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## MEMORANDUM

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DATE: February 15, 2021

FROM: Cliff Boehmer

TO: Maria Morelli

CC:

RE: Comments on Working Sessions and ZBA 11.4.20 Charges      PAGES: 3

PROJECT: 500 Harvard Street

PROJECT No.: 2020042

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Maria: In anticipation of the ZBA hearing on 500 Harvard Street scheduled for this coming Wednesday, February 17, I am providing you with some comments on the working sessions that you and I have attended with the development team, a review of the ZBA charges that were delivered at the 11.4.20 hearing, and my thoughts of the current state of the proposed design that will be presented this coming Wednesday.

### *The Working Sessions*

Since the November 4, 2020 hearing we have participated in three virtual working sessions with the development team to discuss the ZBA's charge and review how the design is progressing. These sessions were on November 10, 2020, January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2021, and on February 5, 2021. The initial session on November 10, in addition to reviewing the charge from the ZBA, was largely a "de-briefing" from the November 4 hearing, working to "process" some of the comments that were made by the ZBA and other Brookline residents. In addition to comments about height, massing, setbacks, and step backs, there was real concern expressed regarding the architectural language:

- Looks like a prison
- Arcade is oppressive
- Not elegant
- Fortress of solitude
- Looks like a hotel
- Doesn't feel safe
- Doesn't look residential

Generally, I think it is fair to say that the development team took the architectural "taste" concerns to heart by eliminating the dark masonry colors, expressed "steel" structure, deeply recessed balconies, etc. All of the design iterations that were reviewed at the second and third sessions worked with imagery of building envelope materials and detailing that are more typical for multi-family housing in Brookline. The discussions about "more traditional" appearance also bridged over to elements that are more massing related, most noticeably with the introduction of large scale bays that "bookend" the primary facades of the building, as well as smaller scale shallow bays on the west side of the building facing the neighbor on Kenwood.

Not unexpectedly, the elimination of the deep-set balconies that previously "bookended" the primary elevations created new massing "issues." Where there were eroded corners of the building in the November design that helped relate to the scale and setbacks of the neighbors to the north and west, the subsequent design iterations have attempted to "tie in" by more subtle shaping of a solid mass. It is because of this challenge, as well as

ongoing discussions about the nature of the streetwall along Harvard Street and relationship to the Kenwood neighbor that most discussion in the second two meetings was about what needed to be “carved away” to create a meaningful acknowledgement and respect of context.

What was not directly discussed in great detail during the working sessions was whether or not a six story building can work on this site. There was some discussion of re-distributing some of the top floor massing to the first floor as a means of mitigating scale (i.e., creating residential units on the first floor as opposed to parking). Each façade of the building was discussed in detail and a variety of approaches were reviewed, some by utilizing real time manipulation of the 3-D model by the project architect. But ultimately, it was various versions of six story buildings that were reviewed at each session, perhaps driven by the perceived charge to “justify” the proposed height through mitigation of the massing.

### ***ZBA CHARGE/THOUGHTS ON CURRENT STATE OF PROPOSED DESIGN***

Following the November 4, 2020 hearing, The ZBA charge was summarized in a memo distributed by you.

#### **Overall:**

***“Lacks sufficient mitigation of massing to justify height.”*** The ZBA did not believe that the November 4 massing was adequately articulated to justify a six-story building for the site. I concurred, but my concern was primarily with the west elevation facing the neighbor on Kenwood. In reviewing the current ground-level perspectives, it is my opinion that the design hasn’t yet “recovered from” the infilling of the deep balconies. While clearly not well-received from a stylistic perspective, that gesture succeeded in creating zones of the building with increased setback and diminished height at the locations that directly interface with neighbors. As such, it was a less-abrupt build up to the six-story height at the corner of Kenwood and Harvard. The stronger tie-in with the neighbor pulled 514 into a block-long composition that helped to “justify” the six stories at the corner. Additionally, the open framework of the balconies made a visual connection to the columned arcade element, helping the building read as a more coherent whole.

