NEEDHAM PLANNING BOARD MINUTES

January 14, 2021

The Needham Planning Board Virtual Meeting using Zoom was remotely called to order by Jeanne McKnight, Chairman, on Thursday, January 14, 2021, at 8:30 a.m. with Messrs. Jacobs, Alpert, Owens and Block, as well as Planning Director, Ms. Newman.

Ms. McKnight took a roll call attendance of people expected to be on the agenda. She noted this is an open meeting that is being held remotely because of Governor Baker's executive order on March 12, 2020 due to the COVID Virus. All attendees are present by video conference. She reviewed the rules of conduct for zoom meetings. She noted this meeting does not include public hearings and will not allow for public comment. If any votes are taken at the meeting the vote will be conducted by roll call.

Highway Commercial 1 Rezoning and Planning Study: Review of Urban Design Plan, Discussion of Next Steps and Project Schedule.

Ms. McKnight noted all information is on the website. Ms. Newman introduced the work that has been done. This is a follow up to the previous Town Meeting where a number of issues and concerns had come up. There have been meetings to come up with issues the community had and they have tried to address those. This is to better understand the visual impact of the property.

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

VOTED: to automatically continue the meeting to 1/19/21 at 7:15 p.m. with the same zoom ID number if any technical difficulties arise that keep the Planning Board from continuing this meeting tonight and authorize the Vice-Chairman to continue the meeting if the Chairman has technical difficulties.

Natasha Espada, of Studio ENEE, showed the site divided into Site 1 and Site 2. Site 1 is the Channel 5 portion and Site 2 is the Muzi portion. She reviewed the planning effort to date and gave a summary of existing conditions. The existing zoning FAR is .5 with commercial use/warehouse. The proposed as-of-right FAR is 1.0 with 2 options. Option 1 is commercial use and option 2 is mixed use of commercial and residential. The Special Permit zoning has an FAR of 1.35 with 2 options. Option 1 is commercial use and option 2 is mixed use with commercial and residential. She focused on the overall analysis of Needham and looked at density in town. They looked at the amenities corridor along Chestnut Street and Highland Avenue and at transportation. There is no public transportation serving this site. They should look at how transportation could impact the site in a better way.

Ms. Espada stated most buildings in the amenities corridor are 2 story and create an edge. They are intertwined with some houses. She noted there is an existing By-Law, the previous proposal and the new proposal. The FAR has decreased and the height remains at 70 feet but the setback is decreased. The minimum lot area remains, lot frontage remains and lot coverage will be 65%. Traffic mitigation is to be paid for by the developer. Ms. Newman stated the use profile needs to be added to the chart under the new proposal. Ms. Espada will work with Ms. Newman and Mr. Block to verify the spreadsheet. The amenities corridor disintegrates now as it gets to the site. The Muzi site has 454,150 square feet with 757 parking spaces. The Channel 5 site has 205,375 with 343 required parking spaces.

Mr. Block stated between Sites 1 and 2 is a parcel of land. Ms. Espada noted that is part of the Channel 5 site. Mr. Jacobs asked if the parking requirement can be shown on the table. Ms. Espada stated she will show that and will document what is existing. She looked at a one-story warehouse use and how many parking spaces would be needed. At .35, and one story, with 140 spaces this exceeds the size of some buildings across Rte. 128/95. Ms. McKnight asked what the building next to the warehouse on the drawings is. Ms. Espada stated that is the Muzi Ford building. She wanted to show existing conditions but will Photoshop it out. Mr. Jacobs feels she should show the warehouse with and without the existing buildings. Mr. Block commented they should consider only showing warehouse use if someone asks; otherwise, it could be considered a scare tactic. Ms. Espada commented what the gateway could look like under current zoning by right needs to be shown. Ms. Newman stated this shows the scale of a building now allowed by right. Mr. Alpert does not want people to focus on that. He wants them to focus on what the Planning Board vision is.

Ms. Espada suggested saying a warehouse half the size of the site could be built and she will show that if asked. She will move it to the back of the presentation. For the as-of-right proposed zoning plan, she recommends that 200 feet from Gould Street and about the same from Highland Avenue should be an FAR of 1.0. There would be 685 parking spaces on the Channel 5 site with 205,000 square feet and 1,513 parking spaces on the Muzi site with 454,000 square feet. She feels there should be 20% open space. Corporate office could be 42%, research and development at 42% and retail at 15%. Ms. Newman stated the depth of the setback along Highland Avenue has been increased from the original proposal. She showed renderings of 42-foot-high and 70-foot-high buildings and different scenarios. A "P" should be added on top of parking. Housing is to be shown across from residential neighborhoods and research and development and commercial have been pushed farther into the site. The Special Permit could have an FAR of 1.35 and 866,000 square feet. She stated they are not designing a building but just showing the scale.

