



TOWN OF BROOKLINE

Massachusetts

PLANNING BOARD

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July 23, 2017

Jesse Geller, Chairman
Brookline Zoning Board of Appeals

Mr. Geller:

RE: Babcock Place Comprehensive Permit (134-138 Babcock Street)

The proposal is for a five-story building with 62 units of rental housing and 31 ground floor parking spaces spanning two abutting parcels—one in the M-1.5 zoning district; the other in the T-5 zoning district.

Although the project site is primarily located within a multifamily district and can sustain increased density, the Planning Board is not supportive of the largely commercial design as proposed. It is incongruous with the surrounding context, which is clearly a residential not mixed-use or commercial area and which includes the nearby Graffam-McKay Local Historical District. As with most of the recent c.40B proposals in Brookline, the site is situated at the juncture of two different zoning districts, which increases the design challenge. The Planning Board strongly urges that the following impacts be addressed and recommendations be considered to better integrate any increased density on the site. Specifically, the Planning Board has concerns about the architectural design, massing and setbacks, site plan and circulation, potential traffic safety issues, and impact on streetscape and abutters. The proposal maximizes the building envelope, employing few measures to mitigate the increased density. The site plan also presents a traffic hazard.

An initial review by the Preservation Planners indicates that the existing structures on the two parcels may be architecturally and/or historically significant. Although adaptive reuse of architecturally significant properties should be considered in redevelopment proposals, the Planning Board recognizes the challenge of doing so in this case.

Overview of Key Recommendations

- Overall design should reflect residential characteristics.
- Site and building design should feature qualities sympathetic to the context of the Babcock-Stedman-Manchester neighborhood.
- Carefully evaluate the location of the driveway and the loading zone to assess safety at the two Freeman Street intersections with Babcock Street. Consider whether a loading zone is needed at all.
- If a loading zone is needed, avoid having vehicles back out of loading zone onto Babcock Street, which is an unsafe condition. Address site circulation deficiencies.

- Step back top floor on all sides to achieve a more compatible scale.
- Increase front yard setback to about 20 feet to maintain existing modal setback pattern in the area.
- Increase rear yard setback to about 20 feet to mitigate impact on rear abutters, which are one story below site.
- Increase setback at right side rear (the “ell”) to avoid enveloping abutting single-family properties, and to improve viewsheds and reduce shadow impacts.
- Create a more welcoming residential entrance at pedestrian level.
- Increase the importance of the building entrance over the garage entrance. Consider moving garage entry from the center of front façade or to a side façade.
- Consider moving parking below grade or at a lower grade.
- Avoid ventilating garage into abutting yards, negatively impacting public health and quality of life.
- Improve regimented fenestration to mitigate massing.
- Conserve existing mature trees in front side yard if possible to maintain characteristic streetscape and vegetative screening.
- Provide usable open space that offers occupants of the building outdoor amenities.
- Provide adequate setbacks to accommodate vegetative screening between the site and two-family zoning district.
- Prepare a tree-protection plan to protect street and abutters’ trees.
- Ensure safe pedestrian path from side entrance to loading zone.
- Analyze turning radius within garage.
- Achieve a higher, more practical parking ratio than 0.5.

Context and Streetscape

The site consists of two abutting parcels, located in the M-1.5 multifamily and T-5 two-family zoning districts, a few blocks away from the local business district on Harvard Street, Coolidge Corner and a few parcels away from the Graffam-McKay Local Historic District. Although Babcock Street includes both multifamily and two-family zoning districts, several key constants that help integrate the different building typologies are the consistent front yard setbacks, maximum three- and four-story building heights and open space landscaping (with some exceptions). The site not only abuts the mostly single- and two-family homes on Stedman and Manchester Streets, but also the grade beyond the rear and right side property lines declines sharply, which places any structure built on the site one story above the homes in the two-family district.

In addition to its visibility from Stedman and Manchester due to grading, the site is located at the Freeman-Babcock Street intersection, at which Freeman Street forks in a Y-shape to create a landscaped pocket park and exposing the site to a long viewshed. The existing building and site plan both have symmetrical layouts that align with the pocket park to create a strong axis with the perpendicular Freeman Street. For example, note that the portico is squarely centered and the two driveways are located in the left and right side yards to reinforce alignment with this axis. The left and right legs of Freeman Street create a wide view plane, horizontally, and the depth of the viewshed runs from Babcock to as far back as Amory Street. Clearly, redevelopment of the site will create a strong statement that bears on a clearly defined neighborhood context.

