



Issued May 17, 2024

DESIGN REVIEW ADVISORY COMMITTEE
*****SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES*****
THURSDAY, MAY 9, 2024
ROOM 407, TOWN HALL, WEST HARTFORD, CT

Call to Order/Roll Call: 4:30 P.M.

DRAC ATTENDANCE: Vice Chair, Hugh Schweitzer; Members: Brian Flemming & Jenna McClure;
Alternates: David Hines & Jim Lawler

ABSENT: Ray Giolitto & Elizabeth Pang

Staff: Todd Dumais, Town Planner & Brian Pudlik, Senior Planner

REFERRAL FROM THE TOWN PLANNER:

1. **1800 Asylum Avenue** – Study session preparatory to the submission of a potential new Special Development District application for the redevelopment of the western portion of the former UConn campus located at 1800 Asylum Avenue. The applicant contemplates the redevelopment to include the demolition of all existing buildings and the construction of twelve (12) new buildings, including commercial / mixed-use and residential, a new private roadway and surface parking lots along with associated site improvements, including landscaping pedestrian pathways and site drainage.

T. Dumais – Town Planner - Provided a brief introduction and background of the project and the DRAC's involvement up to this point. He noted the project's prior connection to 1700 Asylum Ave, which was recently received approval by Town Council for a zone change and Special Development District designation for the construction of multi-family residential housing.

B. Fischer – Project Architect, provided a general overview of the changes to the plans that have taken place since the last study session with the DRAC.

L. Gilmore Project Architect, presented a detailed walkthrough of the site plan, sections and renderings previously seen by the Committee and compared those to the current plan. Ms. Gilmore utilized both a PowerPoint presentation and a 3-D interactive computer model to “walk” the Committee through the project site and answer questions.

M. Bruton – Project Engineer, noted the development team learned a great deal from the wetlands and SDD permitting process at 1700 Asylum Avenue and made a number of changes to 1800 Asylum Avenue. He next highlighted those changes for the Committee including:

- *Wetland impacts have been reduced by eliminating pathways and observation decks from wetland areas;*

- *Impervious area has been reduced by shrinking drive aisles and parking space depths throughout the project site, in addition to proposing permeable pavers along the westerly boundary of the parking lots;*
- *General increase in the buffers to the wetland areas;*

Mr. Bruton also noted that the height and scale of the townhomes on Asylum shrunk slightly from the prior plan, but the ones on Lawler increased slightly to accommodate integrated garages. This change on Lawler allowed the team to provide backyards for the townhomes as well as more area to screen this portion of the property from the commercial and mixed-use buildings.

J. McClure – DRAC member, commented that the height and massing of the new townhome layout on Asylum appeared dramatically higher than in the previous plan. After this comment, a discussion around the grading plan and the fact that substantial fill is planned to be brought in to address the east to west upward slope of Asylum occurred. The design team indicated they would review design alternatives that would not necessitate as much fill, perhaps by stepping or breaking the building.

L. Gilmore added that the townhomes on Lawler would hold the 30' building line setback and are now proposed at 30'-11" to the peak of the roofline. Regarding the area east of the townhomes on Lawler, Ms. Gilmore noted that the proposed planting berm has been raised where possible with additional plantings to better screen the grocery store and to comply with Town screening requirements. Mr. Bruton indicated that where a larger berm was not possible, fencing could be incorporated.

Regarding building materials and aesthetic, Ms. Gilmore noted that the assisted living facility would be comprised of wood-look paneling, masonry and brick. For the mixed-use buildings, their intent is to maintain a consistent aesthetic across all commercial tenant spaces. The intent is to create a "more modern interpretation" than Blue Back Square's treatment of facades, where each is unique. She then showed a fly-through presentation of the whole project site.

H. Schweitzer – DRAC member and Vice-Chair, asked the team what elements of the project they view as most unfinished. Mr. Bruton indicated that much of the work on the civil plans has been completed by virtue of the currently pending wetland permitting process. On the architecture side, Mr. Fischer stated that scale and location of buildings is relatively set, but more work needs to be done to refine the design and detailing of each building.

J. McClure then reiterated her concern that the proposed grading on Asylum results in townhomes that are substantially out of scale with the neighborhood and create a sense that the buildings are looming over the existing homes.

H. Schweitzer asked whether options exist to use retaining walls to more favorably manipulate grade. Mr. Fischer they would look both at options to retain as well as stepping the building.

J. McClure then commented that the team should consider eliminating the section of walkway that separates the southerly parking area on Asylum from the townhomes, as it feels out of place and compromises the private yard space the team is trying to create. Regarding the spa building, she raised a concern that such a use does not lend itself to a space that is publicly used and that the design of the building, with so much glass and visibility into the it, the team should reconsider the use of the ground floor to one that would draw more people in. Finally, Ms. McClure asked what design elements would tie the project together.

In response, Ms. Gilmore stated that a restaurant connected to the spa may be a viable option on the ground floor of the spa building. Regarding tying the buildings together, they intend to use a similar color palette of warm tones and through the use of faux wood paneling.

B. Flemming – DRAC member, asked what happened to the paths on the west side of the project site. Mr. Bruton stated that wetland considerations led to the removal of those paths. Mr. Flemming then reiterated the importance of active uses in buildings 3 & 4 where community engagement could take place.

