

NEEDHAM PLANNING BOARD MINUTES

February 3, 2021

The Needham Planning Board Town Wide Community Planning Virtual Meeting using Zoom was remotely called to order by Jeanne McKnight, Chairman, on Wednesday, February 3, 2021, at 7:15 p.m. with Messrs. Jacobs, Owens and Block, as well as Planning Director, Ms. Newman and Assistant Planner, Ms. Clee. Also in attendance was Select Board member Marianne Cooley, Natasha Espada of Studio Enee Architects and Rebecca Brown of Greenman Pederson Inc. (GPI).

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 encourages public participation and public comment. If any votes are taken at the meeting the vote will be conducted by roll call. She stated Planning Board member Adam Block will facilitate the presentation and moderate comments and questions.

Mr. Block noted the Planning Board reviewed the area under consideration. This is a 15-acre area with the Muzi parcel being 9.4 acres and the Channel 5 parcel being 5.8 acres. The site is bounded by 128 to the east, Highland Avenue to the south, Gould Street on the west and the MBTA right of way on the north. Natasha Espada of Studio Enee gave an overview of the site and surrounding area. Across the highway is the industrial area with bigger buildings. There are residential neighborhoods interspersed, and yet there is a clear commercial spine running through Newton and Needham. The design team looked at public transportation and she showed the train line and bus line locations. She noted the need to think about how to get public transportation to this area. She showed the spine which has civic, retail and office. She noted there is a clear edge of density on the spine which is defined by buildings having multiple heights.

Mr. Block stated various committees have looked at the proposed Highway Commercial 1 area as an underutilized district. They want to unlock a higher and better use of these parcels along this corridor that makes a stronger contribution to the Town while respecting it has residential neighborhoods nearby. Rezoning was initially proposed at the October 2019 Town Meeting in which a majority of Members voted to approve the rezoning, though without a supermajority, that rezoning article did not pass. He noted the Needham Heights Neighborhood Association subsequently hosted a community meeting and received constructive feedback. The constructive feedback focused on 3 critical elements of the 2019 proposal: an option for multi-family residential development; to reduce the scope and scale of development; and to reduce the maximum building heights. The presentation will review the initial and current proposals and show what has changed.

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

VOTED: to automatically continue the meeting to 2/10/21 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.

Mr. Block reviewed the table of uses for Highway Commercial 1 and explained uses allowed by right and uses allowed by special permit. He showed uses allowed under the existing By-Law, the 2019 proposal and the 2021 proposal, noting current uses that would be discontinued, uses new in 2019 and uses new in 2021. He stated this includes an option for multi-family after feedback that was received. The housing is limited to 240 units where a minimum of 40% and a maximum of 70% must be 1-bedroom units and 12 1/2% must be affordable. He reviewed the dimensional requirements. In the 2019 proposal the maximum density, or FAR, was 1.75. The 2021 proposal reduces it to 1.35, or by 25%, based on community feedback. The 2019 height was 70 feet by right and 84 feet by special permit. The maximum height has been reduced to 56 feet by right and 70 feet by special permit. The maximum height has also been pushed back 200 feet from Gould Street and Highland Avenue.

Ms. Espada showed the current site. She noted Site 1, which is where Channel 5 is, has a 3-story building toward the rear of the site and a one-story building by Gould Street. There is also a 2-story building at the Muzi Ford site and a one-story building. She noted she is going to show As of Right Zoning with an FAR of 1.0 with a single building and multiple buildings. She will also show Special Permit Zoning with an FAR of 1.35 with a single building and multiple buildings. She clarified there are no buildings designed. They are just showing what would be allowable. She noted ancillary retail would service the occupants of the buildings and would not be destination shopping.

Ms. Espada stated the entrance to the site would remain the same. She showed the current views from Gould Street and Highland Avenue and renderings of what it could look like. She also showed views from Route 128 and the 128 exit. She showed total building square footage for corporate headquarters at 30%, research and development at 30%, retail at 10.5% and residential at 29.5%. She showed renderings with 2 stories in front and 4 stories in back and noted the front buildings are in proportion with other buildings in the area. Special permit zoning allows increases in the FAR. With the single building option there could be 5 stories, 700 feet in height, 200 feet back, and 42 feet height within the 200 feet. The 5-story building would be right near the highway. In the Mixed-Use option there is a 3-story edge around the site that mimics what is on the spine along Highland Avenue.

