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PDNA wants X/O investigation: planning department refuses

By Sarah Severson

The Prairie District Neighborhood Alliance (PDNA) has filed a procedural challenge with the City's Department of Planning and Development asking for clarification on aspects of the approved X/O luxury highrise project at 1700 S. Prairie Ave, which would erect one tower of 45 stories and another 33 stories high. The City, however, found no reason for an investigation and nothing inappropriate in the project's approval process.



PDNA's pressure on the X/O developer may result in changes to the townhouse part of the development and to the streetscape. The towers will remain, however.

“We’re concerned with the procedural aspect of the approval,” said Jeff Ayersman, PDNA treasurer. “We believe there was not full disclosure on the application and that the project does not fit with the City’s plan for the Near South Loop.”

Tina Feldstein, PDNA president, said the application did not provide full financial disclosure or mention that Keith Giles, a Frankel & Giles and Kargil Development principal, was an officer on the Near South Planning Board (NSPB), one of the organizations that approved the project. She also alleged neighborhood residents did not receive notice before public meetings.

“We feel it was not due diligence in the process of approving the project,” Feldstein explained. “They did not disclose that the developer had donated money to every organization that gave community support.”

Giles responded by noting the financial part of the application contained a misprint that has since been cleared up and insisting he has been open about his involvement with the NSPB and a one-time donation to the Greater South Loop Association (GSLA). He added that the developer held multiple meetings with individual neighbors and community groups about the project.

“The public and community review of this project took place over a period of over six months, which allowed comment and community input from many, many different sources,” Giles wrote in a letter that was read aloud at the last GSLA meeting. “The result was a project that was approved without significant objection.”

Giles recently met with the PDNA to discuss its concerns.

“We opened up a formal dialogue with the hope and expectation to come up with some compromises on development ideas,” Giles said. “We made it clear that we’re not ignoring them, and we’re concerned that they don’t like the project.”

Giles said the towers' design will not change, as more than half the units in the first tower already are sold, but he is willing to redesign the townhouses and streetscape.

“We’re including a 10,000 square foot park, replacing street lights, redoing sidewalks, and contributed \$700,000 to the Glessner House,” Giles said. “We’re trying to reconcile with the group and are willing to do some more.”

Despite PDNA’s opposition, Giles is encouraged by the number of sales to date.

“The public at large has embraced the project, and it’s been very successful from a marketing and sales standpoint,” he said.

Giles disagreed with the PDNA’s challenge to the project’s applications, stating the developer always has focused on full disclosure.

“The group is looking for a way to overturn the decision from Planning and Development,” he said. “I’m disappointed that no one has focused on the world-renowned architecture and that this will be an environmentally responsible building. We’re doing more than anyone has done in the South Loop.”

The City Council approved the X/O Towers last fall. The project is in the construction documents stage, with final plans being created. Giles said the developers expect to have permits this summer and break ground next year.

The City’s Department of Planning and Development (DPD) said that, although the PDNA objects to having two tall towers near the historic Prairie District, the property actually sits just north of the district and fits into the City’s plan for the South Loop for several reasons. For example, according to Constance Buscemi, DPD spokesperson, the X/O development will be down the block from other new—and taller—buildings, the corner will provide open space that is accessible and available to the community, the project will provide parking as required, and the development will be set back behind townhouses in accordance with the South Loop plan.

“Development means that you mix old with new—a mix of heights and density,” Buscemi said. “If you never developed anything, it would stay the same. You do not preserve a historic district by creating new buildings that mimic it but [by constructing ones] that are different so you don’t confuse historic buildings with recently erected buildings.”

Buscemi confirmed the developers completed the approval process in the correct manner by holding community meetings and going through the City Planning Commission and Zoning Committee, where the public can comment.

“It was an open, public process judged on its merits, and it was approved,” Buscemi said. “There was nothing inappropriate and no reason for investigation.”

Newly elected 2nd Ward alderman Bob Fioretti said he plans to review all the documents related the project, and he wants to work with Planning and Development, neighborhood organizations, and the developer to find resolutions among all parties.

“I will review what has already taken place and then form an opinion on the matter,” he said.