It is worth noting that the Town’s Housing Production Plan identifies corridors suitable for higher density affordable housing projects, which surround the Stedman-Babcock neighborhood but do not include it. This comment is meant to underscore the existence of the strong residential and lower-density patterns that define the area and which should be carefully considered when integrating a project with a higher density.

Also note that this area of Babcock is the focus of a redesign to introduce traffic calming and bike lanes. The configuration of the pocket park and the Freeman-Babcock Street intersection may change. Until a redesign is approved, any analysis should be based on existing conditions, as advised by Peter Ditto, Director of Engineering and Transportation.

Front Yard Setback Modal Pattern

Front yard setbacks are consistently 20-feet on both sides of Babcock Street from Dwight to Winslow Streets, despite varied building typologies. These front yards feature landscaping and some mature trees, thereby contributing to the charming residential quality of the area. With its minimal setback from Babcock and no open space, the condominiums at 143-241 Babcock, diagonally across from the project site, are an exception to this rule. At the other extreme are the apartment buildings at 60 and 110 Babcock with their +/- 87 foot front yard setbacks, which compensate for any unusually tall building heights.

With its relatively shallow and anomalous 8- to 9-foot front yard setback and five-story height, the proposed building would overwhelm Babcock. The Planning Board recommends increasing the front yard setback to about 20 feet to be in line with the buildings to the left and right and to maintain this strong front yard setback modal pattern defining the majority of Babcock Street itself.

Architecture: Height-Setback Ratio, Scale, Massing, Style

Overall, the architectural design is wholly incongruous with the surrounding neighborhood.

The black frame running along the roof line, along the entire height of the building, and along the elevator run does nothing to mitigate the building's massing; this feature only emphasizes its bulk. The one-foot juts and jogs are not sufficient to effectively reduce the building's bulk.

Because of the approximate 10-foot decline beyond the rear property line in combination with the insufficient 10 foot rear yard setback, the building is perceived by rear abutters as being taller than five stories. The Planning Board strongly recommends increasing the rear yard setback to about 20 feet to mitigate the building's overwhelming scale, in conjunction with reducing the massing of the top floor to improve the impact on abutters especially those to the rear. The Board also recommends reducing the intrusion of the building into the rear "ell" of the property, where its bulk would loom over residential properties on three sides, and eliminating balconies at the rear of the building to enhance privacy of the properties below. The setback should accommodate some evergreen landscaping as a buffer, as well as functional, open-space amenities for residents of the project.

Because the driveway is now located at the center of the site, it unfortunately becomes the focal point of the front façade (even though the garage entrance is 20 feet from the front property line). As mentioned earlier, because of the site's location, perpendicular to the Freeman Street pocket park, there is a long viewshed of the project as far back as the Amory Street intersection. Mature trees in the pocket park screen the view, though the Planning Board advises evaluating renderings from this perspective with winter landscaping, when there would be less buffering. (Also keep in mind that the redesign of this area of Babcock Street could eliminate this screening.)

The Planning Board strongly urges the Zoning Board of Appeals to consider relocating the entrance of the garage to the far edge of the front yard or to a side yard itself. The ZBA should also seriously explore the possibility of locating the garage level at a lower grade or fully below grade. This change would create a more welcoming residential entrance that would help maintain the residential quality of the neighborhood. For concerns about the garage's ventilation, see the section on Public Health below.

The ceiling-height glass panes and regimented fenestration, with no differentiation between living rooms and bedrooms, and with little to no trim to offer some contrast between light and shadow for visual relief, would be better suited in a downtown or commercial context. Here, the effect is jarring. Warmer, more compatible architectural materials would better integrate the project into the neighborhood.

Viewsheds and Shadow Impacts

To study the proposal's shadow impact on rear abutters, observe the abutting four story property at 120 Babcock Street, which runs the width of the rear property line and has a more shallow, five-foot setback. The deep 80-foot courtyard and 19 foot front yard setback is compatible with the Babcock streetscape; however, at even at just four stories tall the building blocks the southern exposure and casts entire rear yards on Stedman Street in shadow. Although shadow impact cannot be completely eliminated, it should be mitigated by reducing the massing of the top floor and increasing the rear yard setback to improve access to sky and light. In addition, the Board notes that the dark color of the building at the rear emphasizes the shadow impacts.