Rebecca Brown, of GPI, spoke from the traffic perspective. She looked at the site and estimated the maximum potential traffic with a full build out of the site at a 1.35 FAR. She also assessed whether reasonable mitigations can be done. She noted the study area included the intersections along Central Street at Gould Street and Hampton Avenue and River Park Street and along Gould at Ellis Street and Kearney Road, the 2 current drives to Muzi and Channel 5 and the Highland/Hunting/Gould intersection. Information was collected in 2015, and she was able to utilize those traffic counts. I-95 was being widened at the time. In February 2019, supplemental data was collected as post construction to compare.

Ms. Brown noted the Gould and Central intersection supplemental data was collected by the Town. The 2019 counts are about 13 to 15% lower than the 2015 data collected. She used the updated information and used the 2015 information for a worst-case scenario. She reviewed existing trips and proposed trips for the worst-case scenario of 1.35 FAR. She compared the existing site uses and the proposed site uses. There is an increase of approximately 8,900 weekday daily trips per day. She looked at the existing traffic patterns in the area, journey to work model and place of residency. She also looked at what the building density looked like around the site.

Ms. Brown reviewed the projected level of service in the area for 2030 without mitigation and noted most intersections passed. She stated there were 4 intersections that did not pass. Central and Gould is already being looked at by the Town, and the Town is looking at installation of traffic signals and improvements. The 2 site drives were a level of service F and also the intersection of Highland and Gould. The intent is to estimate how much traffic would be generated and how to mitigate. She showed a concept plan. She looked at the site drives, which would require a traffic signal at one of the 2 locations. She feels it would be the southerly drive. The northerly drive would not need a signal. This is the potential layout of the site. Both drives would warrant a left turn lane and right turn lanes. There would need to be 2 right turns out of the drive at the signaled drive.

Gould Street would need to be widened to allow for 4 lanes; there would be 2 left turn lanes onto Highland Avenue, a dedicated through lane and a dedicated right on Highland to the west. Highland would need a right lane onto Gould. Widening would be done toward the site along Gould and Highland. A land taking would be required from the front of the site. The level of service could be brought back to a no-build condition and the site drives would operate at a Level D or better. A mitigation packet could be done to bring back to a no-build condition.

Select Board member Marianne Cooley spoke of the fiscal impacts. She stated until there is a proposal this is all hypothetical. This just creates the potential for new possibilities and unlocks a revenue opportunity for the Town. She noted this was discussed 2 years ago and the possibility of warehouse use was discussed then. They did not think a warehouse would be 24/7 then but is more likely now with the pandemic. She has no updated fiscal impact study yet, so they looked at the 2019 information. There would be additional costs for the Town with residential. The Town benefits from the commercial base to share the tax burden. The Town could anticipate upward of

\$4,000,000 in revenue. The Planning Board would work with the developer to limit the impact of the development. She commented she looks forward to questions and feedback.

Mr. Block said that the Planning Board's new proposal responds to constructive feedback received over the last 15 months. He recapped the traffic mitigations that are possible.

Keith LaFace, of 504 Chestnut Street and Town Meeting Member Precinct E, stated he supports the zoning change. He owned a home on Central at Gould. This area lacked places to walk to such as restaurants. He feels reasonable mitigation should be implemented before the ground breaks. It is a thoughtful proposal.

Lee Truong, of 109 Evelyn Road, asked what the consideration was for the determination of an FAR of 1.35 versus a 1.0 FAR. She feels the traffic will be awful. Mr. Block stated the Board is setting parameters for development. It would be up to the developer on how they would like to proceed within those parameters. It is less expensive to develop a by-right proposal. A larger project takes longer and has government oversight and public hearings. No one knows what a developer would bring forward. Ms. Truong asked what Research and Development implies. Mr. Block stated there are allowed uses by right or by special permit. It is up to the developer to determine what they would like to do. Types of Research and Development could be life sciences or medical labs, or it could be research and engineering or computer high tech. The Board would let the developer see what they are able to put together.

Barry Pollack, of 15 Pandolf Lane and Town Meeting Member Precinct J, stated some concerns have been addressed and he appreciates the numbers are lower. He asked if the height is measured from the Highland Avenue height of natural land as it sits now. Ms. Newman noted it is measured from the grade around the building. Mr. Block stated the Board is trying to encourage greater height be pushed to the back of the site. Mr. Pollack stated he would like to see part of the property as a recreational facility like Wellesley has. He noted 56 feet is too high for part of this site but not bad by the highway. He asked who would be best to contact on the Planning Board with feedback regarding heights. Mr. Block encouraged all attendees to submit any comments or questions in writing to planning@needhamma.gov. Mr. Pollack noted land taking was mentioned and asked where that would be. Mr. Block clarified that was speculative at this point and would depend on the developers plan. It may be a function of improving traffic at Highland and Gould. The developer could offer their own land for the taking.

