



Town of Brookline

Massachusetts

PLANNING BOARD

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March 28, 2017
Mark Zuroff, Chairman
Brookline Zoning Board Appeals

Re: 111 Cypress Street (Cypress Apartments)
Comprehensive Permit Application

Chairman Zuroff,

Although the lot can sustain increased density for residential use, the Planning Board has specific concerns about the safety of the proposed vehicular and pedestrian access, the resulting streetscapes, and the scale and massing proposed for this project. With revisions the project could better fit into the scale and character of the neighborhood and activate this block. The Planning Board offers the following recommendations to better integrate the development into the surrounding neighborhood and improve public safety.

Overview of Recommendations

1. Lower the height of the building, which currently reads more like a high-rise. Five-story wood construction over a concrete podium could be more economical than the steel or concrete construction that would likely be necessitated by the seven-story proposal.
2. Create a welcoming façade on Cypress Street by increasing the significance of the entry to the building here and eliminating the exposed garage level and 18 parking spaces on this floor. Space along Cypress could be configured as a welcoming lobby and common space amenity for occupants. Another suggestion is to create several townhome entrances to the building along Cypress to better integrate the apartment building into the smaller-scale residential neighborhood.
3. Eliminate garage access on Cypress. A curb cut anywhere on Cypress to the site is not recommended both for safety concerns and the need for a better activated streetscape.
4. Create a deeper setback on Cypress to increase the width of the sidewalk and to improve the setback-to-height ratio viewed from this public way.
5. Increase setback at Cypress/Brington corner to improve the viewshed for pedestrians and mitigate the wall-like effect of the building (increasing a sense of safety at night, as residents walk along Cypress Street to Brington Road).

6. Increase setback of the portion of the building closest to the transformer to allow vehicles unencumbered access along the existing easement.
7. Consider expanding the basement level garage slightly under the driveway to maintain vehicular circulation from one level to another internally within the building footprint. (Note this suggestion is to improve circulation from one garage level to another. The Planning Board is averse to increasing the parking ratio on this site, where traffic is already very congested.)
8. Increase articulation at the roofline to alleviate the monolithic, wall-like effect. Providing roof decks and arranging upper floors facing Brington in tiers with terraces would improve the massing and add some variety to the regimented fenestration.
9. Create safer pedestrian pathways for occupants of the project throughout the site and to public transit, which is especially a necessity in a walkable neighborhood.
10. Eliminate the surface parking and reconfigure the driveway to reduce the commercial appearance.
11. Adjust the footprint to create a U-shaped building to soften the wall-like effect of the building and create pockets of open space. For example, expand the footprint at the southern end of the building on Brington to create a node analogous to the one at the northern end of the building (while maintaining adequate setbacks to the Brington Road neighborhood). Maintain the height of the southern node at 40 feet so that it is inscale with the single- and two-family homes on Brington. In addition to improving the massing, the result would soften the Brington Road edge and the viewshed of the expansive driveway so that the site reads as more residential and less commercial.
12. Create a deeper vegetative buffer along the property line shared with 19-21 Brington Road.

Site Circulation and Vehicular Access

The structured garage is located on three floors: 37 spaces in the basement, 34 spaces on the first floor (which is at grade with the surface parking area off Brington Road), and 18 parking spaces on the second floor (which is at grade with Cypress Street). The surface parking area consists of a deep U-shaped driveway, the branches of which surround 16 surface parking spaces. Two separate garage entrances provide access to the basement and first floor levels off the surface parking area. Because of the narrow building footprint, once inside the garage vehicles cannot access other parking levels without exiting. Two additional parking spaces and a loading zone are very close to the property line shared with 19-21 Brington Road.

The Brington Road driveway entrance and exits are shifted closer to the abutter's property line, which means the curb cut is moved further away from Cypress-Brington intersection, an advantage if it indeed alleviates potential congestion at that juncture. The deep driveway means that vehicles very likely will not queue on Brington. However, the extent of the exposed parking reinforces the commercial aspect of the site layout. Traffic calming bump-outs on Brington might need to be adjusted to improve the turning radii of trucks exiting the site. The Board recommends that the applicant provide turning radius analysis, as daily truck deliveries are increasingly prevalent.