The L-shaped building, with little buffering, dwarfs the single and two-family structures at a lower grade on Babcock, Manchester and Stedman Streets. Projects proposed at junctures where two zoning districts meet require sensitive massing to ease the transition. The Planning Board strongly urges reducing the size of the rear ell, and enhancing the building's articulation and setbacks to improve viewsheds from all perspectives.

Site Circulation, Public Safety, and Design of Off-Street Parking

The project proposes eliminating existing curb cuts and relocating them to create a 20-foot wide driveway in the center of the site leading to the ground level garage and a separate loading zone closer to the existing hydrant. About 19 feet is proposed between the driveway and loading zone. The Planning Board questions whether a loading zone is necessary, particularly where, as in this case, it creates significant safety problems, as noted below. (Note that a loading zone is not required per zoning for a residential building.) Because the parking ratio does not seem sufficient, the Planning Board is opposed to a loading zone being misused as surface parking, especially in the front yard.

The slope of the loading zone appears to be about a 10% incline within the first 20 feet of the property, which if accurate would conform with zoning; however, the Board is concerned about the steepness of the slope and potential conflicts between exiting trucks and approaching pedestrians. Compounding this condition is that the loading zone would require a vehicle or truck to back out onto Babcock Street at one of the Freeman-Babcock intersections, which is busy with vehicular and pedestrian traffic, and especially children walking to the Devotion School. The open space triangle at the intersection is designed as a small park for pedestrians and dog-walkers. Although no crosswalks are present, pedestrians tend to cross Babcock Street at this juncture to reach the triangle. The Board considers backing out onto Babcock Street unacceptable because of public safety concerns. Note that the loading zone is not represented on the landscaping plan; that discrepancy needs to be resolved and open space calculations revisited. The driveways on the exiting-conditions site plan has space for vehicles to turn around and nose out of the site.

Although Peter Ditto, the Director of Engineering and Transportation, is analyzing traffic and pedestrian safety separately, he has stated that backing out onto Babcock is not acceptable. Revising the site plan to accommodate a three-point turn or turnaround, or eliminating the loading altogether, is a priority for safer conditions.

Staff asked for an Auto-Turn analysis of the driveway, loading zone, and garage. The diagrams suggest that the width and radius of the loading zone entrance need to be adjusted (see June 21, 2017 plans by J. F. Hennessey). There is also a potential conflict between a truck pulling into the loading zone and a pedestrian opening a side door to the building.

The diagrams also indicate a possible need to increase the radii of the curb cuts entering the garage. Note that increasing the curb cut radii may create a conflict with the loading zone and an existing street tree. Under M.G.L. c. 87, proposed removal of a street tree would involve a public hearing process administered by the Town Arborist and is not within the purview of the ZBA. The loading zone curb cuts also may be too close to the hydrant. To be thorough, the Planning Board suggests an analysis of vehicles entering the garage from Freeman

Street. In addition, the Board recommends an Auto-Turn analysis of the garage drive aisle because of the 90-degree turn. (The project team's submitted another turning radii analysis prepared by Vanasse Associates July 11, 2017. The discrepancies between the two results require a technical review by staff and peer reviewers. It appears as though Vanasse's turning radii analysis was based on an initial redesign of Babcock Street, which has not been approved and will indeed change.)

When design of the loading zone is resolved, or if the loading zone is eliminated, the Board should not permit front yard parking (within 20 feet of the front yard property line).

For comments on the design of front façade, especially in relation to the garage entrance, refer to the section on Architecture.

Public Health and Ventilation

The proposal does not include plans for a mechanical garage ventilation system. The Board has observed that any ventilation appears to rely on openings on three sides of the building at ground level. This is a serious concern, considering the proximity of the abutting two-family homes. It is also another reason for strongly considering subgrade, or lower grade parking. The Planning Board advises that a garage ventilation system be evaluated for safety and for the least impact on abutters.

Changes to Babcock Street

Please ensure that the proposal is evaluated for traffic safety in light of any imminent redesign of Babcock Street.

