

NEEDHAM PLANNING BOARD MINUTES

June 3, 2025

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 Artie Crocker, Chairman, on Tuesday, June 3, 2025, at 7:00 p.m. with Messrs. Block and McCullen and Ms. Espada, Planner, Ms. Newman and Assistant Planner, Ms. Clee. Mr. Greenberg arrived at 7:20 p.m.

Mr. Crocker noted this is an open meeting that is being held in a hybrid manner 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.

ANR Plan – Matthew Semprucci, Devon Semprucci, Thomas Hartley Jr., (Property located at 107 Webster Street and 16 Frank Street, Needham, MA).

Ms. Newman noted this is 2 lots. One lot has frontage on a public way and the other lot has frontage on a private way. Around 4,000 square feet at the rear of the house on Frank Street is being carved off and is being conveyed to Webster Street immediately behind. Both lots have minimum frontage on a way. Engineering has reviewed. She feels it is appropriate for endorsement. Mr. Block asked if the applicants are building a larger house. Ms. Newman does not know but it is not part of this.

Upon a motion made by Mr. McCullen, and seconded by Ms. Espada, it was by a vote of the four members present unanimously:

VOTED: to endorse the ANR Plan.

Public Hearing:

7:00 p.m. – Amendment to Major Project Site Plan Special Permit No. 93-3: Wingate Development, LLC, 63 Kendrick Street, Needham, MA 02494, Petitioner (Property located at 589 Highland Avenue, Needham, Massachusetts). Regarding certain plan modifications, including the addition of 2 EV chargers, a Bocce court, Dog Run and extended sidewalk and 3 parking spaces.

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

VOTED: to waive the reading of the public hearing notice.

David Feldman, of SVP Development, noted the applicant wants to modify the Special Permit to include 3 EV Charging stations to accommodate 4 parking spaces, a Bocce ball court, a dog run and an extension of the internal sidewalk to create a firm path for resident to walk from the residents' entrance to Gould Street. This would also add back in 3 parking spaces that were removed. Mr. Crocker noted no comments from the Police, Fire, DPW, Building Department and Design Review. The Board of Health comment related to the dogs. Mr. Crocker asked about the dog refuse and what the plan is. Mr. Feldman stated they would supply plastic bags, a waste disposal site and a water station. Maintenance staff will police the area on a daily basis. The dog run is in a shaded area. Mr. Crocker asked if the owners will be with the dogs. Mr. Feldman stated that part of the house rules are a requirement the owners must accompany their dogs. They do not anticipate many dogs. Currently there is one dog and at maximum there were 3 dogs.

Mr. Crocker asked if the applicant made comments back to the Board of Health and if they are comfortable including those comments as part of the decision. Mr. Feldman noted there were comments back and he is fine including them. Mr. Block asked if these changes would be regarded as de minimus. Ms. Newman stated she advertised this as a hearing due to the

fact the place for dogs directly abuts the abutters and the noise from the new athletic facility. Mr. Feldman noted the existing area is shaded and there are no trees coming down. There will be a single gate. There is a grass area where the bocce court is.

Upon a motion made by Mr. Block, and seconded by Mr. McCullen, it was by a vote of the four members present unanimously:

VOTED: to close the hearing.

Ms. Newman will draft a decision for the Board to vote at the next meeting.

Board of Appeals – June 12, 2025.

99 Whitman Road – Jeffrey Gayman and Andrea Gayman, Applicants.

Upon a motion made by Mr. Block, and seconded by Mr. McCullen, it was by a vote of the four members present unanimously:

VOTED: “No comment.”

Discussion with Robert Schlager, Bulfinch, Possibility of broader use, including some potential form of residential in an expanded mixed-use development at 557 Highland Avenue.

Tim Sullivan, Attorney with Goulston & Storrs, gave a brief introduction. He noted the goal tonight is to get feedback with an informal discussion. The market for life sciences is quite challenging right now. The use of the project was an office mix. He wants to remind the Board what was permitted and discussed. The applicant would like to get the project going and wanted to let the Board know what they are thinking. Eric Weyant, architect, went through what was previously permitted. There were 2 buildings – the north building was 5 stories and the south building stepped down to Highland Avenue to 3 stories. There was a 2-story connecting atrium between the buildings. An emphasis was placed on the corner, so they had 10,000 square feet of ground floor retail, an outdoor plaza, a walking trail around the perimeter, and pickle ball courts. The height was prioritized toward the back of the site.

