



Breaking Old Ground

Midvale Project Has Lessons For Infill Sites To Come
Sequoia Commons Breaking Old Ground

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Neighbors wanted two-story (three at most) buildings with owner-occupied condominiums. They wanted a larger library and retail including a grocery store and pharmacy.

Developers wanted four stories with condos and rental units above an expanded library and retail stores.

What resulted was something in between.

Construction on Sequoia Commons - a project that will reshape the aging Midvale Plaza shopping strip, its surrounding neighborhoods and, possibly, the future of urban redevelopment in Madison - began earlier this month. Neighbors, developers and city officials this week toasted the milestone with locally made premium ice cream.

Getting to this point has been both contentious and instructive, those involved on both sides of the project explained.

"This has the potential to serve as a model for infill development," said developer Joe Krupp, who owns and is redeveloping the site along with Jack Kelly and sons Scott Kelly and pro golfer Jerry Kelly. "I feel confident that when it's done, people will see the merits of this project."

But the sting remains for some.

"People there are still angry, and they have a right to be," said Sandra Saul, a Sunset Village neighborhood resident who ran in the primary election this year for a City Council seat. "I was portrayed as against infill but I'm not against infill. It does need to be thoughtful, smart infill with input from neighbors."

Sequoia Commons is the first of 50 recommended infill development sites in the city's 2006 Comprehensive Plan to break ground, Krupp said. These sites exist on a map in the new plan meant to guide the city's future growth and are purposely not further identified.

It is also the first redevelopment of its kind in this particular neighborhood. As such, it provides an interesting case study in the city's ongoing support of urban infill development.

It's 1960s Madison meets new urbanism.

That's what made this project particularly fascinating, according to Madison Mayor Dave Cieslewicz.

"What you had there was infill development in a neighborhood that had not experienced a lot of development in the last several decades," Cieslewicz said. "I do think that now that we're over this and once people see the product, which I think they're going to like very much, it will be easier in the future."

The first phase of construction now underway at Sequoia Commons will include three stories of condominiums above a 20,000 square-foot library branch and 7,500 square feet of condos under two residential stories with 80 underground parking stalls and surface parking.

To reduce the appearance of height, upper levels contain a number of setbacks.



Phase II, expected to be approved later this year and begin construction in fall 2008, is proposed to include an additional 100 residential units above 10,000 square feet of ground-level retail space.

In addition, the also controversial mixed-use redevelopment of the Hilldale Shopping Center was already changing the landscape near this neighborhood.

"Any big project like this has a lot of neighborhood involvement. This one was more contentious," said Ald. Tim Gruber, who supported the politically charged Sequoia project.

But, according to Brandon Casto, a Westmorland resident who served on the neighborhood steering group for the project, some good came of the process.

The neighborhood is celebrating a significant increase in space at the popular Sequoia Branch library. The branch will nearly double, growing from 11,000 to 20,000 square feet. In addition, neighborhood residents learned much about the city's infill development approval process and how to work through it with city staff and developers.

"There was general miscommunication between all parties," Casto explained of the neighbors' main issue. "But we were able to walk away learning a lot so that going forward, there won't be the same level of tension."

The Westmorland neighborhood is in the initial phases of developing a neighborhood plan. The plan, which could be set for approval next year, would help guide future development in the area.

Redevelopment will happen in Madison, according to Jim LaGro, a University of Wisconsin-Madison professor of urban and regional planning. It's important for all parties to be engaged in discussion about redevelopment that has clear guidelines with the service of a skilled facilitator.

"In the best-case scenario, that dialogue can improve the redevelopment plan - partly, because the neighbors have a good understanding of many of the contextual issues that must be considered in planning for the site's redevelopment," LaGro said in an e-mail.

In addition to the library, Chocolate Shoppe Ice Cream has signed a lease and LaBrioche Bakery hopes to be part of the new retail component, expected to be ready for occupancy in about a year.

"We do consider ourselves the neighborhood bakery," said LaBrioche owner David Yankovich. "Now that there are so many setbacks to the condos, we'll hopefully have the ability to vent our ovens and open in Phase I."

Other retail possibilities, in both phases, include a restaurant, dry cleaner, coffee shop, wine shop and mail center.

Meanwhile, current shops and the library along Midvale Boulevard will remain open while construction progresses on the Tokay Boulevard side of the site.

"The parking is a pain in the butt. People go by and think we're not open," said Madison Public Library Director Barb Dimick. "We'll stay open until the day we move."

Dimick promises the wait and parking pain will be worth it.

When complete, the Sequoia library branch will be the largest branch library in the Madison Public Library system. In addition to a glass-enclosed corner reading area with fireplace and comfortable furniture, the library is adding many green elements and will apply for certification through the LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) green building standards program.

The library is one of the key residential amenities to Sequoia Commons, according to Karyl Lynn Bruckner, project manager with the Kellys' Avante Properties division. Several condominiums have been reserved in Phase I already, she said. Buyers have thus far been people who love the neighborhood but want to trade-in their single-family home for a condominium.