OPEN MEETING AND WELCOME

Vice Chairperson Martin Jokinen called the Regular Meeting of the Vadnais Heights Planning Commission to order at 7:00 p.m. on March 24, 2020.

ROLL CALL

Evan Cordes, Chairperson  Absent
Linda Bigelbach  Absent
Edward Caillier  Present
Brian Carnes  Present
Curt Cooper  Present
Martin Jokinen, Vice Chairperson  Present
Joseph Stumph  Absent
Jerry Moynagh, First Alternate  Absent
Terri Dresen, Second Alternate  Absent

Also present: Kevin Watson, City Administrator; Nolan Wall, Planning/Community Development Director; Jeff Melcoch, Cable Producer.

Commissioner Carnes noted several members were absent due to social distancing and the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for only a quorum to be present.

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

Upon motion by Commissioner Cooper, seconded by Commissioner Carnes, it was

“RESOLVED, to approve the March 24, 2020, Regular Meeting Agenda as presented.”

Ayes – 4  Nays – 0

The motion carried.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Vice Chair Jokinen requested spelling corrections for Commissioner Dresen’s name.

Upon motion by Commissioner Cooper, seconded by Commissioner Caillier, it was

“RESOLVED, to approve the minutes of the February 24, 2020, Regular Meeting as corrected.”
Ayes – 4   
Nays – 0   

The motion carried.

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Vice Chairperson Jokinen opened the floor to the public at 7:02 p.m. for questions and comments on items not on the agenda.

As no one wished to address the Commission, Vice Chairperson Jokinen closed the meeting to the public at 7:02 p.m.

PUBLIC HEARINGS

A. Case 20-002: Dakota UPREIT LP – Planned Unit Development Amendment and Site Plan Review at 905-955 East County Road E (Vadnais Square)

Planning/Community Development Director Wall shared the applicant is requesting to divide the 32,500-square-foot “minor anchor” tenant space at Vadnais Square into up to three retail suites through a Planned Unit Development (PUD) Amendment and Site Plan Review. He said the subject property contains the Vadnais Square shopping center development and was rezoned from City Center (CC) to Planned Unit Development (PUD) in 2016. Dakota UPREIT LP purchased the shopping center in 2016. He spoke how market trends were changing and the need to split the tenant space into several spaces versus larger big box stores and instead have smaller destination retail stores. As a result of the vacancy created in the former Xperience Fitness tenant space, the property owner is proposing to split the space into up to three retail suites. One tenant, Foss Swim School, has been identified, but no other tenants have lease agreements for the remaining space(s), as of yet.

Wall noted that the original Development Agreement was executed in 1995 and approved a 27,500-square-foot minor anchor retail store at the southwest corner of the retail building. Subsequent amendments have changed the exact size of the space, but it has always been considered as an anchor tenant. Use of that space, as approved, continued until November 2019 when the tenant vacated. A similar process was followed in 2014 to reconfigure the former Festival Foods space into several smaller suites to accommodate a new grocery tenant that didn’t need all the vacant space. He stated the review process to split the former Festival Foods into five retail suites six years ago triggered a deliberate conversation about the changing retail environment and the intent and vision for the Vadnais Square development in the larger context of the City Center District. The same circumstances are facilitating the requests in this case. The importance of the entire City Center area depends in large part on maintaining a vibrant multi-tenant shopping center that is viable in the current retail market. The property owner shares the same goal. To that end, they are reacting to losing Xperience Fitness as the minor anchor tenant and the current market to fill it. Wall stated plans show the proposed layout for Foss Swim School, which would occupy approximately 12,000 square feet and provides a similar use to the former fitness club. The applicant/property owner is requesting to split the
remaining 22,000 square feet into at least two more retail suites for future tenants. The request offers them flexibility in attracting tenants, but would still allow for one larger tenant to lease all the remaining space.

Vice Chairperson Jokinen opened the public hearing at 7:09 p.m.

As no one wished to address the Commission, Vice Chairperson Jokinen closed the public hearing at 7:09 p.m.

Upon motion by Commissioner Carnes, seconded by Commissioner Cooper, it was

“RESOLVED to approve the proposed comprehensive plan amendment, rezoning, and planned unit development amendment requests, based on the finding of fact that the applicant is responding to the current retail market in an attempt to keep the shopping center viable and leased.

Subject to the conditions:

1. A development agreement amendment between the property owner, and all others with interests in the subject property, shall be entered into with the City, to be recorded at the applicant’s cost with the offices of the Ramsey County Recorder and/or Register of Titles, prior to issuance of a building permit.

