



Issued January 7, 2025

DESIGN REVIEW ADVISORY COMMITTEE
*****REGULAR MEETING MINUTES*****
THURSDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2024
ROOM 400, TOWN HALL, WEST HARTFORD, CT

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

DRAC ATTENDANCE: Chair, Ray Giolitto; Vice-Chair, Hugh Schweitzer; Committee Members, Brian Flemming & Jenna McClure. Alternates: David Hines

ABSENT: Committee Member Liz Pang & Alternate Jim Lawler

Staff: Todd Dumais, Town Planner, Brian Pudlik, Senior Planner & Robert Gosselin, Associate Planner

REFERRAL FROM THE TOWN COUNCIL:

1. **29 Highland Street:** Application filed on behalf of Vessel RE Holdings LLC and Vessel Technologies, Inc., contractor purchaser of 29 Highland Street, for change of zone of approximately 2.3 +/- acres of the site from a RI single-family zone to a RM-1 multifamily residence district with Special Development District Designation overlay for the redevelopment of the site into a new 112 unit multifamily residential development which will qualify as a “set-aside development” under General Statutes Section 8-30g. Associated parking and site amenities are also proposed. *(One prior informal study session held on this project in August, 2024)*

B. Pudlik – Senior Planner – Introduced the application.

J. Levy – Applicant – Provided an in-depth review of the proposed project by noting the following:

- ***The modern aesthetic of the proposed building is similar to that of Bristow Middle School on the opposite side of the street.***
- ***Other multi-family uses are currently present on both Highland Street and on Farmington Avenue to the south, making the proposed zone change and use contextually appropriate.***
- ***The height and massing of the proposed building is similar to that of neighboring multi-family residential properties.***
- ***The placement of the building close to Highland Street is respectful of surrounding properties, particularly the single-family homes to the west, by establishing a wide buffer. Mr. Levy noted that the existing Hugh’s Health and Rehabilitation building covers virtually all of the lot and is immediately adjacent to the westerly property boundary with almost no buffer to the homes on Concord Street.***
- ***The proposed unit mix is 60 percent one-bedroom, 30 percent two-bedroom and 10 percent three-bedroom.***

- *Based on DRAC feedback from the prior study session, the double open-air entry vestibule is facing Highland Street to establish a more inviting street presence.*
- *Regarding the trash enclosure, the team is exploring location options based on feedback from property owners on Concord Street. The intent is to locate the enclosure(s) as far away from the westerly property boundary as possible, while still providing access for trash hauling vehicles.*
- *Regarding landscaping, extensive plantings are proposed around the perimeter of the property, including several native-species street trees along the Highland Street frontage.*
- *Regarding site lighting, all fixtures are full cut-off and solar powered.*
- *A shadow study was conducted, which showed no impact to adjacent properties.*

Mr. Levy went on to describe the unique construction methodology for Vessel, noting that all building components are manufactured off-site and are trucked in, then assembled on-site. In doing so, the timeframe to complete the building is substantially faster than traditional construction and produces very little waste at the project site. The building is also more environmentally friendly than traditional construction in that all building materials can be recycled if needed, the building is fully solar powered, all walls are highly insulated making the building extremely energy efficient and all fixtures are high efficiency, low-flow, which reduces water usage throughout the building.

R. Giolitto – DRAC Chair – Asked Mr. Levy to confirm that the entry vestibule will definitely be on the east side of the building, as there appears to be a discrepancy in the plans with some showing the entry on the west side of the building. Mr. Levy confirmed that the entry will be on the east side and stated that they would review the plans to ensure an accurate depiction of that proposal.

Mr. Giolitto then questioned whether the entry vestibule and the stairwell inside would be white as shown in the renderings. He noted his observation of the Vessel New London project where the entry vestibule and stair were uncoated galvanized steel, which is a dramatically different aesthetic what is depicted in the project renderings being presented. Mr. Levy indicated that he would check on that to confirm.

Also regarding the entry vestibule, Mr. Giolitto asked whether any mechanical equipment would be located in the space, as is the case in New London. Mr. Levy said all mechanicals would be enclosed within a closet and not visible.

H. Schweitzer – DRAC Vice-Chair – Began by asking that Mr. Levy provide night time renderings in addition to renderings from a human perspective to be presented at a follow up DRAC meeting. Both will give the Committee and a more comprehensive view of the project.

