

NEEDHAM PLANNING BOARD MINUTES

November 7, 2023

The Needham Planning Board meeting, held in the Charles River Room of the Public Services Administration Building and virtually using Zoom, was called to order by Adam Block, Chairman, on Tuesday, November 7, 2023, at 7:00 p.m. with Messrs. Crocker and Alpert and Mmes. McKnight and Espada, Planning Director, Ms. Newman and Assistant Planner, Ms. Clee.

Mr. Block noted this is an open meeting that is being held in a hybrid manner in public and remotely per state guidelines. He reviewed the rules of conduct for all meetings. This meeting includes one public hearing and public comment will be allowed. If any votes are taken at the meeting the vote will be conducted by roll call. All supporting materials, including the agenda, are posted on the town's website.

Public Hearing:

7:30 p.m. – Major Project Site Plan Special Permit No. 2023-03: Neehigh, LLC, 93 Union Street, Suite 315, Newton Center, Petitioner (Property located at 629-661 Highland Avenue, Needham, Massachusetts). Regarding request to demolish the five existing buildings on the property and build a single two-story 50,000 square feet Medical Office Building (25,000 square feet footprint) with two levels of parking (one at-grade and one below grade) totaling two hundred and fifty (250) spaces. Please note: This hearing has been continued from the September 5, 2023, October 3, 2023 and October 17, 2023 Planning Board meetings.

Mr. Block introduced the proponents. Mr. Block noted the following correspondence for the record: an updated traffic study from Vanasse & Associates, Inc.; a letter, dated 11/1/23, from Adriana Santiago, Project Engineer at Greenman-Pedersen, Inc. (GPI), noting she has reviewed the updated traffic study with its conclusions and recommendations; an email, dated 10/31/23, from Police Chief John Schlittler with recommendations of traffic-control signage; an email, dated 10/31/23, from Colby Cavanaugh, of Mangel Destefano, with updated plan sheets; and an email, dated 11/2/23, from Daniel Barton, of Mangel Destafano, with information and egress/entrance with revised renderings.

Evans Huber, Attorney for the applicant, noted changes were made to move the dumpster to the center rear of the parking garage and Cross Street was made a one way entrance only. The entry was made narrower. Near the intersection of Putnam and Cross it is being proposed to change the shape of the curbing to extend part of the way toward Cross Street to prevent a left turn. There will be a "no left turn" sign. He noted the consent of the abutters along Putnam Street would be needed to change the shape and eliminate one parking space. Mr. Alpert asked if a permanent barrier would be put there. It looks like one lane. Mr. Huber stated it is still 2 lanes. He feels no one would like to take a right onto Putnam. It is not a barrier but a white painted line. He noted only vehicles from the lower parking area would be using this. It would make it difficult to make a left turn.

Ms. McKnight asked what happens if the abutters do not want to give up a parking space. She understands the spaces are used by condominium unit occupants. She asked if this could work without the parking spaces and what kind of signage would be used so people do not park on Cross Street. Mr. Huber feels a lot of parking is near the building. He would not think people would walk across the lot to park there as it does not make sense. There is plenty of parking closer to the entrance to the building. Mr. Alpert agreed it does not make sense to park there. Justin Mosca, of VHB, noted a curbing change can be done without losing a parking space but the curb gets more squared off. This is really intended to discourage left turns but without extending into the parking space it would be less clear. Jeffrey Dirk, of Vanasse & Associates, noted they will work with the property owners to come up with something. It needs to accommodate fire vehicles. Putnam Street is a low volume road, and they want to keep that.

Mr. Huber stated the last major change is an accessible ramp has been put in for an entrance/exit. This has minimized the visual impact. Shauna Gillies-Smith, landscape designer, clarified it is a sloped walkway and not a ramp.

Howard Goldman, Attorney for Gateway Condos, thought they were eliminating exits onto Cross Street. The upper parking level has eliminated the exit onto Cross but not the lower level. This is a very congested area. He asked if this was workable. The Gateway Condos and others do like the parking spaces along Cross Street and would not want to give up any.

