

Historic town hall gets a modern neighbor

Contentious Germantown project advances despite design concerns



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The proposed 75-unit apartment building across Germantown Avenue from the now-shuttered high school has received mixed reactions.

IMAGE COURTESY OF CANNO DESIGN



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by **Tommy Tucker** (</browse.html?byline=Tommy Tucker>)

A 75-unit, 96,645-square-foot apartment project adjacent to Germantown’s historic Town Hall cleared a key hurdle on Nov. 6, progressing past the Civic Design Review Committee process after a contentious public meeting that highlighted concerns over its impact on the neighborhood.

The development at 5932-42 Germantown Ave., which conforms to current city zoning and requires no variances, triggered the CDR process due to its size. While CDR approval isn't mandatory for the project to proceed, developers are encouraged to work with the committee and community on large-scale developments, especially in historically significant areas like Germantown.

Project specifications

The plans shown at the last CDR meeting on Sept. 3 detail 21 two-bedroom units, 44 one-bedroom units and 10 studio apartments, representing a significant addition to the neighborhood's housing stock. The proposal includes 38 parking spaces for residents and 3,538 square feet of commercial space intended to enhance street-level activity.

Representatives from architectural firm Canno Design presented the detailed plans on behalf of developer IS JAM LLC, under Iron Stone Real Estate Partners, outlining their vision for the property's transformation.

Design and historic context

The site itself is significant. The original building, constructed in 1906 by Charles Engle Chipley, replaced the old Engle House which was moved to the rear of the lot.

It also sits directly next to Germantown Town Hall, which was built when Germantown was incorporated into Philadelphia in 1854. And across the street, the former Germantown High School, built in 1914, is undergoing its own transformation into a 238-unit residential project.

Sydney Conaway, an urban designer with the Philadelphia City Planning Commission's Art & Design division, praised the facade's northeast corner wrap of white brick and complained about the green metal siding used for the rest of the exterior. He asked for "the use of more high-quality materials for the entirety of the facade."

Preservationist and architectural historian Oscar Beisert said the design is out of character for the neighborhood.

"While this design isn't terrible, there's this massive box that's behind the three-story facade, it looks like a behemoth behind this sort of flimsy brick wall," he told the Local. "That area has a lot of public presence about it, you have that open park across the street and they benefit from the buildings around it that are landmarks. And then (the developer) just barely gives us anything to contribute to the quality of the historic district."

"Those windows look like a sort of motel that you would see along the side of an interstate," he continued. "And that paneling, just because it's like a nicer color than you usually see doesn't mean that it's something that's going to have long lasting quality."

Traffic and safety

A major point of contention involves the alley that accesses the rear parking area. After extensive community feedback and discussion, Canno Design widened the driveway from 12 to 17 feet to accommodate two-way traffic, addressing initial concerns about access.

"There was concern here that you could not have two-way traffic if someone was pulling out of this garage and onto Germantown Avenue and someone was also pulling from Germantown Avenue into the garage," said Devon Beverly, the firm's legal representative.

The driveway issue also affects emergency services. Because the intersecting Haines Street is one-way traffic, the Philadelphia Police 14th District station, located behind the proposed development, uses the alley to exit onto Germantown Avenue. Neighbors and CDR committee members have expressed serious concerns about potential interference with police response times.

Beverly said the company is communicating with the 14th Police District regarding access and coordination, it has presented no formal agreement. Julie Stapleton-Carroll, first vice president of West Central Germantown Neighbors, asked for concrete commitments and "a more formalized process and an actual written MOU (Memorandum of Understanding).

"It sounds to me like the conversations have been casual up to this point, and I'd like to see something more formalized," she said.

At the previous hearing, WCGN requested the careful preservation of the 1906 cornerstone and its contents, along with any other historically significant artifacts discovered during construction.

Beisert said the CDR process itself is flawed, as projects like this one aren't designed to help neighbors preserve the character of historically rich neighborhoods like Germantown. He thinks the committee should have more power to influence the designs of projects like this one.

"It's sort of a pointless process, you know, if they don't have any teeth," he said. "The view of Town Hall when you're coming south is going to be blocked by this massive building. I'm not saying nothing should be built there, but I do think it should be somewhat deferential to the historic context of this significant neighborhood."