2. Building and demolition permits in compliance with all applicable code standards shall be submitted prior to commencement of any construction activities on the subject property, to be reviewed/approved administratively.

3. Sign permits in compliance with all applicable code standards shall be submitted prior to any sign(s) being installed/relocated on the subject property, to be reviewed/approved administratively.

4. The existing “minor anchor” space shall not be divided into more than three separate tenant spaces without approval by the City Council, after review by the Planning Commission.”

Ayes – 4  Nays – 0

The motion carried.

B. Case 20-003: At Home Apartments, LLC – Rezoning, Final Planned Unit Development Plan, Site Plan Review at Unaddressed Parcel at County Highway 96/McMenemy Street

Vice Chairperson Jokinen stated the public hearing for At Home Apartments, LLC – Rezoning, Final Planned Unit Development Plan, Site Plan Review at Unaddressed Parcel at County Highway 96/McMenemy Street would be opened but continued and action postponed to the April 2, 2020, special meeting. He said no formal action would be taken this evening and encouraged the public to review the City’s website for public input opportunities for the continued public hearing.
Vice Chairperson Jokinen opened the public hearing at 7:09 p.m.

Planning/Community Development Director Wall shared that At Home Apartments, LLC, is proposing to re-zone the subject property to PUD to allow for construction of a multi-family residential development, including final PUD and site plan reviews. At the January 21 meeting, the City Council approved the applicant’s request to rezone the subject property’s future land use designation from Office-Business to Mixed Use, which is currently being reviewed by the Metropolitan Council and we expect action on it next month.

Wall noted that the proposed development is a rental community that includes a mix of two-story, attached townhomes and a four-story apartment building, totaling 163 units. Several revisions were made to the proposed plans resulting from the Concept PUD Plan public testimony and subsequent City Council and Planning Commission discussions. If approved, construction would occur in multiple phases, commencing late spring/early summer this year to be completed by the fall of 2021. The proposed development includes 14 buildings (1 apartment/13 townhomes) on one platted lot. The proposed development includes two housing types, attached townhomes and an apartment building. The pitched roofs would complement the dwellings in the adjacent single-family residential neighborhood, as opposed to flat roofs which may better complement the surrounding office/warehouse uses and often evoke a more urban-feel. In addition, the two-story townhome design offers a transition between the height of the adjacent dwellings and the four-story apartment building. The townhomes would be constructed in three phases, with completion estimated for spring, summer, and fall of 2021, respectively.

Wall noted that the proposed development does not include any land dedicated to the public, so the applicant will likely be required to pay the applicable park dedication fee in lieu of dedication, as allowed by the City Code. The proposed development would include outdoor amenities for residents and guests, including an outdoor pool, gazebo, grilling areas, and a covered bar area with outdoor TVs. The proposed apartment building will have a fitness room, yoga room, and community space. In addition, trail connections to the existing off-street trail facility on the south side of County Highway 96 were proposed from within the development on the north and west sides. Wall shared existing developments within surrounding communities were analyzed for density for comparison and the main points included: gross density range for certain existing/approved developments in surrounding communities is approximately 8–51 units/acre; gross density range for existing developments in Vadnais Heights is 8–29 units/acre; proposed development has a gross density of 12.2 units/acre and is significantly less dense than comparable developments in the City and the surrounding area.

Wall said the subject property and proposed apartment building’s location are generally isolated from surrounding structures, therefore it is not anticipated that any significant view-sheds will be interrupted. The Vadnais Heights Fire Department has reviewed the proposed plans and does not have any concerns with the building’s height, as they have appropriately-trained staff and equipment to respond to a fire event in a tall building. In addition, the proposed development provides the required fire access around most of the building and is required to install fire suppression/alarm systems. For comparison
purposes, the R-3 District’s maximum building height standard is 36’, which generally only allows for a three-story building and is consistent with most existing multi-family residential buildings in the community. Most new suburban multi-family residential construction is three or four stories tall, but can vary in overall height depending on the roof design (pitched vs. flat) but noted there was a growing trend in suburban communities to allow taller buildings in appropriate locations to increase density.