A new curb cut is proposed off Cypress Street to provide access to the garage level off the second floor. Although the Board defers to the Transportation Board and Transportation Division staff, the Board is very critical of this proposal for the following reasons:

- The Cypress Street curb cut is a mere 100 feet from the Tappan Street signaled intersection, which might not be an adequate sight stopping distance.
- The slight increase in grade as one approaches the curb cut traveling from Washington Street will compromise visibility, especially at night.
- The 25-foot long drive entrance means that vehicles will likely queue on Cypress.
- The turning radius might require a vehicle to go into the opposite lane, which is already made narrow with on-street parking and daycare drop-offs on the north side of Cypress and a bike lane on the south side.
- The entrance is off a narrow sidewalk and route heavily traveled by bicyclists and pedestrians, especially residents, Brookline High School students and Green Line commuters.
- The vestibule and retaining wall will impede visibility of drivers exiting the garage.

Eliminating the Cypress Street garage entrance would mean that all access would be confined to Brington Road, which must be evaluated very carefully. It would also mean that the building, as configured, would not be able to accommodate parking on the second floor. However, the garage level in fact should not define the Cypress streetscape. Treating this façade as the building's rear unfortunately would deactivate this prominent block in a highly trafficked neighborhood. Eliminating these parking spaces—and vehicle trips—may compensate for restricting access to Brington Road.

Another consideration is to expand the basement level parking so that the below-grade parking is not confined to the footprint of the building as currently proposed. Planning Department staff has discussed this possibility with the developer. Although it would be a costly option, the developer has considered this configuration and has not ruled that possibility out. The Board and staff are aware of stormwater runoff challenges in the area, but the Director of Engineering and Transportation will certainly recommend compliance with Town By-Law 8.26 (stormwater management) to protect abutters' properties.

Note: Both the Cypress Street curb cuts and the new Brington Road curb cuts would require the removal of street trees, pursuant to M.G.L. c.87, the Shade Tree Act, a separate public hearing process.

Pedestrian Access

The primary entrance to the building is nestled at the elbow of the L-shaped structure between the garage entrances at the end of the long driveway facing Brington Road. In addition to the possible inconvenience for someone walking to this entrance, that path does not seem safe or welcoming to occupants. There is also a less prominent building entrance off Cypress but this leads one through the garage level and is not an attractive welcome for residents of the building either. The Board recommends making Cypress Street a more prominent entrance to the building to create a more welcoming, activated façade on that prominent street. Common space amenities can be configured in this area, since ground floor residential units are not attractive to potential tenants.

Because the site abuts the Brookline Hill T-stop, several residents have advocated for a path the public can use to access the T-stop. As configured, the site does not provide a safe means for pedestrians to do so. Other quality of life issues such as privacy would need to be factored in and discussed with the applicant. The site already has two easements that restrict use of portions of the site.

Relationship to Surrounding Context

Like many of the Chapter 40B proposals submitted to the Town, the site is located where two different zoning districts—in this case, a local business district and two-family zone—meet. In the area are residential buildings ranging in density from single- and two-family dwellings to row-houses and six-story lofts. In these cases, the challenge is not merely to integrate a project with higher-than-allowed density but especially to reconcile often competing objectives for these different districts.

Situated on a corner lot in an active commercial area, abutting a single-family neighborhood on Brington Road, and located one parcel away from a prominent intersection at Route 9, the building essentially has no rear façades. At least three of the façades could be improved to better relate to the varied abutting contexts.

Brington-Cypress Corner: To better assess the proposal, a rendering of the site as one approaches it traveling north from Route 9 is critical. (At the request of the Planning Department, the project team is working to provide a 3D model for the next ZBA hearing. Until then, a model has not been available for this analysis.)

Cypress Streetscape: The prominent garage entrance and the extent of garage at the ground level (for most of the building's 220 foot length) introduce a rear-facing façade along what is a lively, heavily traveled street, which would de-activate the streetscape. The parking at this level should be eliminated altogether. As mentioned earlier, making the Cypress façade the primary building entrance would improve the project's relationship to the multifamily buildings across from it; namely the Ritchie Building, which is in the National Register.