Mr. Schweitzer then asked whether anything would be installed on the exterior of the building, such as lighting, security cameras, etc. Mr. Levy indicated that camera systems will be used for security, but they will not be installed on the outside of the building. He also added that no exterior building-mounted lighting is proposed.

Mr. Schweitzer asked whether there are any tonal variations available for the exterior rain screen color. Mr. Levy indicated that a wood-look panel is available but was unable to say definitively whether other color options are possible. He indicated he would check.

B. Flemming – DRAC member – Asked how the building entries would be lit for passersby if no building-mounted lighting is proposed. Mr. Levy was unsure, but indicated that the team would review options.

J. McClure – DRAC member – Stated that the placement of the building does not respect the adjacent buildings to the north or south with its proposed position being so much further forward (to the east). She suggested that the team prepare a rendering looking north on Highland to get a sense of how that will feel from that perspective. Ms. McClure stated a concern that the building will feel very imposing that far forward of the neighboring buildings, but would reserve final judgment until a rendering was prepared to show that perspective.

E. LaBatte – Project Engineer – Stated that they would explore options to shift the building further to the west, but that the grade of the property makes positioning the building challenging to adjust.

J. McClure – DRAC member – Also expressed concern regarding pedestrian safety within the proposed parking area with no refuge islands or defined walking paths through the lot. She encouraged the applicant to consider user experience with a priority towards safety.

D. Hines – DRAC member – Stated that the building looks like a “brutalist iceberg” given its monolithic shape and monotone white color palette. Mr. Hines went on to express concerns over the building’s height and massing and suggested that a three-story building would be a better fit for the neighborhood. To further the point, Mr. Hines noted that residents on Concord Street would have to look at a 40-foot wall right in their backyard, which is not desirable. As a suggestion to break up the apparent massing at the rear of the building, Mr. Hines questioned whether the double-wide corridor could be extended all the way through the building.

Regarding the shadow study, Mr. Hines noted that it did not capture the shadows the building will create to the west around the winter solstice. He stated that shadows would likely be impactful for residents on Concord Street during that time of year and asked that the team update their study to verify.

Regarding exterior material treatment, Mr. Hines noted a preference for incorporating wood paneling elements into the façade to break up the monolithic white box.

R. Giolitto – DRAC Chair – Asked whether the change in grade from west to east causes any portion of the foundation wall to be exposed in some areas more than in others. Mr. LaBatte stated that it would not; that the building must sit flat and will have approximately 6” of foundation wall exposed around the entire building.

Regarding the appearance of the secondary exit stair towers on the north and south ends of the building, Mr. Giolitto asked whether those would also be white. Mr. Levy stated that they would be.

Regarding the overall number of parking spaces, Mr. Giolitto asked whether the proposed number is necessary or could fewer parking spaces be provided. Mr. Levy stated that the ratio is currently 1.23 per dwelling unit, but will look to reduce if possible.

Finally, Mr. Giolitto asked what the width of the planted strip is between the west side of the building and the parking area in order to determine whether there is an opportunity to push the building further to the west. Mr. LaBatte stated that the width of that strip is 15 feet.

H. Schweitzer – DRAC Vice Chair – Asked whether there is a parapet above the roofline and whether the solar panels would be visible from the ground-level. Mr. Levy stated that there is a parapet wall and the solar system will be screened from view behind it.

Regarding the position of the building, Mr. Schweitzer asked whether the southern half of the building could be shifted further west to provide some articulation of the building plane. Mr. Levy and Mr. LaBatte indicated that they would review whether that was possible.

J. McClure – DRAC member – Encouraged the team to review all options for color variation on the exterior wall panels.

R. Giolitto – DRAC Chair – Asked whether the applicant would be willing to come back from one additional meeting with the Committee to address issues discussed during this meeting. Mr. Levy stated that they would be happy to come back.

APPROVAL OF MEETING MINUTES:

2. Minutes from the November 14, 2024 Special Meeting: ***Motion; Hines /Second; McClure. Approved***

COMMUNICATION

3. Approval of Annual Calendar – 2025 DRAC Meeting and Filing Dates: ***Motion; McClure /Second; Hines. Approved***

TOWN PLANNER'S REPORT:

4. Discussion on proposed changes to the height of “building 4” at 1800 Asylum Avenue

After reviewing the proposed change to the building height, the DRAC concluded that there is no material change to the overall proposal and it would not impact the Committee's formal recommendation of the project to the Town Council.

ADJOURNMENT: 6:00 PM

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

Duane Martin, Community Development Director
Leon Davidoff, Town Clerk