



Town of Brookline *Massachusetts*

PLANNING BOARD

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July 16, 2016

Mr. Jesse Geller
Zoning Board Appeals

Re: 420 Harvard Street
Comprehensive Permit Application

Chairman Geller:

The Applicant is proposing to replace an existing 1- to 2.5-story building with ground level office space and residential units on the upper floor with a six-story mixed-used development consisting of 36 rental residential units above ground floor retail or office and 23 garaged parking spaces and 6 surface parking spaces.

The Planning Board acknowledges that the applicant has made some positive changes to the design since it was submitted to the subsidizing agency; namely, stepping back floors 3 through 6 on the sides facing the two-family neighborhood and adding a modest open-space area (about 1000 sf) at the northeast corner of the site abutting that neighborhood.

Even with revisions, however, the building ostensibly covers over 90% of the site, imposing impacts on both the commercial streetscape and the two-family neighborhood. The Planning Board strongly feels that the footprint should be decreased and the massing should be further articulated to improve neighbors' viewsheds and better integrate the project along Harvard Street. The parking plan and ratio seem unrealistic, especially in regard to sustaining the demands of both retail and residential uses. In addition, the automated stacker parking system needs to be analyzed more thoroughly for auditory and vibrational impacts, as well as its feasibility.

Driveway Design, Parking System and Requirements

The Planning Board strongly feels that the stacker system is both unrealistic and potentially noisy. The entrance of the stacking system would be close to the entrance of the driveway, where there is no accommodation on the site for queuing vehicles. In addition, it is not clear much how a driver's visibility is impaired with this site plan. Will drivers exiting the stackers onto the driveway have sufficient view of drivers entering the driveway?

Also, the use of stackers will generate a considerable degree of noise and vibration, which is a concern for the abutting two-family neighborhood and the occupants on floors directly upon the system. This potential impact needs to be assessed more fully, because of shallow or non-existent setbacks along Fuller Street. The Planning Board recommends that the impacts and feasibility be evaluated in

conjunction with the estimated number of new trips. In addition, the project team should explain how the stacking system would function on the site with the proposed parking plan.

Separate parking ratios, for residential and for office/retail uses, should be specified instead of an overall ratio of 0.8. The proposed parking ratio for the residential component is closer to 0.63, whereas six parking spaces are proposed for the retail/office space (10 to 13 spaces would be required for this component). Because of the limited options for overnight and on-street parking, these parking ratios are not realistic.

Also, the applicant's traffic study does not expressly indicate if traffic volumes include projections for the two retail tenants. Different use categories—convenience store versus realty office for example—generate varying degrees of traffic. The traffic study should also factor in the large scale renovation at the Devotion School and the proposed 40B projects at Temple Kehillath Israel and 40 Center Street. The Board defers to the Director of Engineering to determine the adequacy of the traffic study scope.

The Board feels that site can accommodate underground parking, which will offer a more realistic parking plan for a project with increased density.

Scale and Massing

The Planning Department has requested site sections that will better compare the respective elevations of the proposed structure and those on abutting parcels, as well as building sections and elevations. Nonetheless, the Board is very familiar with the surrounding context and development patterns, which consist of one- to two-story commercial buildings on Harvard and two-family homes on the abutting streets. Although mid-rise apartment buildings are located on Centre and Williams Street, the heights of these buildings, which do not conform to zoning, are somewhat offset by deeper setbacks.

On Harvard Street, floors two and above present have very shallow setbacks, only exacerbated by the protruding balconies, which present zero setback conditions. The Planning Board recommends setting back the upper floors from Harvard Street lot line to better maintain the strong one-story modal pattern of the commercial buildings on Harvard Street.

The L-shaped decks in the rear and the balconies on the remaining three facades are too shallow to be useful and only expand the massing rather than mitigate its impact. Note that the decks on Fuller and Harvard are about 13 feet above the street level with nearly zero setback conditions. The Planning Board recommends eliminating them.

The applicant has set back the upper floors at the north and northeast facades of the building to improve neighbors' viewsheds; however, the Planning Board feels the setbacks are not sufficient. The Board recommends that the applicant provide building sections in conjunction with a 3D model to provide a perspective of these viewsheds.

Other than the roughly 1000 sf of open space, the plan does not provide much screening between the second floor sidewall and the abutting dwelling on Fuller. (There would be about 12 feet between the sidewalls.) The Planning Board strongly recommends a deeper setback between the building and the 44 Fuller Street lot line. Because of the number of windows on the abutting home, a buffer would mitigate some of the visual and auditory impacts, especially vegetative screening along the north and north-west lot lines.

The Planning Board notes the shallow setback and fenestration on the side of the building abutting the Butcherie. Should the building abutting 420 Harvard be redeveloped to the maximum height allowed, the occupants of units on this side of the 420 Harvard project would be adversely impacted.

The Board also points out the disparity in the size of the units, possibly between affordable and market rate offerings. Some unit sizes do not make sense (for example, a 976-sf three-bedroom unit), which indicates that development's program needs to be given more thought. As presented, the program (odd unit sizes and in adequate parking ratio) does not appear to be functional.

Rubbish Location

The applicant should develop a rubbish plan early in the process and include various retail and office scenarios, as the amount of trash generated by a coffee shop would differ vastly from that produced by office tenant. Trash should be stored on the site itself out of the public way. The applicant should consider private trash removal services, to reduce the number of receptacles that would be located in the public way for municipal pick-up.

Lighting Plan

Because of the excessive height of the building and its shallow setbacks, the lighting plan and its anticipated impact on the surrounding residential neighborhood needs to be addressed early in the public hearing process.

Additional Materials

In addition to the requested site sections 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. The model should including sight lines from both directions of Fuller and Harvard Streets at pedestrian level and second story levels, and from Coolidge Street rear yards at first and second story levels. The Board recommends winter views (without landscaping). Structures on abutting properties should be represented (gray cubes drawn to scale are acceptable). Representing pedestrians in the model is helpful, to assess human scale in relation to that of the building.

In addition, the Planning Board advises the ZBA to request shadow studies that enable one to view shadow impacts throughout a 24-hour period, four times a year, via animation.

Sincerely,

Linda Hamlin, Chairman