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June 3, 2016

Jesse Geller
Zoning Board Appeals

Re: 40 Centre Street
Comprehensive Permit Application

Chairman Geller,

Although the project site is located within a multifamily district and can sustain increased density, the Planning Board has specific concerns about the site plan, massing, and building design proposed for this project. With revisions the project could fit into the scale and character of the neighborhood. The Planning Board offers the following recommendations to better integrate the development into the surrounding neighborhood.

A Georgian Revival structure built in 1922, it was deemed architecturally significant by the Preservation Commission, with the one-year demolition delay expiring this summer. Although adaptive reuse should be given some consideration, the Planning Board recognizes the challenges of doing so successfully in this case. Nonetheless, the front façade offers good inspiration for designing human scale architectural elements that could lend a welcoming residential quality to the development.

Overview of Recommendations

- Reduce height by at least one full story
- Increase front yard setback to 15 feet to improve visibility at driveway and maintain existing modal setback pattern
- Retain location of existing driveway (and increase its width to 20 feet) to offset traffic conflicts. This also has the advantage of creating more distance between the leftside rowhouse and proposed building.
- Consider exchanging ground level parking with rear yard surface parking to be consistent with development pattern
- Articulate the building through use of bays, for example, to reduce massing
- Use warmer building materials, borrow architectural elements from the 2.5 story neighborhood
- Increase rear yard setback to avoid diminishing rear abutters' outdoor amenities.
- Achieve a more practical parking ratio

Public Safety and Design of Off-Street Parking

Visibility: Section 6.04 of the Brookline zoning by-law regulates the design of off-street parking areas.

The proposal might not comply with the regulation under this section “designed to ensure maximum and vehicular safety.” This regulation is provided below:

“Adequate sight distance so that exiting vehicles have a clear view of any pedestrian on the sidewalk within a minimum of five (5) feet to either side of the entrance of exit drive from six (6) feet behind the property line and along the centerline of the driveway.” [Sec. 6.04.4.f.1]

It is not clear how far the garage door is set back from the front lot line. From drawings, the garage door appears to be too close to the sidewalk, which is a safety concern. In addition, the front yard setback remains merely two feet, which could compromise driver visibility in the cone of vision that is set forth in the regulation above. In a district known for heavy pedestrian traffic, this potential safety hazard is a primary concern. To ensure pedestrian safety, the Board strongly recommends increasing the front yard setback of the building.

In addition, the proposed driveway is directly aligned with the very active two-way driveway that leads to the public Coolidge Corner parking lot across from the project site. The Board anticipates traffic conflicts where the two driveways align with each other and intersect Centre Street. To resolve this potential conflict, note that the existing driveway is offset to the left of the driveway leading to the public parking lot, so that they do not align. The driveway at the 70 Centre Street apartments also employs this technique. Furthermore, note that the entrance to its garage is stepped back considerably from the front lot line. The Board recommends retaining the driveway in the existing location, increasing the width of the existing driveway to 20 feet, and expanding surface parking at the rear of the lot to greatly improve vehicular circulation and ensure public safety.

Retaining the location of the existing driveway and expanding it to 20 feet wide would also increase the space between the sidewalls of the rowhouse to the left and the proposed structure; thereby providing safer access to emergency responders. The plan proposes a mere 8 feet between the sidewalls of the projecting bay of the rowhouse and the new building. In addition, the rowhouse on the left has about 10 windows on the side wall facing the proposed building. Increasing space in this area would improve access to more light and air resources to the left abutter.

It is also worth considering that a surface parking area in the rear might better accommodate an infiltration system that so far has not been designed for this plan in accordance with the Town’s stormwater management bylaw.

Front Yard Parking: The street-facing garage entrance is set back 15 feet from the front line, and therefore is not in compliance with Table 5.01, Footnote 1, which specifies a setback of 20 feet. In addition, the ground floor parking level not only adds to the considerable height of the structure, the street-facing garage door also lends a very commercial, rather than residential, appearance to a property that should serve as a transition between the smaller scale residential dwellings to the right and the rowhouse to the left. Expanding the parking area at the rear of the site and eliminating the ground floor parking level will help achieve a more residential quality in addition to enhancing public safety.

Context and Streetscape

In addition to relocating the parking area to the rear, other factors should be addressed to better integrate this project into the surrounding context. Before outlining these factors, the Board feels it is critical to define the surrounding context appropriately.

The parcel is within the M-1.0 (multifamily) district that is surrounded by other multifamily districts of

gradually increasing density (F-1.0, M-1.5 and M-2.0) and the General Business district of G-1.75(CC). It can be said that the parcel itself serves as a transition property among these diverse zoning districts and building typologies.

