

Greetings fellow Verona residents,

This is an open letter to everyone who has contacted me regarding the proposed McKenzie development on Lot 36 of Harmony Hills. I'm writing to share what I'm finding, address some misconceptions and identify the most important factors that are influencing my decisions.

#1 – Thursday night's meeting

I was informed that an individual discouraged many of the Harmony Hills residents from attending McKenzie's open house meeting at Blackhawk Trails on Thursday night. This advice resulted in an important missed opportunity.

I attended specifically because I was very interested in listening to discussion between you and the developer. I also wanted to engage you and the developer simultaneously in face-to-face dialog. This sort of interaction is the best opportunity for people like me to analyze both sides of an issue and come to the best conclusions. As many of you know, open meetings laws prevented such interactions at the recent Common Council and Plan Commission meetings.

Two residents attended in addition to the developers and myself. We were able to discuss a few points of incorrect information that are going around the neighborhood. We also discussed options for building arrangement and traffic modification (see below). It was a useful meeting, but increased attendance would have been extremely valuable to both the developer and me.

#2 – Exceptions to "minimum standards"

A better way of phrasing this would be "maximum limitations." A major motivation for limits in quantities and sizes is to justify extra scrutiny placed upon larger and/or more complex developments. The scale of the McKenzie proposal allows us to put it through an extensive process known as Planned Unit Development (PUD).

The limits in the zoning code are not intended to declare a development to be "bad" nor "inconsistent with the City's goals." At the end of the day, the City simply wants more control over things that may have a larger impact.

#3 – Neighborhood sentiment

While opposition to the McKenzie development is strong, the residents of Harmony Hills are not unanimous. There are residents who feel that the points I'm raising here are of high enough priority to work together and find ways for the development to coexist with them. While it's true that the person with the largest mailing list is doing his best to cultivate a particular point of view, it's important that others not be drowned out of the discussion.

One of my own positions regarding utility boxes in my district was forwarded to numerous people, in lieu of focusing on my reaction to a proposed apartment building expansion immediately down the street from me. I supported that proposal because I felt it was of sufficient quality for the City of Verona overall and that the lot down the street from me was a reasonable place to put it. By contrast, I opposed a proposal by T. Wall Properties to significantly modify their much higher-density housing plan because I had far less faith in it playing out well in the long run.

#4 – The 2006 plan for Lot 36

A developer proposed it, the City gave permission to proceed and the developer eventually walked away from it. There is no conspiracy, lie or other attempt on the part of the City to mislead. That proposal is no longer on the table, and that was the developer's choice. The approval subsequently expired in early 2011.

I would be a bit concerned about the real estate agents, etc. who were telling people in 2010 and 2011 that the 2006 plan was what the future held. In my experience, any development plan that goes more than a couple years without moving soil is likely to undergo significant changes, or be abandoned completely.

#5 – Getting a new proposal similar to the 2006 plan

This is extremely unlikely. The construction of new owner-occupied multi-family developments is not economically viable, and will not be for quite a few years. The current landowner would have to be willing to hold out and sit on Lot 36 for a long time. Given the holding costs of the land and the fact that there are at least two apartment developers interested in purchasing it, I don't see them wanting to do this, and the City does not have the right to force it.

#6 – Getting a smaller apartment complex that attracts up-scale residents

This is also extremely unlikely. In order to offer the amenities, conveniences and high-quality buildings that up-scale residents want, there needs to be a concentration of responsible residents who are willing to pay top-shelf rental prices. If there aren't enough units, there isn't enough revenue to make the model work. A quantity of 96 units is already relatively small for a high-end development like the one that McKenzie is proposing in a location such as Verona.

#7 – Who is the other apartment developer that's interested?

We don't know and we won't know unless they choose to unveil themselves. Real estate offers are protected by a lot of confidentiality, particularly when they are in the pre-acceptance negotiation phase. However, I think it's a safe bet that the next developer is unlikely to attempt such an up-scale development because they can clearly see what's happening to McKenzie's proposal. Given the small quantity of top-shelf apartment developers versus the much greater quantity of no-so-top-shelf apartment developers in Dane County, the odds of getting another high-end proposal are further decreased. This will dramatically change the make-up of neighbors that end up living on Lot 36.

