

Jefferson Hospital Garage a better design, still in the wrong spot

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It is a shame that historic Philadelphia cannot seem to prevent garage creep from harming the fabric of Center City, that most walkable of downtowns.

Case in point: A plan for a nearly block-long, eight-story garage on Chestnut Street near Jefferson University Hospital chugs along. Chestnut is supposed to be the showplace street of Center City, not a parking lot.

But the hospital, along with Interpark Corp. of Chicago and local developer Lubert Adler Partners, won't be deterred.

The planning commission, despite objections from its professional staff, has signed off on the project. The project, which needs variances, is now before the Zoning Board of Adjustment, which at least has asked the developers to upgrade the garage to soften the impact on the streetscape. The zoning board has not scheduled a hearing on the latest design proposal.

There is no doubt Jefferson needs a garage; new parking is a key to its plan for a new research center. The point pressed by the Design Advocacy Group (DAG), an architects alliance, is that Jeff's goals could be met even if the garage were moved to the back of the block, so that it faced onto Sansom, a side street, not Chestnut.

The developers have heeded the ferment over the project in one way. Their architects, Bower Lewis Thrower, have decidedly improved the design of the garage facade on Chestnut Street. An artist's sketch suggests a more pedestrian-friendly design that does more to disguise the garage, while allowing for retail on the ground floor. The new plan also moves the exits and garage pickup off of Chestnut.

If one has to build a garage on Chestnut, this plan is clearly a well-intended improvement. But the main issue, of course, is whether the garage really has to go on Chestnut.

That question may never get a full airing. The developers probably have the clout in City Hall to get their plan approved.

But future citizens of Philadelphia may well wonder why the city's leaders back in 2003 made so many accommodations so that a monster garage could muck up one of Center City's main streets.

They'll wonder why the Street administration made no effort to work with the developers and Jefferson University Hospital to reimagine the project to meet their needs without erecting this 50-year mistake.

There has to be another way to help Jeff get its research center, while helping developer Dean Adler find the kind of foot traffic he needs to make a success of his brave renovation of the Victory Building catercorner to the site in question.

Why is it so crazy to expect City Hall, which in other parts of Center City seems eager to bail developers out of their mistakes, to offer planning and financial help so that Jefferson can speed up its long-range plan for an ambulatory care building on the same block as the garage? That way, the building could go on Chestnut where it belongs, with the garage on Sansom.

DAG has offered some creative ideas on how to do that. There may be others. Why not explore the possibilities, instead of settling for the second-rate?