Masha Sherman, of 166 Noanett Road, stated she supports restaurants and places people could go hang. There is nothing in this area. She asked if the Board discussed the impact of the construction on the value of existing houses. Mr. Block appreciates that. In terms of property values, he is a local realtor. He believes that proximity to retail and restaurants adds a level of convenience that could increase property values as homes would be considered more desirable. It has an uplifting effect on the surrounding community. He noted it is hard to isolate and quantify this variable.

Monte Krieger, of 33 Woodbine Circle, stated he is confused by the traffic numbers. It seems the numbers were only based on commercial and not residential. One thought is including residential housing here. Was that included in the traffic counts? Ms. Brown stated she did not look at the residential component originally. She did look at it and found a reduction in traffic if commercial was replaced with residential. She was asked to present a worst-case scenario though. Mr. Krieger asked if the counts were based on one car per unit. Ms. Brown noted there would be multi-bedroom units. She accounted for a range of cars that people may have. Mr. Krieger noted the Highland to Hunting turn would be worse than current. Ms. Brown stated it could be a little worse than the current level of service E. A different timing plan could improve it.

Gerry Rovner, of 48 Cynthia Road and Town Meeting Member Precinct B, asked what the dates of the traffic study were and if it was pre Covid. He also asked how far back up Central Avenue was studied. He stated there are 3 schools on Central Avenue. Ms. Brown stated they studied Central from Gould Street to the River Park Street intersection and all of Gould Street. She noted all the traffic counts were done pre Covid in February 2019. She compared the 2015 data to the 2019 data. The 2015 data was higher, so she did include some of those numbers for a worst-case scenario. Mr. Rovner asked the dates of the studies. Ms. Brown noted all different dates in 2015 from

June and December. In 2019 the data was collected in February at Gould and Central and Gould and Highland. Mr. Rovner asked if any study was done on the impact of the light at Central and Chestnut in Newton. It is a major choke point. Ms. Brown responded that this intersection was not studied. Mr. Rovner asked if there was any intent of the current owners to vacate this property. Mr. Block stated he had no idea and is not aware of any plans they may have.

John Kapellas, of 125 Evelyn Road, appreciates all the information and work done. He noted Mr. Block said they are looking for something with a stronger contribution to the Town and asked what that means. Mr. Block noted a financial contribution to the Town and stronger aesthetics and amenities to the Town and residents in the immediate area. Mr. Kapellas is concerned with traffic. There is one entry point from 128 north and south. He asked if there could be a consideration of a direct exit off 128 to this facility. Ms. Brown stated ramps to 128 are under Mass DOT. Mass DOT is not in favor or amenable to providing ramps directly into commercial developments. Mr. Kapellas asked if the impact of the project in Newton has been counted into the traffic study. Ms. Brown has projected traffic out to a 2030 condition and grew it out by 1% per year. This takes into account unknown projects. Mr. Kapellas asked if there was any By-Law that would prevent a medical campus or high-level education not-for-profit or emerging-infectious-disease labs. Ms. Newman stated exempt uses such as not-for-profit education would be allowed at this property. Education uses would be allowed by right, but labs would be by special permit and would also go through review by the Health Department.

Peter Olive, of 133 Thornton Road and Town Meeting Member Precinct H, stated he was glad to see residential units there. He noted it is not the most desirable place for housing but why is it capped at 240. It seems if it were increased the traffic would go down. Mr. Block stated the Board tried to develop a mix of uses. That seemed to be an appropriate mix and balance. They will let the market decide. Mr. Olive noted the housing shortage is acute.

Doug Fox, of 43 Mark Tree Road and Precinct F, noted the traffic study has been pieced together. Traffic is a big issue. The study from 2019 showed a decrease. He asked if the 2015 versus the 2019 study is apples to apples. It does not jive that it went down. He wants to make sure they are really looking at that intersection. Ms. Brown stated the 2015 study was done during the 128 widening project, when ramps were closed, and traffic diverted. Most traffic on Gould was similar from 2015 to 2019. The majority of the reduction was on and off Hunting Road. There is an ongoing project by Mass DOT to construct improvements at the Highland and Gould intersection. She assumed those would be in place when this area gets developed.

Joni Schockett, of 174 Evelyn Road, stated a concern raised at the Heights meeting was green space. She did not hear anything about that. She noted traffic is always worse than studies show. She asked if there was any way to mitigate traffic on side streets when this is up and running. Mr. Block stated when a project comes before the Board a study will be done then and will be looked at very closely. There will also be meetings. Ms. McKnight clarified there was green space shown on the slides. Ms. Espada stated 20% of the site has to be green space. It could be one area or spread out.