It's difficult to discuss the other potential outcomes for Lot 36 without having it sound like a scare tactic, but this is a reality that all of us in elected office must grapple with. If we decline this development and a less attractive one takes its place, everyone who is around 10 years from now will (rightfully) view us as having been shortsighted.

#8 – Attracting Epic employees to Harmony Hills

McKenzie's existing developments have already succeeded at attracting high percentages of Epic employees, and the ones I've talked with are very happy with the quality of life and services that they enjoy. I think it'll be even easier for the development in Harmony Hills to attract their target clientele.

#9 – Traffic

A multi-family development has always been planned for Harmony Hills, and the roads were designed to handle the traffic. Notice that Lucerne Dr itself has far fewer other driveways on it than many other residential streets throughout the City of Verona. Note also that Lucerne is not positioned to be an optimal through street for other traffic. It's designed to handle the multi-family development's traffic plus the small amount of other traffic on it.

A few folks have pointed out that the Blackhawk Trails development has its entrances on a major arterial roadway. That development is much larger than what McKenzie is proposing in Harmony Hills. I also believe that the City would be prohibited from adding an access point on to Highway M at this location. Nonetheless, I will request that direct access to Highway M be discussed when the General Development Plan is presented.

Keep in mind that the attraction of Epic employees to this development would help with the traffic concerns. The start time for an Epic employee's day is relatively flexible, as is the end time, so they will be spread out. A large percentage of Epic's employees travel throughout the week and there is a strong biking group. Both of these will decrease the number of cars per capita entering and leaving the development on a daily basis.

Some have noted the traffic backup getting out of Epic around 5pm every day. Much of this is allowed to happen in order to throttle the rate at which vehicles come out to area roads and arrive in nearby neighborhoods. The evening traffic backup will be at Epic's end of the line, rather than in Harmony Hills. It's a relatively minor inconvenience for Epic employees in the interest of being good neighbors on the area roads.

(Disclosure: I happen to also be an Epic employee. I personally witness the above two paragraphs on a daily basis.)

#10 – Parking

A resident at the Thursday meeting was surprised to learn that each of the three proposed apartment buildings would have underground parking. Each building includes almost one underground stall for every apartment, in addition to the surface stalls for a total of about 1.7 parking spots per housing unit. This is significantly above City of Verona minimum requirements for off-street parking.

#11 – Three-story building towering over the neighborhood

The developer plans to decrease the elevation at the north end of Lot 36, and a two-story building will go there rather than a three-story building. This is a direct response to neighbors being concerned about an apartment building "towering over" the neighborhood. This building will also be more aesthetically friendly because it has the clubhouse attached to it.

#12 – Change Lot 36 to single-family housing

This is another item that goes in the “very unlikely” category. The City of Verona has a policy of spreading multi-family housing units in pockets across all residential developments. This is intended to prevent broad expanses of land from being used for continuous high-density housing, like what many of you have objected to in Prairie Oaks. It also prevents large areas from being exclusively single-family housing, which draws objections from the bodies that the City needs to gain approval from in order to grow.

#13 – Trees buffering traffic noise from Highway M

Concern was expressed about the removal of trees on Lot 36, which help to absorb some of the traffic noise from Highway M. One of the limitations on the arrangement of the buildings comes from the developer’s attempts to preserve as many mature trees as possible. I’ll request that McKenzie provide additional details on the tree preservation success or difficulty when he presents his General Development Plan.

Keep in mind that the buildings themselves will also help to deflect traffic noise from Highway M.

#14 – Conclusion

I hope that this message helps to clear up some misconceptions that have occurred to date, and that it clearly illustrates why I am generally supportive of the McKenzie proposal. The entire City of Verona will benefit from using Lot 36 to provide a high-end housing product, and I believe that any negative impact to Harmony Hills from this particular proposal will be minimal.

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