Shared Parking and the Question of Infectious Invalidity/New Nonconformities at 120 Babcock

The property line on the left cuts through existing surface parking spaces that serve the 120 Babcock and 134 Babcock properties, both owned by the applicant. Because the proposal will no longer accommodate surface parking for 120 Babcock, staff raised and researched the possibility of infectious invalidity and new non-conformities at 120 Babcock. *The Building Department confirms that neither infectious invalidity nor new nonconformities are triggered, because 120 Babcock was built in 1920, prior to Brookline's zoning regulations codified in 1961.* Please refer to the separate memo from staff dated July 11, 2017 on this topic. As for where the displaced parking at 120 Babcock will be served, the applicant states that parking will be provided off-site at other properties he owns.

Usable Open Space and Conservation of Mature Trees

The proposal offers no usable open space for occupants of the site and eliminates all mature trees. Adjusting the location of (or eliminating) the loading zone and reducing the footprint of the building would provide usable open space and improve abutters' viewsheds. The project team should strive to retain as much of the mature trees on the site and to prepare a tree protection plan to avoid damage to street trees and trees on abutters' properties. In regard to sustainability and green building practices, trees can slow or reduce the rate of stormwater flow at peak times by holding water on site. In addition, tree canopies can contribute to Town-wide efforts to mitigate the effect of polluting greenhouse gases on climate change. Finally, at 40 to 60 feet tall, the mature trees on this site function to screen the increased density and help retain the existing residential character of the area. The Town Arborist, Tom Brady, is also reviewing the proposal separately.

Parking Ratio

One of the factors used to assess density of a proposed project is the intensity of use. For example, do the attendant uses, such as parking supply, adequately serve the facility in the proposed neighborhood? The site is

located within the public transit overlay district, which has lower minimum parking requirements than other areas of Brookline. To conform with zoning, the project would need 82 parking spaces for the unit mix proposed, or an overall ratio of 1.3. Because 52 of the 62 units are studios and one-bedrooms, the Planning Board finds this ratio excessive. Nonetheless, it appears that little to no parking spaces were allotted to the studios, which seems insufficient. It also appears that no more than one parking space is allotted to the three-bedroom units, which also seems insufficient. The Planning Board recommends a parking ratio that accommodates some parking for the studio units. If recommendations to reduce the building's massing are considered, it is very likely that the project could achieve a more practical parking ratio.

The percentage of compact spaces (29%) is higher than allowed by zoning (25%). The Planning Board recommends adjusting this ratio to conform to zoning requirements.

The Planning Board is pleased to see storage to accommodate 58 bicycles.

Again, please review an Auto Turn analysis at the bend in the two-way drive aisle to discern if there is adequate visibility of coming traffic. Correcting any deficiencies could involve eliminating a parking space.

Rubbish and Recycling

Another factor to examine when assessing the intensity of use on the site is adequate management of trash and recycling, a public health concern. Staff has requested a trash/recycling narrative from the applicant so that the Director of Environmental Health, Patrick Maloney, can address the following questions:

- Will trash/recycling pick-up be managed by a private service?
- How many times per week is pick-up for trash and for recycling planned?
- How many trash and recycling receptacles are planned and what size containers are proposed?
- Will there be a trash compactor on the site? (If so, the Fire Department must also evaluate this arrangement for safety.)
- Is the trash storage room adequately sized to accommodate receptacles?
- Are any receptacles proposed for outdoor storage? (The Planning Board does not recommend outdoor storage of trash/recycling receptacles.)
- If the Public Health Department were to examine the adequacy of the trash/recycling plan one year after 90% occupancy, would there be enough room within the building footprint to scale up storage?

Stormwater Management

The Planning Board understands that the Director of Engineering and Transportation is reviewing the stormwater management plans for compliance with Section 8.26 of the Town's Bylaw. Because of the grading on and beyond the site, stormwater management is a key issue for review. At this time a low retaining wall is proposed on the right side; it is not clear if retaining walls would be required elsewhere on the site.

Additional Materials

In addition to the requests above for additional information, the Planning Board supports staff's request for the native SketchUp file for the 3D model. The interactive PDF version of the 3D model is not as useful as the native SketchUp file, customarily provided to staff and boards. Site sections cutting through the length of the loading zone would also help assess its slope in terms of public safety. The architect should provide a layout of typical units (bedroom, kitchen, and so on).

Sincerely,
Linda Hamlin, Chair