Joanie Freidman, of 71 Putnam Street, noted she has lived here for 27 years. There were 5 small businesses and there was traffic daily with trucks breaking the curbing. She would ask them not to use the way, but they continued. People came through Putnam on a daily basis. She does not feel signage would work. It is a cut through and people do not care. Truck deliveries will continue to cut through. Highland Avenue traffic is difficult. People can wait 20 minutes to take a left onto Highland. She asked what would happen with people trying to get out of Cross Street onto Highland Avenue. She would prefer to have traffic exit onto Arbor Street as it is on the other side of the building. Cross Street is at an incline and not flat as shown.

Mr. Goldman stated Arbor is a quiet street. He feels that could be used as there is very little traffic around there. Cross is very busy. This would make a mess and people would use Putnam to avoid the mess. The exit should be to Arbor. Mr. Crocker asked why people go out Putnam rather than Cross and was informed it was easier. Mr. Goldman asked what mechanism for enforcement can there be. Mr. Huber stated deliveries are on the upper level and would be directed to Arbor to go out. The only way to leave the upper deck is to go out Arbor. People can decide which way to go out from the lower level. It is not desirable to direct 100% of traffic to Arbor. People will be discouraged from taking a left turn onto Putnam. Ms. McKnight stated there is no difference in traffic on Highland, whether exiting from Cross or Arbor, but there is a steep slope going up Cross to Highland. Putnam to Highland via the condominium right-of-way is a much more gradual slope. She is glad all trucks will be going to the upper level and have to go out Arbor. She noted she has gone out twice to look around. Mr. Huber stated they are sensitive to concerns the people on Putnam have. He feels this preserves the functionality of the people who live there.

Robert Doherty, of Boston Development Group, stated there will be far less illegal parking because there will be a garage. It would be more inconvenient to park on the road and he feels there will be a lot less of that. Mr. Crocker agreed. Wendy Xiao, of 613 Highland Avenue, noted she has small children but could not hear the conversation. Michael Notkin, of 62 Putnam Street, noted concerns with traffic. He lives at the corner, and it looks like the applicants are taking out half his front yard. His driveway is 10 feet off Cross Street. Mr. Dirks noted green space will be added, not taken away. There would be nothing done on his physical property. Mr. Notkin asked if some of the road will be taken and was informed yes. Mr. Notkin is concerned with traffic and would like to see traffic go to Arbor. He mainly wanted to see what was going on with his property. Mr. Dirks noted they will tie Putnam Street into his driveway. Sergey Svetliv, of 63 Putnam Street, has lived there since 2005. There is a lot of snow removal in the winter. Trucks slip and sometimes hit vehicles. Garbage removal is twice a week. He stated there may be a big issue with adjustments. There are water truck deliveries also. It is hard in the winter and may be an issue. He wants the Board to think about the winter.

Nancy Greenwald, Condominium Trustee at 615 Highland Avenue, has a concern with parking for 250 cars. Cross Street has a steep hill, and she feels cars will cut through the condo development. There is not a clear view from Cross to Highland. She thinks the condo association owns the parking spots along Cross Street. Ronald Greenwald, of 615 Highland Avenue, is concerned with traffic on Highland Avenue. There will need to be a detail policeman to get traffic out of the property to Highland Avenue. Emily Pick, of 12 Mills Road, lives on the other side of Highland Avenue. She is concerned with shoot through traffic. Mills Road has a lot of kids who play in the road. People will cut through these roads. The left turn out of Mills onto Highland Avenue is a disaster. She feels this will congest the entire area with doctor appointments every 15 to 20 minutes. This is a recipe for disaster in Needham Heights.

Alan Freidman, of 71 Putnam Street, stated parking exit should be one way via Cross as it makes sense. Delivery trucks did not care what was said to them. They kept coming through Putnam. People will take a left and go onto Putnam. It would be a hindrance and they should not have to tolerate it. Mr. Crocker asked if they are impinging on Cross Street and making one way at that part. Mr. Dirks stated the width basically stays the same. One telephone pole will be relocated. Mr. Crocker asked if the pole is in the road now. Mr. Dirks stated it appears it is. They are working within the roadway and the road will be adjusted a little. Mr. Crocker asked why delivery trucks will only be on the upper level. Ms. Cavanaugh stated they will not fit in the lower level. Ms. Espada asked if the project is making a street in the back. Mr. Dirks stated it will be a 2-lane driveway that connects 2 streets (Arbor and Cross) to the lower parking. Ms. Espada asked if the entrance in front is still an entrance and was informed it was.