Mr. Weyant noted the Special Permit was 480,000 square feet of office and lab programs, 10,000 square feet of ground floor retail and about 1,400 parking stalls primarily in structure parking. There were 2 below grade levels of parking. The retail plaza at the corner was community focused. People would enter at Gould Street. He noted the road widening took away a little of their property and a traffic light was to be installed. There have been a lot of market challenges with the cost of construction and the interest rates. They are starting to explore other potential uses. Retail was looked at previously and possibly residential, office lab is being changed to medical office, senior housing in a 55 plus model or a potential hotel. They are just beginning to consider other options. He showed a conceptual option which prioritizes housing with a medical office near the ramp.

Mr. Weyant noted a residential footprint is much different than an office lab building and the façade is much more known to people. There is the ability to break the length of the façade along Highland Avenue. The option of a parking garage has been eliminated and there will be parking in the middle of the site. There may be 135 to 160 senior housing units with 5 stories interior stepped down to 3 stories. There will be the same curb cut as the Wingate intersection. North of that a hotel use may add 100 to 125 keys with a step down from 5 stories to 3 stories and market rate housing. Robert Schlager, President of Bulfinch, stated they are trying to explore alternate uses. There have been no corporate type tenants in the market recently and life science has dried up. Medical office is active especially with Children’s Hospital opening in January 2026. There is a housing demand. He understands the sensitivity with the schools and impacts on the town. They will rekindle studies looking at senior housing, assisted living and memory care along these lines. They are considering at 250 units of market rate and also a hotel type of concept. They are looking at the Board to help them with the gateway to Needham and give them input.

Mr. Crocker commented he did not hear of any independent living. Mr. Schlager missed that. Mr. Crocker stated it is always on his mind about some type of ownership. He asked what ownership options they are looking at. Mr. Schlager stated it is premature but different options are being looked at. With apartments there may be an option for a combination of rental and owners. Mr. Crocker is glad Mr. Schlager thinks about this as the gateway to Needham and what it would look like visually. Last time the applicant reached out to the neighborhoods to get their input and keep them involved. Mr. Schlager stated they will begin that process. Tonight, they would like feedback from the Board before embarking on that. Mr. Crocker asked if a hotel was a serious consideration. Mr. Schlager just wants feedback but noted there has not been a hotel built in Needham for 15 years since the small scale Marriott in the Industrial Park.

Mr. Crocker noted, previously, there were never 5 stories by Gould Street but with this project 5 stories are being put right by Gould Street. Mr. Schlager stated stories are materially less with residential as opposed to a commercial component. Mr. Weyant noted 60 feet with residential is easily 70 feet with commercial. Mr. Block asked if there is any sense of what the hotel vacancy rate is in the hotels in Needham or is there less demand. Mr. Schlager does not know but can get that information. Mr. Crocker wants a sense from Mr. Schlager of what he sees as the strongest market sense for this site. Mr. Schlager feels multi-family as it stands today. A component of senior housing is always missing but 150 or so units should be able to support an over 50 component. Mr. Block asked if the thought was roughly 240 units in total of housing plus medical office and/or hotel or was the thinking 500 units in total. Mr. Schlager noted there would be closer to 500 units in total. Only 250 units or so does not make financial sense.

Mr. Block stated the prior approved plan was a 480,000 square foot development and the By-Law allowed closer to 500,000 square feet. He asked what Mr. Weyant estimated to be the total square footage of the development. Mr. Weyant noted it would be less than was previously conceived. He would have to run the numbers. He stated this is very early and he has not dug into the numbers yet. He has begun to look at parking. There were about 1,400 parking spaces previously. He feels it will be closer to 750 to 1,000 spaces now. Mr. Crocker asked what the parking ratio per unit of residential housing is. Mr. Weyant stated one space per unit for market and less for senior housing. Mr. Block feels it would be helpful to get the numbers. The Town is working to revise the parking standards. He would like to hear the parking demand proposed under different concepts as this site is isolated for public transportation. The applicant would need to provide access to public transportation in a regular way. That would get congestion out of the area. He would want to make sure parking is sufficient. Mr. Schlager commented one thing they explored is the shuttle bus concept originally proposed. Several electric shuttle buses would circle the area to and from the T station. He feels that is well conceived. Mr. Block commented, if a hotel use, he would think to put it as close to the bowl as possible and as far away from Gould Street as possible. That would keep the urban edge and the commercial in back.