However, if one analyzes key land-use metrics—such as height and setback—of the parcels on both sides of Centre Street, between 30 Centre (the left abutter) and the Williams Street intersection, we can derive some general design principles that define this streetscape to apply to the proposed project. (Note: The Coolidge Corner Interim Planning Overlay Guidelines expired in 2007 and are no longer applicable. However, the design principles espoused in this guide are still a practical reference.)

Scale, Height, and Setbacks: While it is correct that several buildings in this multifamily district are mid-rise structures, that fact alone does not justify a project that is nearly 70 feet tall at this location with five-foot side yard setbacks. In general, the taller buildings in this area have deeper setbacks in proportion to their excessive heights.

1. Between 30 Centre Street and the Williams Street intersection, the majority of the multifamily buildings do not exceed 45 feet tall. Some of the notable exceptions are the two mid-rise apartment buildings at 70 Centre Street and 40 Williams Street, which are 80 feet and 60 feet tall, respectively. Note that 70 Centre Street has deep front and side yard setbacks to offset the impact of the building's massing and height, atypical for these two blocks of Centre Street. 40 Williams Street is a corner lot of an active intersection, which is an appropriate location for increased density. Similarly, the mixed use complex at the intersection of Centre Street and Beacon Street, at 60 feet tall, fronts Beacon, a multi-lane major thoroughfare. The high-rise to the rear of the project site, 19 Winchester Street, features a 100-foot distance between that building and the one currently at 40 Centre. Despite the parking lot to the right of the project site, the Board feels that reducing the building's height would better integrate the project into the neighborhood and improve shadow impacts on the streetscape itself.
2. Although the height of the rowhouse to the left is 45 feet high, its hipped roof articulates the massing such that one perceives the overall height to be lower, at the cornice line. The proposed building only emphasizes its six story massing with the addition of the parapet.
3. Most important and unfortunately overlooked in the applicant's presentation are the Victorian-style homes that line both sides of these two to three blocks of Centre Street. Despite the range of individual building typologies in this and the abutting zoning districts, these 2.5 story dwellings are carefully conserved structures that characterize the streetscape and sight lines within this area of Centre Street.
4. The minimum front yard setbacks on both sides of Centre Street between addresses 30 through 75 is about 20 feet—with 25 feet being the median setback on the two blocks regardless of building type (low-rise and mid-rise apartment buildings, rowhouses, 2.5 story homes). The 80 foot building at 70 Centre exceeds the maximum height requirement by 30 feet; however, it features a 45-foot front yard setback in proportion to its excessive height. To better integrate a project with increased density, the Board recommends increasing the building setback so that it complies with the minimum zoning requirement of 15 feet for at least a majority of the front yard. The 15 foot setback is still well under the median for these two blocks.

While the Board acknowledges the function of the project site as a transition property, it strongly feels that the 2.5 story residential neighborhood serves as a primary reference. To function as a successful transition, the development should incorporate a deeper front yard setback and more landscaping and a

reduction in building height. The Board recommends eliminating at least one full story from the proposed building so that the overall height does not exceed 55 feet (exchanging ground level parking with rear-yard surface parking is one solution).

Although the complex at 19 Winchester features a 60 foot rear yard setback, the Board notes the location of pool amenities in the rear yard close to the lot line. Increasing the rear yard setback is a reasonable consideration to avoid diminishing the quality of the abutters' outdoor amenities.

Massing, Architectural Elements, and Materials: Borrowing elements from the surrounding neighborhood is another technique to better integrate a project with increased density.

For example, the use of fiber cement panels, metal balconies, and cool tones only heightens the development's contrast with the traditional 2.5 story homes. The articulation of the building further emphasizes its verticality and excessive height. One of the charms of the Georgian Revival building on the site is the gracious bay window, which lends a welcoming dimension and human scale to the front façade. Although a modern-style building could be elegant in this setting, the Board recommends more articulation on the front façade, a lower ceiling height on the ground floor, and warmer tones and materials.

Parking Ratio

The parking ratio of 0.38 seems impractical, even for this highly walkable neighborhood. If one were to apply the following conservative formula, which deviates considerably from zoning requirements, the project would need 30 parking spaces, or a ratio of 0.67.

- 0 parking space for the 5 studio units
- 0.5 parking space for the 20 one-bedrooms
- 1 parking space for the 15 two-bedrooms and 5 three-bedrooms

If recommendations to reduce building massing and increase setbacks are considered, it is very likely that the project could achieve a more practical ratio of parking spaces to dwelling units.

Additional Materials

In addition to the required drawings and full size plans drawn to scale, the Planning Board recommends a digital 3D model that provides perspectives from the abutting properties at ground level, and first-, and second story heights and sight lines from both ends of Centre Street and across from the project site at pedestrian level. The Board recommends winter views (without landscaping).

The Board usually receives shadow studies that enable it to view shadow impacts throughout a 24-hour period, four times a year. It requests a similar animation file from the applicant.

Sincerely,



Linda Hamlin, Chairman