Teresa Combs, of 7 Utica Road, works in health care and there are ambulances and EMTs frequently coming in to work on patients. She asked which entrance would the ambulance be using to potentially transport patients. Mr. Block stated, given the height, it would have to come into the upper level through Cross or come down Arbor and would park in the loading zone. Ms. Combs stated she wanted to make sure that was thought of. Ms. McKnight stated the amended traffic report, on page 3 of the summary section, has a self-selection egress. She understands that but is not clear on directed egress by parking deck alternative. What is that? Mr. Dirks stated you can only enter the upper deck by Cross Street. He noted lower level traffic could be forced to only make a left turn to Arbor and the lower deck would be forced to Cross Street but he is not recommending that be done. They are proposing the self-selection option. The Board asked the proponent to look at alternatives. With Cross being one way in, 75% of traffic will go out to Arbor and 25% to Cross.

Ms. Cavanaugh stated the entrance to the upper deck is not just from Cross Street. Cars can come in from Arbor also. They can exit only to Arbor but can enter from either street. Ms. Freidman asked how many spaces were in the lower and upper levels. Ms. Cavanaugh stated 132 in the lower level and 118 in the upper level. Mr. Doherty tends to think staff would park in the lower level given that is covered parking. It helps reduce traffic coming out onto Cross. Mr. Crocker noted the expectation that 75% of traffic will exit to Arbor and 25% to Cross. Arbor is one road and Cross is 2 roads. When exiting the lower level, if the only option drivers will have is to go right then there will be 2 options – the steeper grade up Cross to Highland or through the neighborhood. He feels there will be a higher level of exiting traffic going to the right that will go through the neighborhood. Mr. Dirks stated employees will be told to go out through Arbor. It is easier to get onto Highland from Arbor. Mr. Crocker commented it is great they are putting the curve in at the corner of Cross and Putnam. It will reduce going through Putnam, but people still will.

Mr. Alpert noted there are a lot more standard size spaces on the upper lot and more compact on the lower level. He is always looking for standard size spaces. People will learn they are better off on the upper level with more room and more space and will have to exit onto Arbor. He suggested keeping the mix of standard spaces on the upper level. Ms. Espada asked if the applicant feels all 250 spaces will be occupied at one time. Do they need that many or is the number based on zoning? Mr. Doherty stated the number is based on zoning. This is what doctors, hospitals and user groups of this type are looking for. He feels it is usually 85% full. Ms. Espada stated some zoning has ridiculous amounts of parking. Is this what is needed and wanted? Mr. Doherty feels this is what is wanted and appropriate for this use.

Upon a motion made by Ms. McKnight, and seconded by Mr. Alpert, it was by a vote of the five members present unanimously:

VOTED: to close the hearing.

The Board took a 5-minute break.

Needham Housing Authority – discussion about Linden/Chambers Redevelopment Project

Mr. Block stated he wants an update on what has been accomplished since the last meeting and changes to the proposal. Dan Chen, architect with Bargmann Hendrie + Archetype, Inc., noted the schematic design for Phases 1A, 1B and 2. There will be 2 buildings in Phase 1A and 1B and 2 in Phase 2. They deviated from the concept report to economize the resources to share, reduce the footprint to maximize efficiency, reduce FAR, maximize distance to Linden Street and reduce the height. There will be 130 parking spaces, all surface on site. Mr. Block asked if it is the same parking ratio as now. Reginald Foster, representative for Needham Housing Authority, stated there are currently 152 parking spaces. The Housing Authority has assigned parking. Mr. Chen stated the ratio is lower than 0.5. Mr. Block asked if there are too many spaces. Mr. Chen noted there is some visitor parking. He thinks 130 is the right number. He added a line for minimum lot size. The changes are in red. The minimum frontage has been modified from 80 feet to 150 feet, the front yard setback was 30 feet and is increasing to 40 feet and the rest of the table remains the same.