Wall said in response to the comments received as part of the Concept PUD Plan review process, the applicant incorporated the following revisions into the Final PUD Plan: removed ingress/egress from McMenemy Street; consolidated ingress/egress to one driveway on Oak Grove Parkway as far from the intersection as possible; enhanced the exterior building materials (more colors, stone, and brick); provided berming and robust landscaping to provide screening to/from surrounding properties; enhanced the outdoor amenity space by including more pedestrian trails throughout the site and an outdoor gazebo/pergola area; provided an emergency-only access easement in the southeast corner of the site.

Staff recommends approval of the proposed rezoning, final planned unit development plan, and site plan requests, based on the following findings of fact:

1. The City Council has already approved the required comprehensive plan amendment to re-guide the subject property from Office-Business to Mixed Use and provided comments on the Concept PUD Plan.
2. The proposed development allows for the following:
   a. Multi-family residential development that meets the current market demands.
   b. Additional housing units to assist in meeting the 2040 population/household forecasts.
   c. A range of housing choices in terms of style, size, location, tenure and cost.
   d. A balanced housing supply with housing available for people at all income levels.
   e. A variety of housing types for people in all stages of the life-cycle.
3. The proposed development is compatible with other surrounding uses and, through thoughtful design, provides appropriate transitions/buffers and access that mitigates potential impacts.
4. The proposed development is consistent with the applicable density ranges.
5. The proposed development is consistent with the purpose and intent of the Planned Unit Development District by encouraging zoning flexibility that enhances the project without negatively affecting surrounding land uses, natural resources, or the public.
6. The flexibility being requested as part of the Planned Unit Development process is justified and allows for reasonable development of the subject property.

Subject to the following conditions:
1. The proposed comprehensive plan amendment approved by the City Council, as in Resolution 20-01-016, shall be approved by the Metropolitan Council, in accordance with the required procedures.
2. A development agreement between the applicant, and all others with interests in the subject property, shall be entered into with the City, to be recorded at the
applicant’s cost with the offices of the Ramsey County Recorder and/or Register of Titles, prior to issuance of a building permit.

3. Building permits shall be submitted for administrative review/approval, prior to commencement of any construction activities on the subject property.

4. Construction shall be completed and ready for occupancy according to the approved plans and specifications within one (1) year following issuance of the building permit, unless within that time an extension is granted by the City Council as part of the development agreement.

5. A Fire Certificate of Occupancy shall be obtained annually from the Fire Department by the responsible party, in compliance with the City Code.

6. A sign permit shall be submitted for administrative review/approval, prior to any sign(s) being installed on the subject property.

7. The applicant shall work with the City to erect a city monument/gateway sign at the corner of the McMenemy Street/County Highway 96 intersection.

8. If construction of the proposed development has not commenced within twelve (12) months from effective date of the approval ordinance granting the proposed rezoning, the City Council shall consider commencement of proceedings to rezone the subject property back to the original classification, in compliance with the applicable procedures and with notice to the property owner/applicant.

9. A portion of the parking near the front of the apartment building shall be marked as visitor parking.

10. Ground-mounted mechanical units and building utility areas shall be adequately screened by plant material and/or fencing and shall not obstruct fire department connections or hydrants, to be administratively reviewed/approved as part of the building permit.

11. Existing vegetation proposed to be preserved shall be done so in compliance with the applicable requirements of Chapter 38, Article IV, Section 601(11) of the City Code.

12. Trash/recycling containers housed within the building’s underground parking garages are only permitted to be stored outside on a temporary basis to be emptied.

13. Trash/recycling containers and dog-waste stations shall be provided around the exterior of the development for use by residents and visitors.

14. The applicant shall provide an emergency cross-access easement to the adjoining property to the east, to be shown on the site plan as part of the development agreement, and recorded by document at the applicant’s cost with the offices of the Ramsey County Recorder and/or Register of Titles, prior to issuance of a certificate of occupancy.

15. Exterior off-street parking stalls shall not be used for parking/storage of boats, trailers, or recreational vehicles.

16. Compliance with the conditions included in the Consulting City Engineer’s memorandum, dated February 28, 2020.

17. Compliance with the conditions included in the Fire Technician’s memorandum, dated March 2, 2020.

18. Compliance with the conditions included in the VLAWMO memorandum, dated March 13, 2020.

19. Compliance with the conditions included in the Director of Public Works/City Engineer memorandum, dated March 13, 2020.
Wall said the action requested at this meeting is to table the requests and continue the public hearing to the April 2, 2020, special meeting, for public input and action and extend the application review period an additional 60 days, in compliance with Minn. Stat. Sec. 15.99. He outlined the public process included a project webpage, electronic comment forms, and emails for the record from those who do not want to attend as well as an online sign-up sheet to allow residents to schedule a time to testify in five-minute blocks to limit public attendance and provide an orderly process but noted staff encouraged online input instead. He said a letter was provided beyond the required meeting notice that stated the hearing would be continued and once input was taken at the Planning Commission meeting another opportunity would be provided for comments at a City Council meeting.

