



# Town of Brookline

## *Massachusetts*

### **PLANNING BOARD**

Linda Hamlin, Chairman  
Steven Heikin, Clerk  
Robert Cook  
Blair Hines  
Matthew Oudens  
Mark Zarrillo

Town Hall, Third Floor  
333 Washington Street  
Brookline, MA 02445-6899  
(617) 730-2130

March 30, 2017

Kate Poverman  
Brookline Zoning Board Appeals

Re: 455 Harvard Street Comprehensive Permit Application

Chairman Poverman,

The Planning Board recognizes that the 455 Harvard Street 40B proposal for a four story building, with seventeen residential units and ground floor parking and retail space, is not as large as most previous 40B applications. However, the Board believes it could be better integrated into the surrounding commercial and residential neighborhood. The Planning Board will highlight several areas of concern below that it recommends be addressed by the Zoning Board of Appeals during its deliberations.

### **Relationship to Surrounding Context**

The proposed building at 455 Harvard Street, site of a former gas station and now occupied by an Indian restaurant, is a one-story commercial building in the JFK Crossing Business District. Commercial properties nearby the site are mostly one-story structures, with frontage right at the sidewalk.

While this parcel is located in a local business district (L-1.0), to the rear it abuts a two family district (T-5) on Thorndike Street. This residential neighborhood consists of single and two-family homes, which are mostly two and a half stories and have setbacks of about ten to fifteen feet. As a result, the project and its increased density must be integrated not only into the commercial streetscape of Harvard Street but also into the quiet residential neighborhood of Thorndike Street. The applicant has described this area of Brookline as a dense mixed-use area, but the Planning Board feels that this description is not completely accurate because the commercial uses are presently quite low-density and have only single uses in them. Current retail vacancies in JFK Crossing also raise concerns about the viability of new retail space, particularly if no on-site parking is provided for the retail use.

### **Scale, Height, and Setbacks**

The Planning Board's greatest concern relates to the site plan. The proposed height of four stories is not unreasonable, particularly compared to other 40B projects currently under review; however, the height is substantially taller than surrounding buildings. The Planning Board believes this height could be mitigated by creating deeper setbacks between the building and the single-family home to its rear and along the Thorndike frontage.

The proposed setback to its rear property line, which divides it from the two and a half story home at 78 Thorndike, is only five feet. This is uncomfortably close to the abutting house. These rear abutters will be subjected to negative impacts resulting from loss of light, air, privacy, views and increased noise. Their view to the northwest is currently quite unobstructed, and this would be dramatically

reduced because of the closeness of the façade of the proposed building. The Planning Board strongly recommends a deeper setback here, as well as a vegetative buffer for screening. The building's setback on Thorndike Street should also be increased to align with the average setback of the homes on Thorndike Street. ***A site plan showing the abutting structure at 78 Thorndike, a dimension for its setback to the property lines and the setbacks of other homes on both sides of Thorndike Street should be provided.***

The proposed limited rear setback not only creates impacts for the abutter, but also does not allow enough room to create usable open space at ground level for the enjoyment of the residents, or to provide significant landscaping for screening. Increasing this setback would address these issues.

Another setback issue which should be evaluated is the Harvard Street setback at the intersection of Harvard and Thorndike Streets which might impede the visibility of cars turning onto Harvard Street. Due to the less than ninety degree angle at this intersection, a building that extends to the property edge will inhibit visibility for drivers and pedestrians. While the applicant's traffic study by Vanasse and Associates considered sight lines from the proposed garage exit onto Thorndike Street, it did not include any analysis of sight lines for cars turning from Thorndike onto Harvard Street. ***The Planning Board believes that this additional analysis should be requested to ensure the safety of vehicles and pedestrians at this corner.***

#### **Massing, Architectural Elements, and Materials**

The Planning Board recommends that the architect incorporate materials from the residential neighborhood to enhance the architectural transition. The materials should draw from details of the surrounding neighborhood. At the property line shared with the abutter at 78 Thorndike, the Planning Board recommends more articulation to the façade so that the neighbor is not facing an unrelenting brick wall. The façade facing Thorndike Street should be more residential in character than the one facing Harvard Street.

The Planning Board suggests the following design changes:

- Relocate heavy cornice on top floor to top of third floor above brick portion of the building
- Increase set back of top floor and reduce size of the decks
- Relocate stair on top floor inboard
- Increase the rear setback and provide usable open space for residents at ground level
- Increase setback on Thorndike Street
- Consider relocating residential entry to Thorndike Street

#### **Parking, Circulation and Access**

This seventeen unit building with retail uses on the ground floor will provide twelve parking spaces (5 stacker spaces for a total of ten spaces, one regular space, and one handicap space), at ground level under the building. ***The plans and accompanying tables have some inconsistencies in the number of spaces to be provided and this should be corrected.*** Under zoning, 43 spaces would be required for the proposed residential and retail use. While the Planning Board is generally supportive of reduced parking ratios, particularly in areas well-served by transit, they are concerned about the limited parking proposed, especially for the retail use where none is provided. Customers will be expected to find on-street parking which is limited, and this is likely to cause parkers to spill over onto the residential streets. Also, if nearby parking is hard to find, the viability of the retail space may be affected. Most importantly, the Board is concerned that tenants of the affordable units may find the cost of the on-site parking spaces prohibitive.

Access to the site is being moved from Harvard Street to Thorndike Street. While the applicant believes that the elimination of the existing curb cuts on Harvard is an improvement over current conditions, all traffic entering and exiting the site will now be directed to Thorndike Street, a residential side street. While there are existing curb cuts on Thorndike, they are currently fenced off and not

used. The Planning Board is concerned about traffic impacts on Thorndike, as well as potential queuing onto Thorndike Street, which may result from the proposed stacker system.

The proposed stackers have been a topic of considerable neighborhood concern. ***The Planning Board would like to see additional information from the applicant's traffic consultant regarding the stacking system's noise levels, vibrations and operability, especially when two different unit owners share the stacked spaces. The Board recommends a traffic study that includes queuing scenarios for the garage and projections for the residential units as well as the retail component (with different retail scenarios). As mentioned previously, a sight distance study should also be undertaken for the intersection of Harvard and Thorndike.*** The applicant should confer with the Director of Transportation and Engineering to determine what scope is appropriate for the additional traffic analysis. More information should be provided about the location and dimensions of the loading area. Ideally, the loading area would be located inside the building.

#### **Additional Comments**

***The applicant should also 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 of an office tenant.*** Trash should be stored on the site and private trash removal services should be employed to reduce the number of receptacles that would be located in the public way for municipal pick-up. ***A lighting plan should also be provided.***

***The Planning Board recommends that the applicant provide additional materials to those received in the initial submission, including:***

- ***key site sections with context including the abutting house and the other side of Harvard Street,***
- ***scaled street elevations extending along Harvard Street,***
- ***an electronic 3D model with surrounding context including sight lines from both directions of Thorndike and Harvard Streets at pedestrian and second story levels, abutting buildings (gray cubes drawn to scale) and figures representing pedestrians to assess human scale in relation to the building.***

The Board understands that a supplemental traffic study has been requested by the Director of Engineering and Transportation and that a revised stormwater plan may be underway. The Planning Board agrees with the Planning Department's recommendation that in light of the site's former use as a gas station that an environmental peer reviewer should review and assess the documentation that has been submitted about the status of the site. Design and traffic/parking peer reviewers should also be engaged to recommend revisions to make this the best project possible for the neighborhood.

Sincerely,

Linda Hamlin  
Chairman