

Dear Planning Board Members,

I am the Co-Chair of the Town's Economic Development Advisory Board (EDAB) and voted for the package of warrant articles in the fall of 2016 at both EDAB's public hearing and Town Meeting making possible the development as a hotel of 700 Brookline Avenue. I attended nearly all of the River Road Study Committee meetings as well as the most recent June 20th Design Advisory Team (DAT) meeting. EDAB at its July 10th public meeting discussed the proposed plans with all four members of EDAB who served on the Study Committee present including Ken Lewis. I have reviewed Mr. Lewis' communication to you dated July 27, and agree with the points he made.

At the recent DAT, the Developer referenced on multiple occasions design changes to make the project more affordable. As you know, financial feasibility is not a consideration under our Zoning By-Laws or 40a when considering the granting of special permits. Financial feasibility was, however, considered by the Study Committee supported by the Town's financial consultant. The number of hotel rooms, initially proposed as 168 by the Developer at its first public meeting regarding this project before EDAB on January 4, 2016, is now proposed at 175. Minutes from that meeting include "Elias stated that he and his team want to work with the town to create a gateway building that connects with and enhances amenities like the Emerald Necklace and Muddy River..." Those minutes state this "'hotel type will include a full breakfast buffet that is open to the public as well as dinner service'. It also states "There is unmet demand for hotel rooms in the Boston area generally. The occupancy rate at the Marriott in Coolidge Corner runs in the high 80% range. Some hotels in Boston are in the 90% occupancy range..." This underscores the strength of this hotel sub-market which continues to date. While undoubtedly construction costs have and continue to increase, even if financial feasibility were on the table during a zoning process the market for hotel financing by all accounts remains strong.

Throughout the Study Committee process the Developer made frequent references to the critical importance of this prominent Gateway site visible from three public ways and Claremont's commitment to make this the "crown jewel" of its portfolio. The Memorandum of Agreement entered into by the Developer with the Town states: " on August 17, 2016, the Planning Board, at the recommendation of the River Road Study Committee adopted Design Guidelines with respect to the future development of the Emerald Island Special District, and in recognition of the intent and spirit of the Guidelines and the vision of the Committee, Claremont has expressed its commitment to work with the Town and provide a first-rate project in both its design elements and materials all in further recognition of the importance of the location of the Property; its connection to Brookline's neighborhoods, the Emerald Necklace and surrounding community." The Design Guidelines provide important guidance on general exterior massing, scale and design. It states 2nd para: "Building design should strengthen the relationship between the built environment and the Emerald Necklace". I understand more than ¾ of the building façade facing River Road on the first floor has been proposed as a blank wall. The Guidelines call for "buildings should be 1(a): "first floor

should be designed and treated as a seamless extension of the adjacent public sidewalk, providing for pedestrian circulation and/or other activities typically expected on a sidewalk.” The proposed meeting room space is not typically an activity expected on a sidewalk.

While I consider myself to be progressive about parking, the stunning proposal for built parking to be nearly 60% less than the amount per key the Developer repeatedly indicated was essential operationally should be carefully considered. The Developer repeatedly cited Hilton’s insistence that the maximum permitted under new zoning was its minimum. This causes me to question the credibility of citing Hilton standards for any design issues such as the size and placement of signs. Related to the proposed parking is the equally stunning proposal to not provide potential future access to a second level of parking for a future building developed north of this site under new zoning. During the Study Committee, the Developer showed a typical parking floor plan accommodating connections to the adjacent building on multiple levels. Massing models prepared by a Committee architect showed access at both the second and third floors to the building to the North, with the Developer present and not suggesting intentions otherwise. If this change were allowed, it may impede the future redevelopment of the adjacent district parcels.

I urge the Planning Board to direct the DAT to continue to work with the Developer to ensure that the Design Guidelines and representations made by them throughout the public process leading up to the Town Meeting re-zoning vote are fulfilled. It is both in the Town’s best interest as well as Claremont who prides itself on being a long-term owner to take the time necessary to ensure this is a “crown jewel” asset.

Thank you,
Paul Saner
Co-Chair, EDAB
Precinct 13 Town Meeting Member