

MEMO

DATE: 22 October 2021
TO: Cranford Downtown Management Corporation
FROM: Thomas B. Connolly, AIA
Principal Architect
RE: South Avenue Redevelopment
Chestnut Street Redevelopment

Per the request of the Cranford Downtown Management Corporation (DMC), the firm has had an opportunity to review the concept drawings provided by Iron Ore Properties for the South Avenue and Chestnut Street Redevelopment projects. In general the overall architectural forms and massing are well placed and make sense for their sites. However, both projects exhibit a lack of regard for basic guiding architectural principals and for Cranford's downtown. Any new construction/development should be of quality design with the intent of being sympathetic to the architectural character of Cranford. The concept designs, as presented, are messy, have no clear architectural vocabulary, and would not add value to Cranford's downtown.

A building design is successful when the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, with each element sized, scaled and located in relation to the other building elements; therefore, successful design is more than a random assembling of pieces and parts. The goal of any good design is to create a building composition that is interesting yet not overwhelming and confused. The beauty of architecture comes from simplicity, hierarchy and the appropriate application of an underlining architectural grammar.

South Avenue Redevelopment

The overall design of the South Avenue Redevelopment in no way reflects or is compatible with the architecture of downtown Cranford. This building will add to the recently built or renovated apartment and commercial blocks in the downtown that are negatively impacting Cranford's architectural character. This is not to say all new buildings must match the existing or have to be Victorian in their architectural aesthetic; however, they should be articulated through proper proportion (the arrangement of parts of all the element to one another) and appropriate fenestration and fenestration patterns, and any associated detailing should align with one style rather than picking elements from various styles.

The majority of the existing and older commercial buildings in the downtown have been constructed with a visually discernible base, middle, and top. The two-part commercial block should be articulated in a manner that differentiates between how the building meets the ground, how intermediate floors are grouped, and how the top is resolved at the upper-most stories. The proposed South Avenue Redevelopment project has no clear base, middle and top as would be typical for a two-part commercial block.

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The relationship of solid to voids follows rules of structural integrity; load-bearing walls and elements should run from foundation to roof, with special consideration given to the strength of vulnerable areas such as the corners of the building. The structural elements in the proposed project are not properly articulated. For example, the center bay is articulated as four bays at the upper floors and three bays at the lower floor, therefore lacking any structural cohesion from grade to cornice. To bring order to a messy façade, the main structural elements (columns, piers, pilasters, etc.) should be vertically continuous. Structural elements can be articulated differently at the base from those at the upper levels but they should read as continuous.

The accentuation of the corner is superfluous, poorly designed and particularly ill-placed since it conflicts with the overhang present over the Starbucks at the southeast corner of South Avenue and High Street.

The cornice treatments, materials, windows, and overhang are at odds within the entirety of the building's composition. The window design and style, in particular, show a random assembly of window opening sizes, proportions and types, and lack a coherent relationship between openings. Applying a system of regulating lines across all of the openings and façade, as a whole, will help to create a harmonious composition. This ensures that all the elements of the elevation look coherent and relate to one another. Unless the architect has made a conscious design decision for this misalignment for a reason other than to look "different", all window heads and sills should align. From the ground level to the upper levels, there should also be a hierarchy in the window types while applying a unifying typology ; this will create an elevation that is dynamic and orderly.

The proposed South Avenue Redevelopment should reinforce the basic visual characteristics of the existing buildings in the downtown by incorporating the fundamental design elements noted above with contemporary stylistic trends. Designs for new buildings that are meant to be different just for the sake of being different should be discouraged. Modern interpretations of our existing downtown buildings are appropriate as long as they are stylistically distinguishable. For this project to be successful, Cranford needs to require buildings that are intelligently designed, understand precedent, and use local materials to create authentic, long-lasting, and timeless architecture that reflects a cohesive design intent.

Chestnut Street Redevelopment

The design for the Chestnut Street Redevelopment project is wholly inappropriate as an apartment block that serves as a transition between the commercial and residential sections of the downtown. In our opinion, the development should utilize an architectural vocabulary that is more in line with the residential context of the Walnut Avenue and High Street. The current design is an antithesis to the neighborhood, lacking a respect for its scale and materiality. While the South Avenue development could be more modern in its approach, this development should take on a more traditional architectural styling reflective of the residential neighborhood. As such, the design team should redesign the complex to incorporate a roofline other than a flat roof, use cladding materials such as siding or stucco with limited masonry, and has a massing that is more reflective of its neighborhood. Furthermore, the design team should undertake a careful analysis of the existing buildings surrounding the site to help determine the compatibility of form, height, proportion, size, scale, and roof shape. The overall architectural style is especially important to consider because it will have the most impact on the streetscape. A study of materials, details, and building features from the neighborhood will provide a vocabulary to draw on in designing a compatible building.

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Since the designs presented are only concepts, the firm recommends the DMC be given the opportunity to review the projects again once the designs have been revised and more detailed design development documents prepared.

Thank you for this opportunity to review the design concepts prepared for the South Avenue and Chestnut Street redevelopment projects. Please do not hesitate to contact me should you have any questions or require clarifications regarding the above.