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Maria Morelli, Senior Planner
BROOKLINE DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
333 Washington Street
Brookline, MA 02445

RE: 108 Centre Street 40B Development
Notes from Working sessions with Applicant team

Dear Maria:

As a brief follow up on the four working sessions we have had for this project since the hearing on September 20, (September 23, September 30, October 7, and October 14), I'm writing to provide you with some thoughts regarding the Applicant's responses to the ZBA "charges" they heard at the hearing, as well as some of my own thoughts on the current status of the design. I look forward to discussing all of the above this coming Wednesday evening, October 20 at the next hearing for this case.

ZBA CHARGES

Lack of open space:

While a number of suggestions were advanced and discussed for creating programmable open space on the project site, only minor changes were made in the building footprint or location of the building on the site (part of the café space was removed and the building entry recess was broadened on the Centre Street driveway elevation). As an alternative, the design team looked "campus-wide" at all of the contiguous properties owned by HSL and worked to enhance the connectivity between the various outdoor spaces. In this process of broader site-planning, a stronger connection through the site from Centre Street to the existing Senior Center was also discussed and implemented to a degree.

In my opinion, this "campus-wide" view towards open space makes good sense, as well as the efforts to create a stronger path from Centre to the Senior Center. However, given the number of dwelling units on the campus between 100, 108, and 112-120, there may still be insufficient programmable open space overall, and the connections between them may not be strong enough. To address this concern, I believe that the Applicant should reconsider the suggestion to remove the 5 parking spaces that currently encroach on the southern border of the site. These spaces are dedicated to the building at 100 Centre. This would provide significantly more space for circulation to the Senior Center and landscaping to screen the parking lot at 100. Additionally, more space and connectivity could be gained by eliminating at least two of the parking spaces at the western end of the parking lot that constrict development of a pathway from 100 to the Senior Center.

Choreography of all site functions:

In addition to showing vehicular access, drop off and pick up plans, proposed walking paths through the site, amenity locations, and connections to the Senior Center (much of which is discussed above), the Applicant has provided plan diagrams, as well as Monday and Thursday morning photographs of the current trash pick-up scheme on Centre Street. The proposed trash management plan for 108 will follow the same schedule and utilize the same street pick up locations, increasing the scale of what is depicted in the photographs.

The impact on the public realm, as depicted in the photographs, is at a minimum visual, and probably disruptive to pedestrian circulation during the hours of setting the containers out and the pick-up times. Similarly, the bike path on that side of Centre is disrupted by the trash operations.

These are issues that would be easier to solve if there were more site area available, but if that is not possible, there may be some options to consider:

- Rework trash shed and 112 driveway parapet wall to create a more generous storage/holding area for dumpsters (pulling shed further back from street to open up view angle down sidewalk).
- Increase number of pickups to cut down on street impact.

In any case, trash management is a necessary function of developments of this scale, and in this case, while not attractive, the impact appears to be restricted to relatively few hours each week.

Architectural style; Relationship to 100 and 112 makes more sense:

The overall look of the building has not significantly changed as far as the strategy for breaking up the massing through the use of relatively small projections, tall vertical breaks, and horizontal layering. As suggested by the Board and at the working sessions, the historic references have been abandoned in favor of a more “contemporary expression.” Different approaches to color have been presented, as well as ideas for patterning of large areas of what is presumed to be cementitious panels.

The most promising advancement of the façade design studies has been the accentuation of the covered walkway on the south side of the building that highlights a protected path to the Senior Center from Centre Street. The success of that piece, in this reviewer’s opinion, bolsters the argument for simplifying the look of the residential floors above. If it is not possible to break up the massing and create visual interest through large-scale articulation of the massing (see comments below), then try pushing the idea of this as a mixed-use building and work harder to create the most powerful engagement at the entry level. Consideration should be given to increasing the floor to ceiling height of the entry level, which would strengthen the expression of its importance.

At the last working session, the design of the north elevation was discussed, specifically the unsatisfactory appearance of the full height stairwells. The applicant was encouraged to recognize that while not the most prominent elevation, the north side is very visible from Centre Street and should be as thoughtfully designed as the other facades.

Setback and step-backs of upper floors (articulation):

This aspect of the project has changed very little since the initial application. There remains no significant articulation of the primary massing of the building. Nor have there been any major changes in the building’s footprint or its location on the site.

To the developer’s credit, the working sessions have served as a forum to discuss options that have been studied, including the suggestions made by this peer reviewer and Town staff. Various trade-offs related to different options were examined, but ultimately, all paths led back to a massing and site placement very close to the original submission.

The critical design-drivers that have been established as relatively fixed include the size and programming of the building entry level, the two-lane-wide drop off drive, and the unit count above. All of these elements make good sense and contribute to the quality and viability of the project itself, and will likely benefit the HSL campus, as well as other Brookline residents. I expect that the applicant will present their process of evaluating the different schemes and their associated trade-offs at the hearing this Wednesday evening.

Should a taller building be considered?

Among the options that were examined was the creation of a significant intermediate step-back on the western façade, and relocation of that excised mass to an additional floor. It is this reviewer’s opinion that this move would be a meaningful mitigation strategy for that side of the building. It would also break up the overall “boxiness” of the proposal. Ultimately, the applicant rejected this approach as uneconomic, and in addition, while decreasing the impact to the neighbor to the west, it increased the shadow impact and view of sky to the residents on the opposite side of Centre Street.

Since our last working session, I have had a few additional thoughts about options that could be explored by the Applicant, and will pass them on here:

- Given the awkwardness of the two stairwells on the north elevation, look at fully or significantly embedding them within the primary massing. This may require elimination of the small corridor seating areas on the residential floors.
- In the simplification process, look at some conventional approaches to distinguishing the residential floors from the more public entry level. Try pattern making with small scale stacks of bay windows, some variations in materials and colors, etc.
- Is there an alternative location for the project transformer that is less prominent?

Finally, left over from my letter report dated September 13, 2021:

- There does not appear to be any bicycle storage indicated in the building or exterior racks for visitors.
- Submitted materials do not include a lighting plan.
- The Applicant has stated that they intend to comply with Brookline's zero emission initiative, with the possible exception of domestic hot water production (note that a gas line is indicated on the utility plan). What is the current thinking?
- The project may pursue Passive House certification. Is this the case?
- Are trash chutes as drawn on upper floors sufficiently fire-separated from the corridors?
- Status of geotechnical report that includes recommendations for foundation types for the new structure, water table levels, etc.?
- Provide a preliminary Building Code review. Provide detailed information regarding areas of the building with zero setback, as well as areas of encroachment (for example, ramp from rear of building towards Senior Center).
- Submit a roof plan with mechanical equipment screening dimensions, nature of materials, etc.
- Provide annotated building elevations that include dimensional strings, coordinated with proposed grades around building.
- Draft a site-specific preliminary Construction Management Plan that includes intentions regarding use of site, neighboring sites, and street for mobilization/laydown space, and accommodations that must be made to protect neighboring properties, material deliveries, street closures, construction durations, etc.

As usual, it's a pleasure working with you Maria. I hope you will get back to me with any questions.

Sincerely,



Clifford Boehmer, AIA