From the north, the current design presents a much more abrupt transition from its neighbor at 514 Harvard. While the idea of adding the 5-story large bay at that location was specifically meant to relate to the neighbor’s corner treatment, I think it may only work if the new bay is a lower element, closer to the height of the neighbor’s building. As currently rendered, it feels as though the overall setback along Harvard needs to be increased (when the real issue may be more a function of an inadequate transitional element).

The views of the dark-rendered 4-story band with shallow bays that rounds the southwest corner and runs the length of the west elevation is a more successful transitional element (although it is not clear if that there isn’t a better choice of color for that piece). While step-backs have been moderately increased on the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> floors, they may not be sufficient to strengthen the reading of the four-story element and to increase the sky view for the Kenwood neighbor (see the site section through Harvard Avenue). There also remains an issue of the building looking top-heavy from that perspective. These points have been ongoing discussions in the working sessions, and some progress has been made since the November 4 iteration.

***“Move building back from Harvard.”*** The ZBA was split on this point. As noted above, I believe that in order to keep the bulk of the Harvard façade in the location that’s currently shown, it is important to continue to study options for reworking the transitional element to the neighbor to the north.

***“Relationship to Kenwood 2.5 story abutter needs to be addressed.”*** While the design has improved, additional study is required. As is indicated in the current rendering from Kenwood, it may not be necessary to step back all of the top two floors equally. The issue may be mainly with the southern end of those levels. There may be value in continuing the strong horizontal banding at the top of the 5<sup>th</sup> floor around the entire south and west elevations to help address the top-heavy feeling and somewhat dis-jointed appearance of the three siding materials.

*"Needs to look more residential."* It is my opinion that the developer has succeeded in making the building more residential in appearance.

#### Kenwood Context: Massing and Views of Sky

*"Relationship to Kenwood residential district is unfinished business."* As noted above, more study is suggested. As was discussed at the November 4 hearing, part of the justification for the minimal setbacks on the Harvard Street elevation would be by creating more relief on the west elevation.

*"Balconies on Kenwood are skin deep...."* The balconies that were referred to are gone. There remains one balcony associated with the fifth floor unit on the southwest corner of the building.

*"Need more articulation at fifth and sixth floor."* This has been studied, but current version is not significantly different from the November 4 design.

#### Harvard Street Wall and Front Yard

*"Overhang arcade treatment is not an adequate response to ZBA's initial charge for front yard setback."*

While the design of the space beneath the overhang has been modified to create a wider open area for the accessible entry to the lobby by the elimination of the planters, wholesale setback of the Harvard Street façade was not looked at in detail at the working sessions, and is not incorporated in the current design. The proponent has surveyed existing setbacks along Harvard Street and has made the case that there is no "standard" approach to setback.

*"Floors 2-4 heave over setback....align with 514 Harvard."* As noted above, this aspect of the design remains in the current iteration (i.e., not aligned with 514).

*"Arcade treatment is not Harvard Street thing."* The developer believes that the arcade is effective in engaging pedestrians, and is more successful than a façade that continues with the same plane down to sidewalk level. It is the case that arcades are not a typical architectural element for Harvard Street, but it is also the case that there is no consistent model along Harvard Street for creating effective engagement with the street.

*"Look at pedestrian experience on Harvard in assessing front yard treatment. Planters, columns, and stairs take up front yard space."* As noted above, the developer has reviewed front yards along Harvard Street.

*"Break up of massing at Northeast corner is successful."* As discussed above, it is this reviewer's opinion that breaking up the massing of that corner was more successful in the November 4 version than the current design.

#### Architectural Style

*"Seems institutional."* This aspect of the design has changed significantly from the November 4 design.

*"Gray looks like steel, not residential."* The "expressed" structural elements have been removed from the design. There remains one section of the building that is rendered as a dark gray material. The exact nature of that material has not been discussed and is not called out on the renderings.

*"Faux wood not desirable."* This is not indicated in the current renderings.

I hope you find these comments useful, and I look forward to more detailed discussion at the hearing this coming Wednesday night, February 17.