Ms. McKnight asked why the lot coverage is so high. The existing condition is 16% lot coverage and it is going down to 11%. The call for proposed zoning allows 25% lot coverage. Why 25% and not some lower number? Robert Smart, attorney for the applicants, stated it seems like a reasonable number. Mr. Chen noted the current design is at 11% with the consolidation of buildings. Ms. Espada asked if Phase 1A and 1B would be built separately or at the same time. Mr. Chen noted they will be built consecutively and not at the same time. The construction time frame is 16 months for Phase 1A and 12 months for Phase 1B. He noted there are 18 Linden buildings and the site is around 11.02 acres. Fire lanes have been

added to access the building. He met with the Fire Department 11/1/23. There will be a new fire hydrant in Phase 1A. There are 2 existing hydrants and there will be a new one at the rear in Phase 1B. The path has been adjusted as well as waste management as to how to remove trash and where it is located. There were 2 community meetings with the abutters and the wider community. There was discussion about pushing the Phase 1B building up. Linden Street residents want it moved down for more distance from them. This is a different site plan option. Everything will conform.

Mr. Block asked if it was possible to make the building completely straight. Mr. Chen stated they do not want a 450-foot straight building. He is trying to break it up. Mr. Smart stated it is possible Town Meeting could approve a front setback of 40 feet. They cannot go back because of wetlands. He feels there is still a need to hear further from the public. There are a lot of Town Meeting members they have not met with yet. Mr. Alpert asked the actual setback. Mr. Chen stated 40 feet and 88 feet. The rear setback is 20 feet. The height is 53 feet to the roof ridge. They used the High Rock School for comparison where the highest point is 48 feet. It sets a precedence that there are large buildings nearby. Phase 1A has 20 units per floor with a total of 76 units and Phase 1B has 15 units per floor for a total of 60 units. The center is the core of the building. People will come in off Linden Street. All amenities were coordinated with Engineering and a trash room and trash chutes have been added on every floor as part of the waste management strategy. There is no basement. The mechanicals and 8 water heaters are in the fire services room.

Ms. McKnight asked where the mailboxes are. Mr. Chen stated there is a mail room between the front entry in the central area. Ms. McKnight asked if there would be staff that sit at the desk. Mr. Chen noted there would not be a receptionist. There will be offices on the top floor. Mr. Foster stated there would be counseling sessions during office hours but there will not be a permanent staff member assigned there. There will be a central laundry room. Ms. McKnight commented having community functions all together on the first level encourages friendships. She noted people get a lot of packages. Mr. Chen stated there is a mail/package room where people will go to get their packages. He noted at the 10/3/23 meeting the Planning Board asked for some additional views. He has added 2 additional views – one from the Maple Street cul-de-sac and one from the Linden Development. The views show the building is still blocked from view with a tree buffer. He showed aerial views with late Fall/Winter views. The pictures, from 10/31, show with the leaves falling the building is still shielded from view. He showed Maple Street toward the proposed building still has coverage and he showed the outline of where the building would be. He also did shadow studies with the summer solstice at 9:00 a.m., noon, and 3:00 p.m. The shadows are principally all on the property line. With the winter solstice at 9:00 a.m. shadows are on Linden Street and at 3:00 p.m. they are approaching Maple Street. The flat shadow study did not take into account the trees there. He looked for comps and found this is most applicable to the Rosemary Lake Apartments with 30 units per acre and Chestnut Hollow Apartments with around 68 units per acre. Ms. Espada asked if Chestnut Hollow is the same height as the proposed height. Mr. Chen noted Chestnut Hollow is 4 stories and a little lower than the proposed height. Ms. McKnight stated the Rosemary Lake Apartments are zoned for 18 units per acre.

Mr. Block noted they had 2 community meetings with 17 people at one and 16 attending the other. What comments came out of that? Mr. Foster noted people thought this was a better design, progress was made, and they were glad the building was moved back. The strongest feedback was about flooding in the area and if this would make it worse. He feels it may be a little better as to stormwater management. People see this as an opportunity to voice concerns and are getting used to a bigger building. People would like to get their relatives here who are farther away. He has not received any wild protest letters yet. Mr. Block noted there were some letters months ago expressing concern. Mr. Foster stated they are going beyond the formal outreach meetings. He was invited to Maple Street this weekend to talk about it.