D. Hines – DRAC member, suggested that the team look at eliminating the westerly lobe of the parking lot at the southwest corner of the property. He commented that there is greater value in the open space than the parking spaces in that area. Instead, he suggested reconfiguring the parking area by better utilizing the proposed green space adjacent to the spine roadway. Regarding the Townhomes on Asylum, agreed that they are too massive and need to be reduced in scale. Also noted that their gable ends are too large and should be articulated architecturally and that the use of vertical siding seemed contextually inappropriate.

J. Lawler – DRAC member, stated that the grocery store building is too big and its operations would be disrespectful to the neighborhood and as a use does not fit within the context of the site or the adjacent neighborhood.

Next, Mr. Schweitzer summarized his comments in the context of the DRAC's Performance Criteria:

Relationship of the Buildings to the Site:

He stated that he is pleased with the alignment of the proposed spine road with Fox Meadow Lane, but questioned whether a westbound turn lane was required on Asylum. Mr. Bruton indicated that it is a requirement per their Traffic Engineer.

Relationship of Buildings and Site to Adjoining Area:

There is a desirable transition with the existing streetscape at the macro scale, but at the micro level, there are aspects of the townhome design that need more work. The flat roofs at the ends of the buildings are incompatible with the existing homes on the street, especially because no flat roofs are present in any of the existing adjacent architecture. Additionally, he noted that on the townhomes, specifically buildings 7a & 7b, the gable ends are too massive and have too much siding. Ms. Gilmore

agreed and stated that they are looking at ways to reduce that massing or add more articulation to that façade.

Regarding the grocery building, Mr. Schweitzer made the following comments:

- As cited multiple times during the previous eight study sessions, the grocery store is not harmonious with existing adjoining single-family residences.
 - This building type brings issues that the existing surrounding residents do not currently live with.
 - A loading dock is a quasi-industrial element.
 - Trash and cardboard compactors.
 - Daily deliveries.
 - Commercial trash removal nearly daily.
 - The successful resolution of these elements is influenced by architectural and site design performance, both of which are criteria set forth by the Town for DRAC.
 - Sheets A23 and A24 (view from Lawler Road) show a barely perceptible change in the visibility of the north façade. The proposed façade is still massive and the façade design is an unbroken plane that seems to ignore that this elevation is also a “front” as seen from Lawler Road.
 - If the grocery store is a critical element in the success of the project, might it serve you well to move it to the deepest part of the site to develop the maximum separation from existing residences? *Or, if the grocery has to stay in its present location, could it be rotated 90 degrees.*

Mr. Fischer stated that relocating the store elsewhere on the site would be challenging given the other priorities of their client. Regarding rotating the building, Mr. Fischer stated that the space required to accommodate the loading dock and associated truck turning movements make another orientation impractical and less desirable. Mr. Fischer did acknowledge that the north side of the building could be improved and they would look to do so.

Building Design:

Regarding buildings 3, 4 & 6, the two commercial buildings and the assisted living building, Mr. Schweitzer stated that all three appear to be volumetric studies at this stage and need further development. He further stated that ground floor plans would be helpful for all buildings to better understand how back-of-house activities would be integrated into the site, particularly because many of the proposed buildings have multiple “fronts”. Lastly, regarding those buildings, he asked whether the team had considered adaptive reuse of buildings 3 & 4, should the Use-Group Classification change in the future.

Site Treatment:

Mr. Schweitzer stated that the circulation of pedestrians should be the priority within the development and that there should be a consistent treatment of walkways that is visually distinct from drive aisles, such as pavers or stamped concrete.

Landscaping:

At this stage, the plans do not provide enough detail on landscaping for the DRAC to opine. Mr. Schweitzer did indicate that once the plans do provide those details, he would like Committee Member Liz Pang to comment.

Signs:

Mr. Schweitzer asked that the team provide additional information on proposed signage and requested that any signage and storefront guidelines being developed for the development be provided to the DRAC for review.

Maintenance:

Mr. Schweitzer stated that all building materials used within the “reach range” should be durable, such as masonry or brick. No EIFS. Ms. Gilmore confirmed that they would be.

Mr. Dumais commented that certain elements of the mixed-use buildings, particularly building 2 are “busy” and perhaps unresolved particularly at the building’s interior corner along the spine road. He then commented, a comment he noted he has provided in past meetings and to the design team that the two easternmost townhomes on Asylum, are out of place in the context of the development and the expansive wetlands park that the design team is so carefully trying to create. Mr. Dumais suggested that consideration should be given to removing one or both of these buildings, to allow for a consistent, uninterrupted open space corridor from Asylum Avenue north through the site. He added, in his opinion, this would not only provide this area with a pleasant natural viewshed, much like exists today, and would also take pressure off the wetland to the east.

Mr. Hines also supported this and stated that one or both of the easternmost townhome buildings could be eliminated to the benefit of the site.

Mr. Dumais noted that the DRAC would be available for future informal study session when the design team was ready to do so.

No formal actions or further discussion on the matter was taken.

APPROVAL OF MEETING MINUTES:

1. February 22, 2024 – **No action taken**

COMMUNICATION

3. None

TOWN PLANNER’S REPORT:

4. None

ADJOURNMENT: 6:06 PM

Cc: Rick Ledwith, Town Manager
Dallas Dodge, Corporation Counsel

Duane Martin, Community Development Director
Leon Davidoff, Town Clerk