

NEEDHAM PLANNING BOARD MINUTES

April 7, 2020

The Planning Board Virtual Meeting using Zoom teleconference was remotely called to order by Martin Jacobs, Chairman, on Tuesday, April 7, 2020, at 7:00 p.m. with Messrs. Owens, Alpert and Eisenhut and Ms. McKnight, as well as Assistant Planner, Ms. Clee.

Mr. Jacobs reviewed the rules of conduct for Zoom meetings. He noted there would be no public comments at this meeting. The public may submit comments via email or writing to the Planning Board if the public has any issues with matters continued tonight to the 4/21/20 meeting at 7:00 p.m.

Appointment:

7:15 p.m. – Presentation and discussion: Update on Emery Grover Building working group.

Hank Haff, representative for the Emery Grover working group, stated the group has been working for over 6 months looking at options for the School Department's Emery Grover Building. It is out of date and too small. They are looking at the most viable solution. The Select Board requested 2 options both at the same site. Option 1 would be to demolish the existing building and construct a new building on the site closer to Highland Ave. Option 3 would be to fully renovate the building and build an addition to the back of the existing building. Both options would require action by the Planning Board such as zoning changes for the A1 District Floor Area Ratio (FAR) and waivers associated with parking.

Reese Schroeder an Architect with BH+A, representative for the Permanent Public Building Committee (PPBC), stated 2 of 6 options are being looked at. A new building on the same site is the best option from a parking perspective but demolishes an important historic building. Both options are on the same site. He reviewed the requirement in the A1 zoning district – FAR is 0.5 for a maximum of 23,077 gross square feet for the 1.06 acre site and the maximum height is 3 stories or 40 feet. The parking is one space per 300 feet for office. There are some areas of non-conformance. The new building would have 30,419 of gross square footage which exceeds the FAR at 0.66. The renovation and addition would have 30,266 of gross square footage with an FAR of 0.74 with 4 stories over 50 feet in height.

Mr. Schroeder noted the existing building does not meet the side yard setback. There are 101 parking spaces required for the new building and 114 for the renovation per the zoning code. With the new building there would be 66 new spaces with 3 handicap spaces and a deficiency of 39 spaces. The renovation would have 36 spaces with 2 handicap spaces and a deficiency of 78 spaces. The PPBC could construct 24 off-site parking spaces at the Stephen Palmer site but the distance from the Emery Grover building is greater than 500 feet. He noted remote parking per the bylaw must be within 300 feet of the site. He reviewed the waivers which include, parking spaces, additional future parking and remote parking at a distance greater than 300 feet. A renovation would also have additional waivers of height and side yard setback. There is a non-conforming driveway opening on Highland Avenue. Both options would require a Zoning Bylaw amendment regarding the allowable FAR.

The proposed new building is within the allowed setbacks and height limit, and parking will be behind. There will be a 1,200 square foot conference center and the school Information Technology Department. The remote parking could be increased by building a parking area on Pickering Street. That would provide 22 more parking spaces. There will be a one-way, double loaded angled parking lot. The architect's design has not been vetted yet, so he is just suggesting general massing only. There will be a full below grade basement with 3 stories above. Each floor will be 13 feet 4 inches to maintain the 40 foot roof height. The existing parking areas on Pickering Street are for residents or for lease and are not considered in this study. The site is zoned A1 Apartments and is not in the Needham Center Overlay District. This conforms to all setback requirements.

Mr. Schroeder noted the existing building has an FAR of 0.4. The new building option needs a minimum of 101 parking spaces and there are 67 spaces currently. With the new construction there would be 63 spaces behind for a non-conforming parking count. With Pickering Street there would be 85 spaces and a waiver for number of spaces would be needed. There would also be a waiver for the remote location at more than 300 feet away. He noted Option 3 is the renovation with construction of a 50 foot addition to the rear. He reviewed the necessary waivers and gave a summary of the zoning requirements. There would be exterior historical renovations if Option 3 were chosen. The existing building is 55 feet high pre-existing, non-conforming. There would be an addition of 3 stories that would match the existing above 40 feet. The existing drive is non-conforming. Mr. Haff stated there are a number of challenges. The reuse of the site and location for the School Department have been identified as very important aspects by the School Committee and School Department. There would need to be a number of waivers and the FAR change to the Zoning By-Laws in order to accomplish this. The town went through new By-Law changes with the new school on Central Avenue. The working group would like feedback from the Planning Board. He noted this is a very preliminary discussion.

Ms. McKnight stated she agrees with the decision to have the school administration in the downtown location. She is in favor of historic preservation but she is torn on this project. She noted the Stephen Palmer property off site on Pickering Street is out on long term lease by the Town. How feasible is it to use that strip for parking? Mr. Haff noted the long-term lease goes until 2027 and was a 50 year lease. The timing of reconstruction is such that it would not open for 3 to 4 years at the earliest. He has not explored in detail putting in that additional parking or vetted with only the PPBC but the Select Board has offered it as the only option other than on street parking. Ms. McKnight asked what Zoning By-Law amendment is needed for the A1 District. She asked if consideration has been given to increase the FAR of the A1 District. She feels that should be looked at as an option and might be a simple solution. Mr. Haff stated an FAR increase would be required for either option.