Brington Road Streetscape: The Board acknowledges that the developer expressly intended to consolidate massing as far as possible from the Brington Road neighborhood; however, what results is a view of a monolithic wall and expansive driveway and parking area.

The layout of the proposed site plan follows the current configuration of the commercial building and accompanying surface parking lot, despite the conversion to residential use. The change in use from office to residential is an opportunity to soften the Brington Road edge of the site so that it reads as more residential, which the expansive surface parking area fails to do. The massing of the building could be reconfigured to de-emphasize the commercial aspect of the surface parking. Although this would mean expanding the massing toward the Brington Road neighborhood—by supporting upper floors over a portion of the driveway—this treatment could serve to reduce the excessive height of the structure. Doing so would still allow for an adequate setback to the residential neighborhood.

The project team might consider designing the building with the curve of the lot in mind. Note that the curved shapes of the two older anchor buildings at the Route 9 intersection, including the nearest comparable development, Cypress Lofts, echo this theme. In addition, if a

deeper setback were introduced on Cypress and continued onto Brington, there would be an opportunity to introduce a secondary building entrance and plantings to reinforce the residential streetscape where the two-family district begins.

Buffers: Although a parking area currently abuts the residential property on Brington, the Board is concerned that a loading zone is virtually against the property line shared with 19-21 Brington Road, which is intrusive. An alternative location should be considered. The Board recommends designing a vegetative screen along this property line to soften the viewshed, provide more privacy and a sound buffer, and incorporate elements of the tree-lined Brington Road onto the new residential development.

Height and Building Massing

The L-shaped configuration makes this the largest building in the area: 220 feet by 135 feet at its thickest dimensions and 70 feet tall facing Brington Road. The structure runs almost the entire length of the lot on Cypress with minimal setbacks (except for a 27 wide easement abutting the T-stop). Bays on the middle floors and a recessed top floor are techniques the project team used to articulate the massing. The driveway and surface parking separate the structure from the abutting two-family neighborhood.

Although the second floor is at grade with Cypress, the minimal setbacks on this façade only emphasize the height of the building. A deeper setback could expand the sidewalk and create a better transition to the structure, especially if the primary entrance to the building were located on Cypress.

The Board strongly recommends reducing the height overall by one floor to improve scale. Eliminating the top floor would mean employing possibly more cost-effective wood construction, instead of steel, over a concrete podium.

The Board recommends adding more articulation at the roofline to alleviate the monolithic, wall-like effect fully exposed to the Brington Road neighborhood. Providing roof decks and arranging the upper floors facing Brington in tiers with terraces would improve the massing and add some variety to the regimented fenestration.

Parking Ratio

The proposed parking ratio of 1.06, though far below the required 1.63, could benefit from a parking analysis, especially because the site is in a transit-oriented neighborhood, with amenities within walking distance. It is possible that a parking ratio lower than 1.0 can be justified for the project.

Rubbish and Recycling Management

Although, the Chief of Environmental Health has purview over the rubbish and recycling plan, the Planning Board urges the ZBA to address attendant issues, such as rubbish management, storage and pick-up, as early as possible in the design review stage.

Because the site abuts a residential neighborhood, the Planning Board strongly recommends that no dumpsters, receptacles, or trash areas be located outside the building footprint. The Board especially would like assurance that the trash room, with dimensions of 12 by 32 feet, is large enough to accommodate the needs of 99 residential units.

Lighting Plan

Per Brookline zoning, glare from headlights and site lighting shall not spill onto abutting properties. As the site layout undergoes revision, it is important to evaluate placement of lighting to minimize adverse impact on abutters.

Additional Materials

The Board recommends that the applicant continue working with the Planning Department to provide key site sections, shadow studies, and a 3D model with surrounding context. The Board understands that a supplemental traffic study has been requested by the Director of Engineering and Transportation and a revised stormwater plan may be underway. The Board agrees with the Planning Department's recommendation that an environmental peer review be scheduled to assess the suitability of the site for residential use, especially in light of the gasoline leak that took place some years ago.

Planning Board Review of Revised Plans

The Planning Board wants to exercise its right to review and comment on plans as they are revised during the course of the public hearing.

Sincerely,

Linda Hamlin
Chairman