Vice Chairperson Jokinen confirmed the proposed irrigation pond would be aerated.

Pete Keely, Collage Architects, recapped design considerations made regarding access, traffic, and design, and said they kept with the motif of the modern farmhouse design and developed more materials such as stone and accents and dropped to three stories on the corners. He outlined the outdoor spaces and balconies, gable approach to match the townhomes, different coloring for different looks throughout, then reviewed the proposed landscaping and materials mix between buildings for different looks with rustic wood, lap siding, stone, metal roofing and shingles throughout. Keely spoke about the three-foot berming, gables differing throughout to mimic a series of homes, then shared images of amenity spaces inside and outlined the plan of more one-bedroom units and one-bedroom with den units, fitness room, wine bar, and package/mail room and shared how they worked to get access off Oak Grove and connect to the parking lot to the east with the pond designed as a wet pond with bounce.

Commissioner Carnes said he appreciated the changes from the initial proposal as they are well done and thanked the applicant for their work.

Leanna Stefaniak, At Home Apartments, stressed how they wanted to be collaborative partners and hoped that goal was reflected in the design changes. She said they amended their plans based on the public input received and described the amenities for the outdoor spaces and said they anticipate more feedback at the continued public hearing and would work to incorporate changes to develop a better project.

Commissioner Caillier thanked the applicant for the changes and asked about the definition of transient housing and how At Home vests their long-term renters and activities such as Air B&B-type rentals and not allowing sublets and the corresponding parking impacts. Stefaniak explained how all residents (anyone over the age of 18) must submit applications for criminal and financial background investigations which is why they do not allow subletting. She said this project is a huge investment for both us and their tenants and if someone was living onsite who was not a resident, they are made aware of the fact through onsite management whom will be living onsite and will know the residents. She outlined the seven-night guest policy and the need to sign lease addendums in order to get on a current lease to ensure property rules are followed, vehicle registrations received, and fees paid, adding the 1.8 parking ratio was based on current market trends and was still adequately parked with the average being 1.4.
Commissioner Cooper asked for more information on the market At Home will be going after and the unit costs. Stefaniak responded they anticipate their residents to be baby boomers who are downsizing and right sizing as well as older millennials who may want more space and be closer to work. She spoke about Class A new market apartments and blended averages of approximately $2/square foot for suburban units and $3/square foot for urban units.

Upon motion by Commissioner Carnes, seconded by Commissioner Cooper, it was

“RESOLVED, to table consideration of At Home Apartments, LLC – Rezoning, Final Planned Unit Development Plan, Site Plan Review at Unaddressed Parcel at County Highway 96/McMenemy Street and continue the public hearing and action to the April 2, 2020, public hearing, and extend the application review period an additional 60 days, in compliance with Minn. Stat. Sec. 15.99.”

Ayes – 4  Nays – 0

The motion carried.

NEW BUSINESS

None.

OLD BUSINESS

None.

REPORTS

A. Council Liaison

Councilmember Patricia Youker was absent.

B. Planning Commissioners

None.

C. Staff

Planning/Community Development Director Wall shared the Rush Line group will be conducting virtual meetings and has postponed public engagements at this time and noted that residents who live on the corridor should be very aware of the proposed project due to the group’s active communication.

City Administrator Watson shared an update regarding the City’s response to COVID-19 and how staff is continuing to serve the public as always but not with any in-person services. He said staff are working onsite and from home and splitting shifts to do its best to mitigate cross infections. He commented on the impact these actions are having and
how staff is working to respond to needs as they arise and he said that he appreciates the public’s patience during this time. He encouraged anyone from the public to share their ideas, especially the business community, and shared one example of flexibility provided around temporary signage for activities such as restaurant take-out and thanked the public for their support during this time.

**NEXT MEETING**

Planning/Community Development Director Wall said the next meeting would be held in April at a date to be determined.

**ADJOURN MEETING**

Upon motion by Commissioner Carnes, seconded by Commissioner Cooper, the meeting was adjourned at 7:55 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Cathy Sorensen, *TimeSaver Off Site Secretarial, Inc.*