by current and future residents). Resident's vehicular entry to, and exit from, the building from the alley will minimize the burden of additional vehicles on Chicago Avenue traffic.

**7. The project should provide for a positive, engaging experience at street and pedestrian level.**

The attention to the streetscape experience is very good. The three-story portion of the building is well conceived, and of an appropriate scale. The treatment of the sidewalk area in front of the building is in keeping with city standards. The project will attempt to retain the existing mature sidewalk trees. If they do not survive the construction process, they will be replaced with new trees that meet city requirements.

**8. The project should complement the practices and goals of "Complete Streets" and encourage multi-modal transportation use.**

The project proposes 48 in-building vehicle parking spaces for the 110 units. If this can be conveyed as an appropriate response to the current and future market it will have minimal impact on the traffic in this area, also given the fact that entry and exit to the building will be off the alley behind the building rather than off Chicago Avenue; there will be no disruptive streetscape curb-cuts.

The project is within ¼ mile of Metra and CTA train stations, a viable walking distance for residents. Furthermore, the project provides bicycle parking for 110 bicycles, one for each unit. A designated short-term parking area in front of the building should adequately accommodate such vehicles as Amazon, UPS, etc. deliveries; Uber and Lyft drivers; and other short-term users.



The bicycle lanes are intact with no cross traffic. Tree planting and bicycle parking will be in accordance with the city requirements.

Longer term deliveries, move-ins and move-outs, etc. are to occur at the rear of the building off the alley. Garbage and recycling pick-ups will occur here as well with the containers located inside the building not along the alley.

**9. The project should be a contributor to the City of Evanston's goals to be energy self-sufficient.**

This appears to be the goal of the project. Its use of all-electric services and pursuing LEED Gold status are steps in the right direction.

**10. The project should provide a tangible complement of public benefits.**

The project will further vitalize and activate this area of the city. It will provide much-needed additional housing (including affordable units), increase customer traffic at the local businesses, add retail or a restaurant to the area, likely increase CTA and Metra ridership and improve the alley behind the building by virtue of its internal accommodation for trash, deliveries, etc.



A rendering shows the proposed streetscape for The Legacy at 1621-31 Chicago Ave. Credit: Papageorge Haymes

**Design comments**

1. Among the attendees there was a general concern about the lack of visual continuity between the streetscape three-story portion of the building and the tall, narrower residential portion (tower, if you will) of the building.

2. Some attendees thought that the most recent scheme, employing brick at the three-story portion of the building, seems an unnecessary nod to the theory that Evanston has in its history utilized brick at these locations and new buildings should also. This is a new building that should be able to employ new materials. Just because adjacent buildings have brick walls adjacent to the streetscape is no reason for this building to employ that material. Sensitively expressed datum lines and appropriate detailing of any material can convey the needed scale and interest desired at the streetscape and be respectful of adjacent buildings.

3. Some attendees suggested that if a terra cotta colored brick, or even tiles, are to be employed at the three-story facade, then that material or color should be employed in some manner at the tower to better tie the two portions of the building together visually.
4. The expressed columns below the center of the tower at streetscape level suggest that this is the entrance to the tower, but it is not. This was a disturbing element for most attendees.
5. The curtainwall of butt-glazed glass employed at the tower was generally viewed as attractive and a warranted contrast to adjacent older masonry buildings. The subtle changes in the vertical joint patterns from one floor to another could be an interesting effect. The curved southwest corner was impressive (and likely expensive), though for some it was curious as to why it was not employed at the opposite front corner.
6. The employment of all glass, with its degree of reflectivity, will reduce the apparent mass of the tower. Nevertheless, its volume in this context is very appropriate and satisfying.
7. Signage for retail tenants at street level, being employed at the same area of the top portion of the window storefront, not the alternative material at the fascia above the storefront window, was appreciated.
8. The Merion addition to the south of the proposed building employs a space within the proposed building as a means of egress to the alley. Is this a viable arrangement? Will a permanent easement be granted to the Merion to ensure that this remains if the north neighbor ever changes ownership?
9. The rear of the building along the alley with its internal accommodation of trash, recycling, deliveries and move-ins, etc. is a very beneficial and attractive solution that well serves the functions and appearance of the building as well as the public alley.

*Design Evanston's "Eye on Evanston" articles focus on Evanston's design history and advocate for good design in our city. Visit [designevanston.org](http://designevanston.org) to learn more about the organization.*

Source: Evanston RoundTable 9.25.24