Mr. Block asked, ultimately, how do we move forward? Does the Housing Authority want to be the proponent of the Article through a Citizens' Petition, or should the Planning Board be the proponent? The housing is a priority for the Town. Affordable housing is more challenging, but this is an opportunity to create deeply affordable housing. He would prefer the Planning Board become the proponent. He would like the Planning Board to convene a community meeting before the end of December with a first hearing in January and the second hearing, if needed, before the end of January or beginning of February. He asked if that gets the Article on the Town Meeting or Special Town Meeting schedule. He would like to get on the Special Town Meeting as that gives a little more time.

Mr. Crocker feels the Planning Board should be the proponent and the Annual Town Meeting is what they need to do. The Annual may be a little better and may reach the community in a different way. Ms. Espada agrees the Planning Board should do it. It shows solidarity with the Town and the zoning. Ms. McKnight stated it is fine with her if the Housing

Authority wants the Planning Board to be the proponent. Mr. Smart noted the Housing Authority would prefer the Planning Board be the proponent. Mr. Alpert stated he does not think it matters to Town Meeting who the sponsor is but who the presenter is. He has no problem being the proponent. Mr. Crocker asked if the Planning Board could be the proponent, but the Housing Authority be the presenter. Mr. Foster noted it could be done either way. He feels it may be better if the Planning Board starts. The Housing Authority could be there, and they should ask Margaret Moran, from Cambridge Housing Authority, to be there as well as the other experts. He noted CPA funds for this project will be on the Warrant at the Annual Town Meeting. Mr. Block feels it will be an entire collaboration and all should be accessible. He would like this topic on the agenda for the next meeting.

The Board discussed the timing. Mr. Block would like the Planning Board to have a community meeting. Ms. McKnight noted the Housing Authority has had many community meetings and will be having more. She does not feel the Planning Board has time to have a community meeting. Mr. Block stated the Board would have to make time for it. If done properly it would be better attended. He would like a community meeting in December with a notice to all Town Meeting members, a notice by mail to all residents in the surrounding area and a notice on Facebook. He would like a wide reach to get as many people as possible. There will be a hearing in January. Ms. McKnight feels it is redundant. Mr. Alpert feels if the Housing Authority is already planning a community meeting and notice to all Town Meeting members there is no need for the Planning Board to duplicate it.

The Board discussed when the zoning language would need to be done and when public hearings would be held. After discussion, Mr. Block noted they would try to plan a joint meeting of the Planning Board and Housing Authority tentatively scheduled for 12/6/23. They will check the availability of Powers Hall or the Broadmeadow School. Mr. Block stated he would like to take some time to focus on dimensionals. Mr. Smart noted in Section 3.16.6, with the Planning Board suggestions, the minimum lot area was increased to 20,000, the minimum frontage increased from 80 feet to 150 feet and the minimum front setback increased from 30 feet to 40 feet. The other numbers have been seen previously. Mr. Alpert noted the FAR is 0.42 and the zoning proposal is 0.5, the units per acre is 22.5 and the proposal is 25 and lot coverage is at 11%. He asked if they needed 25% lot coverage in the proposed zoning. He feels it would go over better if the number was lower and thinks 18% would be good. Mr. Foster stated they shrunk the footprint and went up a story. To the north there are neighbors, but the building is farther away from them. The neighbors on the other side are the Housing Authority. It would be better if the required setback was more than 20 feet on the north. Ms. Moran stated it needs to work for both buildings.

Mr. Smart stated it would be useful to hear from the Planning Board members on what they would like the applicant to look at further. They can confer and get back to the Board. Mr. Block told him to send anything they come up with to Ms. Newman and she can forward it to the members. Mr. Block asked if there will be solar or if it will be solar ready. The proponent responded that it will be solar ready. Mr. Block asked if the 58-foot height includes mechanicals. Mr. Chen stated it was 58 feet to the ridge with the mechanicals underneath. The back side of the building is flat. Mr. Smart stated there needs to be language about the mechanicals. It is not in the zoning. Mr. Alpert asked what the area is currently zoned for and does it make sense to do an overlay. Ms. Newman noted it is General Residence and Single Residence B. It needs to be rezoned and not an overlay.

