



Hancock Village  
Neighborhood Conservation  
District Commission  
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Dennis De Witt  
Mark Allen, Alternate  
Stephen Chiumenti, Alternate

## *Town of Brookline Massachusetts*

June 1, 2016

Dear Zoning Board of Appeals:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Chestnut Hill Realty's 40B proposal for Puddingstone at Chestnut Hill. The Brookline Neighborhood Conservation District Commission (NCDC) has evaluated the present Puddingstone at Chestnut Hill 40B proposal, employing the Hancock Village NCD Guidelines as its analytic framework.

It also, more generally, considered the proposed development's appropriateness for the site with particular reference to the site's existing development pattern. The Chestnut Hill proposal disrupts the carefully designed layout of open spaces and the interface of the residential units to each other. The apartment house structure with its parking completely obliterates the characteristic natural landscape feature of the area by blasting away the large puddingstone outcrop — from which, ironically, the project apparently derives its name. The siting, regrading and scale of the proposed apartment building and townhouses are incongruous with the scale and massing as well as the architecture of the two-and-a-half predominately brick U-shaped apartment blocks. The proposed plan destroys the predominantly significant aspects of this historically important Garden City/garden apartment block project and its separation of pedestrian and vehicular circulation paths.

The architecture of the proposed new buildings overshadows the existing buildings —both figuratively and literally, as it would be on a high point on the south edge of the property. It bears no relationship to the intimate and cohesive original design. The introduction of so much impervious surfaces also contradicts the area's signature element, green open spaces. If some version of this proposal is to go forward, more attention should be paid to harmonizing the scale and details of the existing structures.

The original 1947 project included buildings in a continuous, almost flowing character, surrounded by open space courtyards. The new construction interrupts this flow with additional parking, out-of-scale townhouses, the introduction of a new road and rotary, and a massive apartment building that is more suitable in an industrial office park than a garden-apartment complex setting. The proposed new buildings could be less complex in massing and detailing, and be more in scale with the existing Hancock Village complex.

### **Hancock Village's Distinctive Existing Context**

Hancock Village is an intact, highly successful planned development embodying well thought-out relationships

among its structures, the site's natural contours and its adjacent neighborhood of single-family homes. Developed between 1946 and 1949, it was undertaken by the John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance Company to meet the area's critical need to provide affordable housing for returning war veterans. In consideration for a zoning change from single- to multi-family housing granted by the Town, the company proposed a development that would be more affordable than contemporary single-family neighborhoods but would embody the best thinking about residential development of its time, as indicated in historical documents. Laid out by Olmsted Associates of Brookline, Hancock Village represents the culmination of an evolving strand of American, automobile-age residential development that had its beginning in the mid-1930s as the Garden Village model (distinct from the earlier English Garden City model). Its hallmarks are respect for the natural and topographical character of its site, separation of pedestrians from automobile traffic, and the orientation of the living space away from the street and towards common greenspace. Each of Hancock Village's dwelling units occupies a townhouse of two stories, most topped by a peaked roof. Each unit has its own separate entrance, the front door of which characteristically opens into a green courtyard providing pedestrian access to the village streets. At the rear, each has a patio within a sheltered hierarchical system of greenspaces consisting of a communal open space overlooked and bounded on three sides by its townhouse rows and, at its open end, connecting to a network of rustic green corridors that filter through the development. In designing these open space sequences, Olmsted Associates, rather than being daunted by the site's *genius loci*, its rising and falling terrain and its prominent rock outcroppings, used them to provide the development's visual interest. One such corridor, running north-south through the village, incorporates the area's highest point, crowned with puddingstone outcropping, to form a small urban wild.

In addition to weaving the village together with internal more rustic green corridors, Olmsted Associates laid out a more urbane greenbelt of linear parkland along its northern edge. This undulating greensward framed by mature trees simultaneously provides the greenspace into which the communal greenspaces and patios of the northernmost townhouses open and a recreation zone for perhaps a quarter of the site's Brookline residents.

The plan's circulation system is an integral compliment to the village's open space layout. The green zones between the townhouse clusters organize paths and spaces that separate pedestrians from automobiles. Cars are accommodated by a logically coherent roadway system consisting of a central street, Independence Drive, which connects Hancock Village to surrounding communities, and off of which run looped local roadways that provide parking for the apartments and access to two original parking garages. It is important to note that none of the original roads are dead-ends, and that the proposed new road with rotary creates a new circulation pattern. Overall, the Olmsted Associates' plan is a logically coherent system of residences situated within a green, undulating natural setting.