Mr. Block asked what the goal would be for the By-Law change. Mr. Schlager noted they are initiating the process tonight, they will develop neighborhood meetings and, if supportive, the next step would be to come back to the Planning Board. Then there would be a zoning amendment in the Fall, complete the process by next summer and hopefully start construction by the winter of 2026 or January of 2027. He would like to try to get to Town Meeting in May 2026. Mr. Sullivan noted the zoning amendment would be more surgical changes to the By-Law that exists rather than starting from the beginning. Mr. Block noted it would require an impact study. They will have to complete the hearing process by February 2026 to get to the May Town Meeting. Mr. Crocker noted there would need to be public hearings in the Fall, 55 plus and potentially less than one space per unit. There needs to be some public transportation. He feels instead of going toward Newton, why not go toward Needham's public transportation. There is some concern with the rental units on the other side of 128. The police are there a fair amount. He likes the ownership options. Mr. Schlager will follow up and take note of all comments.

Mr. McCullen would suggest the public email comments. This is not a public hearing but there is a large amount of people here. Email comments can be forwarded on to the applicants. He likes the mixed-use case model and does support it. He likes the senior housing component with market rate housing. He supports a hotel depending on the vacancy rate. He feels they need to be extra vigilant about the traffic impact and movement within the space itself. He likes the hotel entrance being on Highland Avenue rather than Gould Street. Transit is important and needs to be continuous. Mr. Greenberg asked what the early thinking of what the retail would be. Would it be for the broader community or supplementary and complimentary to the uses at the site? Mr. Schlager noted it would not change from the original. There may be a mom and

pop restaurant open for breakfast and closing at maybe 6:00 p.m., with no liquor licenses or night time club, a shoe cobbler, hair salon, beauty salon or a dry cleaner. All complimentary uses.

Mr. Greenberg noted traffic is a concern. Is there just one point of ingress, egress or are there ways to mitigate traffic. Mr. Schlager stated part of the traffic mitigation plan which would not change is a traffic light at Gould Street. Sean Manning of VHB, showed the approved project. He noted there were extensive improvements, improved mobility, terrific pedestrian amenities and they will not change anything. The main entrance at Gould Street will be signalized with a secondary outlet via TV Place. They will look at traffic generating ideas with this versus the old plan. Mr. Schlager stated he has spoken with Mass Highway. They will not allow access from the 128 off ramp or on Highland Avenue. There can be no additional curb cuts on Highland Avenue for safety reasons.

Ms. Espada noted there are 750 to 1,000 parking spaces with no garage. She asked if there is underground parking. Mr. Weyant noted there is partially underground parking and podium parking at the rear. Mr. Schlager noted the site slopes down toward the off ramp, which is why the hotel and market rate housing are where they are. A level of parking could be buried there. Ms. Espada asked if the amenity jogging trail would be kept and was informed it would be. She commented the scale of the housing is more in tune with the rest of it and she appreciates that. The park was a 7,000 square foot amenity. She asked if there is an opportunity for this to be part of the community space. Mr. Schlager will work with the Town on that. He asked Ms. Espada how she feels about sliding the zoning setback line a little bit forward to give more flexibility with the deck height. Ms. Espada feels the applicant needs a section cut through. The height difference makes a huge difference. The buildings are similar proportions to Wingate and the programming seems reasonable. Affordable housing would be great.

Mr. Crocker noted there will be underground parking for the market rate. Where would the parking be for the 55 plus and what would it be? Mr. Schlager noted there would be a combination of surface parking and locationally some underground beneath that building, more toward the center of the site. It is still in the preliminary stages but they will take advantage of the grade drop. Mr. Crocker noted the other plan seemed to have more green space. He is concerned with the lack of green space. Mr. Schlager stated the other plan had significantly more green space, so it is a valid concern. Mr. Crocker noted there is the walking path but nothing else. He imagines with the market rate there would be some kids. He asked if there is anything there for kids like a playground. There is a playground and dog walking trails which will be included in the next submission. Mr. Crocker commented he is concerned with green space and visuals. This is the gateway.