Ms. McKnight stated there does not need to be a definition for multi-family dwelling as they already have that under Dwellings, Multi-Family. It should match the state Zoning Act's definition of Multi-Family Dwellings. Mr. Smart noted in Section 3.16.6 (a) they could have a reference to Dwelling, Multi-Family. The definition is only in a few overlay districts – Needham Center Business, Chestnut Street Business and Garden Street Overlay Districts. Mr. Alpert asked why the definition is being limited to these 3 Districts. The definition should be "A building containing 3 or more dwelling units..." Ms. McKnight agreed. She asked why define site plan review in this section. There is a whole site-plan-review chapter so they do not need to define it. Ms. Newman stated there are different thresholds for different districts. If creating a new threshold there would need to be a new definition. Ms. McKnight asked why say accessory uses are allowed by right - it is already in the By-Law. Mr. Alpert noted it is usually delineated by right or special permit. Ms. Newman added that delineations are by district also.

Mr. Alpert asked for clarification as to whether this is limiting occupancy to age and disability. Mr. Smart stated that is not what they are proposing. They are using the definition in Section 1.3 – at or below 80% of income and qualifying under 40B. Affordable housing refers to Section 1.3. They do not feel they need to define more than in terms of income. It is

best for the Housing Authority to have some flexibility. They need to comply with federal and state guidelines and those may change over time. Ms. Newman pointed out it can always be converted. This is not a non-issue. Mr. Foster stated he has had meetings with Town Counsel. The restrictions are in the deed registered with Norfolk County, which does not speak to disabled either. Is this a Planning Board zoning issue or worked out with non-zoning issues? Mr. Alpert stated if age and disability restrictions are not in front of Town Meeting the Finance Committee would have a problem. It could be in the deed and that would be in front of Town Meeting. That would take care of it.

Mr. Block would like the proponent to flag this with Town Counsel. He wants the applicant to make a recommendation on the benefit of doing it and the adverse reaction of it. Send it in separate correspondence to Ms. Newman and she will distribute to the members to review. Ms. McKnight stated the Finance Committee would take seriously any fiscal impact of the project.

ANR Plan – David G. and Elizabeth Sutcliffe, Petitioner (Property located at 609 High Rock Street, Needham, MA)

Ms. Newman stated the plan is compliant.

Upon a motion made by Mr. Alpert, and seconded by Ms. McKnight, it was by a vote of the five members present unanimously:

VOTED: to approve the ANR Plan.

Board of Appeals – November 16, 2023

Mr. Block noted there were 2 cases. One case was continued, and the Board has already dealt with that.

1688 Central Avenue

Mr. Alpert and Ms. Espada recused themselves. Mr. Block thinks this is a building permit application and not a site plan special permit application. None of the members of the Board can provide the expertise and have not been privy to the building permit application. All the members have seen is the application for the appeal of the building permit. They have no information from the Building Commissioner or Town Counsel. He does not see the Planning Board being in a position to make a comment.

Upon a motion made by Mr. Crocker, and seconded by Ms. McKnight, it was by a vote of the three members present unanimously:

VOTED: “No comment.”

Mr. Alpert and Ms. Espada returned to the meeting.

Minutes

The Board put off the minutes.

Report from Planning Director and Board members.

Ms. Newman noted there is a HONE Advisory Group meeting this Thursday. She also noted that she has submitted the Planning Department budget to the Town Manager. She will put the full budget in the next packet for the members. She has asked for an additional Planner and additional planning funds in the amount of \$80,000 to replenish the account. She has also asked for additional administrative support.

Correspondence

Mr. Block noted the following correspondence for the record: a letter from the Attorney General, dated 9/15/23, approving the Annual Town Meeting Articles 19, 20 and 39. They have until 11/17/23 to approve Article 18. He also noted an email, dated 10/20/23, from Assistant Town Manager Katie King regarding stormwater runoff adversely affecting the neighbors,

specifically 21 Mellon Street; and a notice from the City of Newton regarding a map change. Ms. Newman noted the Engineering Department is looking at some changes to the Stormwater Regulations to bring to Town Meeting. Ms. King is on top of it.

Upon a motion made by Mr. Crocker, and seconded by Ms. McKnight, it was by a vote of the five members present unanimously:

VOTED: to adjourn the meeting at 10:25 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Donna J. Kalinowski, Notetaker

Natasha Espada, Vice-Chairman and Clerk