Mr. Owens stated he agrees with Mr. Alpert this is excellent work. They are 85% of the way there. There were a variety of comments regarding slides that need to be added. He would suggest going into the 2/3/21 meeting with the final version. The purpose is to present the vision and what the Board feels it should look like. A full hour will be spent going through this. He expects there will be comments. He suggests the Board meet again next Thursday morning and review the next version of this. His personal opinion is this gateway site should not be used for housing. He is not sure about letting the market decide. The job as the Planning Board is to do the zoning but he would apply flexibility for the developer.

Mr. Alpert stated he disagrees with Mr. Owens. The Board's job is to create not only zoning but zoning with a vision. Mr. Owens agrees they go together. Ms. Newman will see if GPI can be part of the meeting next Thursday. GPI is working on the fiscal impact. The Board spoke of the agenda and timing. It will be a 90-minute meeting with 60 minutes of presentation and 30 minutes for questions. Mr. Owens asked if it was true to include residential would mean less beneficial fiscal impact than commercial and was informed that was true. Ms. McKnight assumes there will be an affordability requirement for multi-family housing. She expects the impact on the schools would not be a terrible impact. A discussion ensued regarding the peak for different uses.

Mr. Jacobs asked what Ms. Espada would like to see different and if there are any flaws she sees. Ms. Espada commented this has come a long way. She would like to see an urban edge created along the front rather than a parking lot with buildings in the back. They should find a way to encourage keeping the corner an urban edge that is of scale and appropriate for Highland Avenue. Mr. Owens left the meeting at 9:30 a.m.

Mr. Block stated he likes the idea of creating an urban edge. It keeps the continuity of what is there now. The Board should make it a mandate if that is what the Board members want. His other comment is that it is uncommon for mixed use to have residential and lab or residential and commercial. The Board should give that some thought. The amenities of one use may be different for other uses such as lab space as opposed to seniors. Ms. McKnight stated there would be a cap on the number of residential units. Mr. Alpert agrees with the concept of an urban edge but he is not sure how to mandate it in the Zoning By-Law. It is too much getting into the weeds at this point. Only the scale of the buildings are being shown at this point.

Mr. Jacobs noted Mr. Block raises some good issues but the issues are for the developer and not the Board. He commented the word "edge" should be used rather than "urban." Ms. Newman discussed strategies and FARs. The Board wants people to use the Special Permit process and not the as of right. Mr. Alpert suggested they might want to go to .8 or .85 FAR by special permit. Ms. Espada stated that is a big change. She would need to recalculate everything. Mr. Alpert suggested leaving it at 1.0 but saying at the meeting the Planning Board is considering changing to a lower number. Having a low density takes away their vision. Ms. Espada noted she sent some examples of sustainable zoning that other towns are doing. Somerville and Cambridge are leaders in sustainable zoning.

Select Board Chair Marianne Cooley stated she was thinking about the notion of a lower by-right FAR. She feels the change should not be made. It creates a lot of artificial work. A discussion ensued. It was decided the slide with the satellite view and the historic sites slides were not needed. Ms. McKnight likes the concept of the amenities slide but it is out of date. Mr. Jacobs likes the amenities slide and it could be said it was out of date. Mr. Block noted the amenities could be pointed out when showing the spine slide. Ms. McKnight feels the total acreage for the parcels should be shown. She summarized the following changes that had been discussed: all the views from Gould Street should make it clear they are toward Highland Avenue; get rid of the black box that is the existing Muzi building; add "P" to parking; and change the green retail color to another color as it can't be distinguished from the greenery. Ms. Espada will make the changes by next Thursday. She will emphasize the continuation of the spine and edge.

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The Board will deal with these at the next meeting.

Ms. Newman stated the as-of-right height could also be dropped to create base conditions. Ms. Espada would recommend changing height rather than FAR. With a change in height you keep some of the density. The heights could be one story less and would require developers to get a Special Permit. Ms. Cooley stated she is in favor of looking at height rather than FAR. Ms. Espada will come down to 2 stories in the front and 4 stories in back. She will see how much she can get done for Thursday. Mr. Block would like to invite Ms. Cooley to the meeting next week. Ms. Cooley asked what is the by-right height in Needham Crossing and was informed it is 54 feet and 4 stories. Mr. Alpert does not think that is relevant to this site; the Board has a different vision for this site.

Upon a motion made by Mr. Alpert, and seconded by Mr. Jacobs, it was by a roll call vote of the five members present unanimously:
VOTED: to adjourn the meeting at 10:07 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Donna J. Kalinowski, Notetaker

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Paul Alpert, Vice-Chairman and Clerk