### **National Register Eligibility**

The integrated design of townhouses, open spaces, paths and roadways that provide Hancock Village's distinctive character remain intact today, nearly 70 years after its development. In recognition of its importance as a culminating example of the Garden Village movement, in 2011 the Town of Brookline and the City of Boston, both in their roles as Massachusetts Historical Commission Certified Local Governments (CLG), declared it to be eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. Such CLG opinions are presumptively dispositive. Among the defining features mentioned in their opinions was the greenbelt. In a concurrence dated June 22, 2012, the Massachusetts Historical Commission agreed with the CLG opinion that Hancock Village meets National Register criteria A and C and possibly B, for listing at the state and local levels. (Meeting only one criterion is required.) The three pertinent criteria are:

- a) Associated with events that has made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history;
- b) Associated with the lives of persons significant in our past;
- c) Embodies distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction.

## **Neighborhood Conservation District By-Law**

In recognition of Hancock Village's historic distinction, the Town of Brookline considered giving it further protection by establishing the property as a Local Historic District (LHD). It determined, however, that such a designation would be inadequate, in that LHDs do not address landscape features, paving, and areas not visible from a public way. Accordingly, the Town established the property as its first Neighborhood Conservation District (NCD), which in the form adopted is the strongest tool available to it to preserve not only the village's built character but also that of its encompassing landscape. The district's guidelines (see Town By-Law Sec. 5.10.3.d.1 in the Attachments) identify the elements of the site plan that are to be preserved: (i) its architectural style and character; (ii) its building size, height and massing; (iii) its façade characteristics; (iv) its roof treatment; and (v) its streetscape, topography, and landscape. Significant negative impacts pertain to (a) removal or alteration of outcroppings; (b) alteration of existing grades; (c) removal of existing pedestrian paths; (d) addition of new impervious surfaces; and (e) loss of open space or the greenbelt buffer. The Commission has reviewed the proposed project in the context of the Hancock Village guidelines in making its determination as to the appropriateness of the conceptual project design. The Commission is cognizant of the fact that the local guidelines are "Local Requirements and Regulations" within the meaning of the Chapter 40B regulations. The Commission's findings follow.

### **Analysis and Findings**

The Commission finds that the proposed conceptual site plan is inappropriate to the existing context of Hancock Village in the following important respects.

First, it violates the hierarchical system of open spaces that form the basis for the village's layout. Specifically, the introduction of two-and-a-half-story flats, their service road, and accessory parking which is being forced into the open space courtyards for the existing townhouses.

In addition, the greenspace with its mature vegetation and puddingstone outcropping would be obliterated to accommodate the new large apartment building, thus destroying the site's undulating character and *genius loci*. It would obliterate the ledge and eliminate it as an open space by siting a six-story apartment building in its place. These elements of the design place it in direct conflict with Hancock Village Neighborhood Conservation District guidelines, Sec. 5.10.3.d.1. (v) (a) through (e).

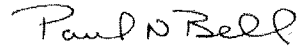
The proposal is inconsistent with Hancock Village's defining scale and architecture, and focus of sections (i) through (iv) of the Hancock Village Neighborhood Conservation District guidelines. As is set forth more fully under the 40B design-review criterion "Building Massing," the proposed 77 feet high and 457 feet long apartment building consumes the expanse of the sight line corridor. The relatively shallow setback of the new apartment building, along with its massive bulk, overshadows and imposes a wall-like effect on the twenty existing two-story townhouses.

The Neighborhood Conservation District Commission believes that a more appropriate plan and design could be developed which would respect and retain the historic and architectural qualities of Hancock Village. This plan would involve applying the universal design principle of locating increased density at the edge of the site, in this case, along Independence Drive. This would allow the project to achieve several important goals of developing more affordable housing, maintaining the community standards of the nearby single-family neighborhood, and most importantly, conserving the character defining qualities of the historically significant Hancock Village site and nearby conservation areas.

**The Commission's Conclusion**

The Commission has carefully considered the Puddingstone at Chestnut Hill 2016 Chapter 40B Proposal within the framework of the Hancock Village NCD Guidelines. In doing so, it focused particularly on the features that distinguish the village's historically significant design and on its relationship to the abutting neighborhood, as well as on the NCD guidelines adopted to conserve Hancock Village's design. The Commission finds that the proposal in its current iteration is not appropriate for the reason set forth.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Paul N Bell in cursive script.

Paul Bell  
Chairman