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Developer Fern Hill's 36-story tower in Old Town approved by Plan Commission

Neighbors showed up in full force Thursday to voice their opposition to the residential project, sharing concerns over the compromise made between the developer and Ald. Brian Hopkins.

By **Abby Miller** Feb 21, 2025, 2:32am CET



Developer Fern Hill's [polarizing residential tower](#) in Old Town was approved by the Chicago Plan Commission on Thursday, despite lingering concerns from neighbors and community groups over the project's revised design.

Fern Hill and Ald. Brian Hopkins (2nd) had announced a compromise two weeks ago for the proposed development, Old Town Canvas, after Hopkins said in January that he'd reject the project. The compromise reduced the number of units in the building by 30% and the height by 20%.

But during a divided public comment session Thursday, some neighbors expressed their dissatisfaction with the timeline and lack of community input for the project's new vision. Others expressed concerns over traffic and density, while some residents applauded bringing more housing and transit improvements to the Old Town corridor.

The approval is the first city-level win for Fern Hill after it [began community discussions](#) for the project in 2021. Since then, dozens of community meetings — hosted both by Hopkins and Fern Hill — have taken place, and hundreds of letters voicing support or opposition to the project have been penned.

Chicago-based Fern Hill is proposing Old Town Canvas at 1600 N. La Salle Drive as part of its plan to redevelop portions of Old Town bounded by North Avenue, La Salle Drive and Clark Street. The project has spurred a commitment from Fern Hill to find a new grocer to replace the former Treasure Island grocery store, 1639 N. Wells St., along with a commitment from Walgreens to stay in the neighborhood.

A portion of the parking, created by the project, will be set aside for Moody Church. The church, 1635 N. La Salle Drive, will not be included in the redevelopment surrounding it.

Rich Klawiter, a lawyer with DLA Piper representing Fern Hill, said community outreach for the project was “exemplary.” More amenities were added, and the building's design was improved because of feedback from various stakeholders.

After reaching a compromise with Hopkins, the proposal shown by Fern Hill on Thursday was a 36-story residential tower, which would include 349 apartments and up to 285 parking spaces. Fern Hill's proposal in January had 500 units and 450 parking spaces.

Of the 349 units, 70 will be affordable at a weighted average of 60% of the area median income. The building will contain a mix of studios, one-bedroom, two-bedroom and three-bedroom units.

The tower will include six floors for parking, according to Fern Hill's presentation. The rooftop will have indoor and outdoor amenities, including a pool, fitness center and lounge.

There's no confirmed grocer, but Fern Hill has said it's committed to finding one.

Several neighborhood groups, including Old Town Friends for Responsible Development, are opposed to the development and were angry over the lack of community input on the compromised plans. Old Town Merchants & Residents Association said in a recent statement that the compromise was "unbeknownst" to them, but they would support the project if certain conditions were met.

Philip Graff has lived in Old Town for almost 40 years. He's a past board member and president of community group Old Town Triangle Association.

Graff said Thursday he's "deeply disappointed" with how Old Town Canvas was changed, including the traffic study and lack of community feedback.

He said the traffic study "makes no sense" and the overall process has been full of misdirection.

"[Fern Hill claims] to be listening to community concerns, but when we talk about the height and density and traffic flow, they tell us they're going to change the color of the building," Graff said.

While some neighbors echoed Graff's concerns, others voiced the need for more housing in the neighborhood and the much-needed traffic investments

the project would bring. Fern Hill will cover the costs of traffic improvements, including new dedicated bus and turn lanes.

One resident said the project drew parallels from another hotly-debated item on Thursday's agenda — [a land use framework plan](#) for a stretch of Broadway in Uptown and Edgewater. The plan aims to encourage more housing and businesses, along with housing along transit lines.

Tom Cuculich, executive director of the Chicagoland Associated General Contractors, said the Old Town project has been properly examined and the city desperately needs it. Developers are looking at cities like Nashville, Austin and Orlando to build, Cuculich said, and Chicago needs to “get back to the economic development vitality that we once had.”

“[Old Town Canvas] is a type of economic development that is needed in this great city of Chicago,” Cuculich said. “We used to have 60 cranes in the sky in the city. We now have less than five.”

Fern Hill estimates the project will create more than 1,000 construction jobs and more than \$10 million in Cook County tax revenue.

Hopkins was present at the meeting to voice his support for the project and address community concerns about the compromise.

“It is a smaller building, period,” Hopkins said. “That is real; that is significant; and that is important. And I believe that that is the best deal we can get as a community.”

Hopkins said his office will help lead conversations between Fern Hill's team and community groups like Old Town Merchants & Residents Association, which shared a list of conditions it wants Fern Hill to meet. Some of the items on the list — like prohibiting vacation rentals and the use of third-party parking platforms like SpotHero — have already been agreed to.

“Everybody who is opposed to this project right now comes to their opposition in good faith,” Hopkins said. “You heard a lot of people who love their neighborhood as much as I do — they just happen to disagree on this particular project, and there's room for that.”