Mr. Jacobs asked if the town owns the Stephen Palmer site currently and was informed it does. He asked if future parking will be available at the 2027 termination date. Mr. Haff stated 22-24 spaces may be available sooner. The town would need to look at all options. Mr. Owens asked if the existing Emery Grover building was historical. Mr. Haff stated it is on the state and national register. Mr. Owens asked if the option of renovation and addition is more expensive than the tear down. Mr. Haff stated the next step is the cost estimate and will include a temporary relocation to the Hillside School for the 2 year renovation. Mr. Owens asked if the current building is functionally obsolete. Mr. Haff stated yes, there is no ADA access, no elevator and it is not sprinklered. It was fully code compliant when constructed in the 1890's.

Mr. Eisenhut stated in an ideal world the historic façade could be preserved and an addition put on. He sees preservation as politically welcome in the Town and pleasing. He asked if Option 3 would create a much larger number of gross square footage and less parking and was informed it would. He commented he does not like paving in front as it is not aesthetically pleasing. Option 3 continues the parking in front. He feels the façade should be preserved, the parking in front taken away and the addition in the back should not be quite as large. He asked if that has been considered. Mr. Haff stated they looked at preserving the front façade and adding a footprint of total new construction. This is the most expensive option. A small addition is less efficient than a total reconstruction. Mr. Eisenhut stated Option 3 is really squeezing the property. He feels the parking area is really underutilized.

Mr. Schroeder noted there is a staff of 54 plus visitors. The IT Department has 15 employees with work stations and like the van drivers are in and out during the day. The School Department has been requesting 100 spaces but far fewer are needed for full time staff. Fewer spaces would require people to park on the street. The 100 spaces include spaces needed to support the large meeting area. Mr. Eisenhut stated he would like to see the façade saved, be aesthetically pleasing and not have parking in front unless necessary.

Mr. Alpert agrees with the others' comments. He has no problem with the request for additional FAR. The renderings meet height requirements. He is concerned with parking, with how many employees and traffic in and out. Option 3 with 36 spaces is nowhere near the amount of parking needed. Parking on the street in that area is already a problem. Option 1 looks like parking may be all right. He is not vested in saving the façade as long as it looks nice. He is fine with the FAR change request, but parking is a huge problem. Mr. Jacobs agreed with all that

has been said. Option 3 would not work. The parking is way too limited. He is not wedded to the historic nature of the building. There are limited options and Option 1 is better than Option 3. He has no problem with the FAR increase, but parking is a problem.

Steven Popper, of the PPBC, stated he appreciates the comments. The comments have been helpful and he has a better understanding of issues going forward. He will price both schemes to understand the aspects of the costs. Mr. Jacobs asked if there was a sense of the timing of how long it would take to do that. Joel Bargman noted they were ready to start next week and it will be 2 weeks to get the cost estimates together. They are looking at the end of April to report back to the PPBC. Ms. McKnight stated the building is on the federal and state historic register. The schools get significant grant money from the state. She asked if there is similar state funding available for the administration building and, if it was sought, would the historic designation be a barrier to getting funds. Mr. Haff stated the MSBA does not fund school administration buildings. There might be other grants for historic preservation that could be requested if renovated. It could potentially be funded partially through Community Preservation Act (CPA) funds but that is still taxpayer funded. He asked if the FAR would be waived down or does it have to go to Town Meeting. What would the timing be if it has to go to Town Meeting? Mr. Jacobs stated he is not sure if it could be waived. Ms. McKnight stated she is not sure it could be waived in the Apartment 1 District. The Board could issue a Special Permit for something already non-conforming but not non-complying with FAR.

Mr. Jacobs noted there was no firm answer. If it is a zoning change to Town Meeting it would at best be in the Fall. The Planning Board would need to think about timing but it is possible to be ready for the Fall.

Discussion of Beth Israel Deaconess Hospital Needham request to extend a pre-existing, non-conforming setback.

Michael Kelly, Director of Facilities for BID Needham, noted this was non-conforming for many years before he started. This was an awning 9 feet off the property line that needed to be removed for the temporary compounding pharmacy. The Department of Public Health required the hospital to build a vestibule in lieu of the awning for a compounding trailer for the pharmacy. The pharmacy was built and the trailer went to another facility. They were left with the structure which is a vinyl sided eye sore. It was built under Needham regulations and is a fully sprinkled building. The building is 20 feet off the property line. The hospital proposes to add faux brick or full brick to the exterior of the building with a sliding glass façade to match the other façades from 1948 and 1965. They will match it as best as they can. The proposal is to remove the concrete half rounds that made the driveway and add foliage. Presently the variance allows pick up and drop off of patients there.