Rachel Green, of 55 Sargent Street, stated she supports as much affordable housing as possible in Needham for racial equity and economic diversity. She feels some apartment complexes do not fit the aesthetics of Needham. She noted modern developers do try to keep design and aesthetics in mind. She thanked the Board for having the meeting.

Leigh Doukas, of 29 Tower Avenue, asked if they were looking to 12% affordable housing rather than the 20% required by 40Bs. Ms. Newman stated 12.5% is the standard Needham has adopted. She has carried that standard forward. The Board is looking to see if there should be a revision to our Zoning By-law to make that standard a requirement across all districts. Ms. Cooley clarified that the Town has met its 40B threshold.

Oscar Mertz, of 67 Rybury Hillway, thanked the Board for continuing to review this site. A new version of this site would be welcome. Studio Enee did a great job helping them see that. This is very helpful and Mixed Use makes sense. Housing is needed for Needham and a friendly 40B would be great here. He commented there is nothing better than green space and he feels the Board should require some green space to be a benefit to the public. He

suggested a density of 1.35 be made as of right and special permit density be allowed to go higher. This is a big site and there are a lot of opportunities here.

Wendy Blom, of 89 Parish Road, is in favor of as much residential as possible and to create as much affordable housing as possible. The town needs some racial diversity. She stated if there is housing the town should do some remedies to past affronts to African American families.

Noah Mertz, of 67 Rybury Hillway, supports an FAR of 1.35 and higher. Maximizing density and affordable housing possibilities can right the wrongs of history. Lexington recently adopted a resolution that racism is a public health crisis. He would like to see inclusionary zoning in other parts of town also.

Ellen Fine, of Greendale Avenue, stated her family came in the 50s. Her parents would be upset by Needham today which has become for the wealthy, by the wealthy. She would suggest taking a step back and thinking about development as a community rather than the highest bidder. How long would construction be? She has been back 8 years and construction has been all around her. She asked why not think about an art center, community center or theater. Bring it back to the Town. Why not indoor growing space? She wants green space and not just fake sod. She wants real trees. The town should look at solar. She suggested reusing the existing Muzi building by looking at tiny housing. She asked what happens to Channel 5 which has been here 40 to 50 years. The Board needs to rethink this. We need to care for the earth and care for the people and the fair share.

Holly Charbonner, of 94 Sachem Road, thanked Ellen Fine for her comments. She asked if the new zoning would include energy efficiency requirements.

Artie Crocker, of 14 Fairlawn Street, noted the perimeter is showing one option for housing. Is that because housing would be the only thing allowed on the perimeter? Mr. Block stated that was just a sample. Mr. Crocker referred to Wingate and noted it is not 3 stories high. Wingate is 2½ stories and is not representative of the heights on Gould Street. This needs to be looked at. He does not favor the proposal of having buildings there, at the gateway, right against the road. He is not happy with what he has seen.

Joan Berlin, of 67 Parker Road, asked if the people who did the traffic study looked back at projections to see how close they have been. She noted the climate will be impacted with all of the additional cars in Needham.

Judy Pelletier, of 107 Gould Street, asked if there was any way to reconsider the amount of the site that could be developed for retail. There needs to be walkable amenities in that part of town. She feels retail would help spread traffic out throughout the day. She noted traffic along Central Avenue, especially down to the light at Chestnut Street, needs to be considered especially during construction to prevent backups.

Adam Cole, of Hillcrest Road, is in favor of a sport's complex idea. He feels 40% of residents could benefit. The initial zoning seems an athletic facility is allowed by right. Why was it changed to a special permit?

Michael Reddy, of 69 Melrose Avenue, echoed Ms. Fine's comments. The Planning Board is taking a reactive approach to what developers say. He feels the railroad right of way could be used. He asked what the Planning Board and Select Board have been doing to consider the use of the railroad right of way like Newton did.

Paula Jacobson, who operates the Charles River YMCA, appreciates the Town's efforts to bring new uses. The YMCA has been in Needham for 140 years and is a partner to the health and well-being of the citizens. Many desire to have a recreational facility in town. She would be willing to work with any developer.

Mr. Block asked everybody to send comments or questions to planning@needhamma.gov. He thanked all for their comments and suggestions. He noted the Planning Board will post the presentation and materials on the website. There will be a public hearing on 3/16/21. The By-Law will be published prior to that meeting. The Zoning By-Law will go to Town Meeting this spring. He thanked Ms. Espada, Ms. Brown and Ms. Cooley as well as Ms. Newman, Ms. Clee and Mr. Hutchinson.

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

VOTED: to adjourn the meeting at 8:55 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Donna J. Kalinowski, Notetaker

Paul Alpert, Vice-Chairman and Clerk