Mr. Block agrees that the residential market probably would be rentals. He reminded the applicant there is a minimum requirement of 12½% affordable. He would like to see some level of affordability with senior housing. The scale on Gould Street on the west and east side of Gould with some continuity of height should be preserved. It should also include an updated fiscal impact study. It looks like more impervious surface than the previous layout. They should look to see how that is managed effectively without an adverse impact to residents. Mr. Crocker decided to allow 10 minutes of public comment. Ms. Espada asked if that was allowed since that was not publicized. Mr. Crocker is going to allow public comment and he gave the ground rules. Robert Dangel, of Hewitt Circle, stated his neighborhood abuts this. He is in favor of developing the site but it looks like they are throwing the kitchen sink at it. He is opposed to any kind of transient types of housing this close to residential so he is opposed to hotels. It is abundantly clear senior housing is needed. He would like to see more senior housing and less market rate and he would like to see more retail here. He would be interested in more dining options. People would walk to that.

David Rushka, of 21 Rosemary Street, stated the applicant should look at other options for transportation like ride share and uber lift so the developer does not need to spend \$100,000 for parking spaces. Ken Buckley, of 221 Warren Street, wants to see this developed. He is concerned with traffic on site and coming off site with hotels. He thinks signaling within a block of each other could make a mess. He feels they should maximize revenue while minimizing impact to the neighborhood. A Performing Arts Center shifts traffic to a different time of day. Or maybe move Trader Joe's there to a larger site. He noted the impact from Newton will blend in. Henry Ragin, of 25 Bennington Street, noted huge construction is going on in Newton. Maybe 800 units will affect traffic. A small space for retail would not become a retail center. He would like more green space and something that is more neighborhood friendly. Traffic needs to be tackled early. People

are going to want more taxes out of this site with Pollard and Mitchell looming. He does not want something built just to get the taxes.

Oscar Mertz, of 67 Rybury Hillway, is excited to see this back on the table and he thanked Bulfinch. He is not sure about the hotel. He would like them to look at the Modera site down the street which has town houses with 2 over 2. Maybe some 2 over 2 with townhouses on Gould with flats above would be good. It is good to see more options for housing choices. There would probably be a reduction in traffic impact and uses across the day would be more beneficial with the residential. He feels it is all a benefit, and he commends Bulfinch. Mr. Crocker asked people to email any comments they have.

Minutes

There were no minutes.

Report from Planning Director and Board members

Ms. Newman noted the first workshop for the Large House Study Committee is this coming Monday at 7:00 p.m. at Town Hall. The workshop is structured to have a presentation at the beginning to state what the charge is, the composition of the committee and a brief overview of what the current regulatory framework looks like. Then they will break out into a series of workout groups at tables facilitated by the committee themselves. They will then report back from the groups and have an open microphone talk. Mr. Crocker noted there is also a survey. Ms. Newman noted the survey will be going live this Friday. She hopes all Planning Board members will be there.

Mr. Crocker noted tomorrow night is the tree hearing. It is very important. Ms. Newman wants to put on an agenda at the next meeting or the one after that a session for what the goals are and prioritize the planning projects. There are 2 public hearings at the next meeting. Mr. Block asked if the Charles River Center informal presentation could be put off. Ms. Newman has met with them, had staff meetings and they have a tight time frame. Part of the process is to come to the Planning Board. They want to file at the end of summer. Mr. Block feels there is time. He does not see a hearing for Children's Hospital taking a lot of time. Mr. Crocker would like to prioritize their goals and planning strategy. He noted he would like to replace himself on the Climate Action Committee with Mr. Greenberg who has agreed to be on the Committee.

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

VOTED: to replace Artie Crocker with Eric Greenberg on the Climate Action Committee.

Mr. McCullen noted there has not been an Envision Needham meeting since the last meeting and no Mobility Planning and Coordination Committee meeting, so he has nothing to report.

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

VOTED: to adjourn at 8:40 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Donna J. Kalinowski, Notetaker

Justin McCullen, Vice-Chairman and Clerk