Ms. McKnight stated she reviewed the original Special Permit granted in 2007 and the amended Special Permit granted in March 2019. She walked by and took photos of the temporary structure. She feels the area in question should revert to the prior use such as persons brought by ambulance on a non-emergency basis. She does not see why the temporary portico is not removed and brought back to the original entrance. She asked why it has to extend so far out that it violates the setback requirement. Also, she does not understand why the masonry wall has to be removed. The wall is behind the plantings. She feels it is an appealing feature of that area. Mr. Kelly noted the applicant is obligated to put back the awning. It is not aesthetically pleasing and sticks out. The awning is too short in height. Economics make sense to having something aesthetically pleasing and avoid issues down the line. The wall removal will not be noticeable if it was taken down with an appropriate planting package.

Mr. Owens stated he is not clear on why the original promise needs to be cast aside. The Board was told in 2019 the compounding pharmacy was a one-time event and the area would be put back in its original condition. Mr. Kelly stated the hospital wants to adhere. They were looking at what needed to be done for this compounding pharmacy and what would happen if there were issues down the road. They would not be able to bring in mobile equipment quickly if necessary so they would like to save the vestibule. Mr. Owens stated that is not persuasive. Mr. Eisenhut noted the setback requirement is 25 feet and it will be at 20 feet. He suggested bringing it back the 5 feet. Mr. Kelly stated the nonconformity with the original awning is approximately 9 feet and within the vestibule would be at 20 feet. He will look at it.

Ms. McKnight stated it could be a minor modification. The Planning Board could vote to not put the awning back as a minor modification. Keeping the new entrance would be an amendment to the Special Permit and may need a hearing. Mr. Alpert stated there is a huge difference between allowing disparity from the setback requirement for the awning high up versus a new structure. He understands the desire and reasoning for keeping the structure. He feels this would be an amendment and not a minor modification. He sympathizes with the hospital's desire for this. He would like to see a more formal application. Mr. Jacobs had nothing to add.

Mr. Kelly stated he respects the comments. He asked if he should prepare a package for a Planning Board hearing. Mr. Jacobs noted he should and he suggested the applicant speak with the abutters first. Ms. Clee suggested the applicant talk about use changes if any. It should be clear what the hospital would be proposing, including emergency situations.

Update on Scope of Traffic Study for Highland Commercial 128 zoning.

Ms. Clee stated the plan is to get the appropriation at the Special Town Meeting in the Spring and do traffic counts in the Fall. Mr. Jacobs commented he anticipates the counts assume that traffic will have returned to normal by the Fall. Ms. Clee feels the hope is to get close enough. Mr. Owens stated the Board needs to figure out what can be supplied to the Finance Committee and what would satisfy them. He would say that unless traffic has returned to some semblance of normal they would not pay attention to any traffic study done. It makes sense to go ahead and ask for funding but it is still a big unknown when to go ahead with the study. All agreed the Planning Board should seek the funding but not go ahead yet.

Mr. Alpert stated if traffic is not back to normal by September maybe this study should be shelved. Adam Block, candidate for the Planning Board, asked what had happened to the original request of \$30,000. Has that been spent? Ms. Clee was not sure. Mr. Jacobs' belief is a prior study has essentially been completed. This is money for a new study with an increase in the scope of the study. Ms. McKnight believed there was a traffic study done for the rezoning of the Muzi site. This is talking about the need for another traffic study. If put off, she does not see anything that says the prices will still be good.

Mr. Block recalls there were traffic study results presented at a prior Town Meeting. Ms. McKnight noted the Board thought to re-engage the consultants for expanded scenario traffic counts but realized the old traffic counts were too old. Mr. Alpert agreed they were using the old data.

Discussion of Planning Board meeting schedule.

Ms. Clee noted there will be a meeting by Zoom on 4/15/20 at 7:00 p.m. and the Board will convene at 6:45 p.m. There was a meeting scheduled for 4/21 but that will be canceled. There was no early May meeting due to Town Meeting. There could be an early May meeting scheduled now as Town Meeting has been postponed until June. She proposed 5/5/20. All agreed. She added all Zoom meetings will begin at 7:15 p.m. going forward.

Minutes

Ms. McKnight noted in the minutes of 1/7/20, under Highland Commercial 1 Rezoning, 4th paragraph, last sentence, take out "there was."

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

VOTED: to accept the minutes of 1/7/20 with the one change discussed.

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

VOTED: to accept the minutes of 12/17/19 and 1/21/20 as revised.

Correspondence

There is no correspondence.

Report from Planning Director and Board members

Ms. McKnight noted she viewed the Zoning Board of Appeals Zoom hearing and recommended linking onto that as she felt it was helpful to see how a hearing can be handled. Mr. Jacobs commented the meeting went better than expected and he thanked all.

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

VOTED: to adjourn the meeting at 9:00 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Donna J. Kalinowski, Notetaker

Jeanne S. McKnight, Vice-Chairman and Clerk