

Issued February 27, 2023

**DESIGN REVIEW ADVISORY COMMITTEE
DRAFT SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES
THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2023
ROOM 400, TOWN HALL, WEST HARTFORD, CT**

AGENDA

Call to Order/Roll Call: 4:30 P.M.

DRAC ATTENDANCE: Chair, Ray Giolitto; Members: Kimberly Parsons Whitaker, Brian Flemming, Jenna McClure, Liz Pang. Alternates: Jim Lawler

ABSENT: Hugh Schweitzer, Vice Chair

Staff: Todd Dumais, Town Planner, Brian Pudlik, Associate Planner

REFERRAL FROM THE TOWN PLANNER:

1. **1700 Asylum Avenue & 1800 Asylum Avenue** – Study session preparatory to the submission of a potential new Special Development District application for the redevelopment of the former UConn campus. The applicant contemplates the redevelopment of both the eastern and western portions of the campus with multifamily housing and mixed-use development including commercial, retail, restaurant, residential and office uses. (*Initial study session on 10-27-22, additional study sessions on 11-10-22, 12-15-22 and 1-19-23*).

T. Dumais – Town Planner - introduced the project and reminded the DRAC that this is the fifth study session for this project. He noted that following their last meeting, there were several areas of specific concerns raised by the Committee and asked that the Applicant’s Design Team highlight those areas of responsive changes

R. Giolitto – DRAC Chair – Noted for the benefit of the development team, that the DRAC asked staff to prepare a summary document of all comments and critiques made regarding this project during previous study sessions. Mr. Giolitto asked that staff share a copy of that document to the development team for their review.

B. Fischer – of Newman Architects, lead designer for the western parcel of the proposed redevelopment, stated that since the last study session, the medical building was moved out of the wetland soils and other buildings throughout the project area were adjusted to provide additional wetland buffering.

J. Mancini – Project Engineer – Went over the changes made to the civil plans since the last meeting including the following: Elimination of the access drives off Lawler Road on both the east and west sides of the development area. On the east side, the Champion Oak has been surveyed in the field and the parking has been adjusted to better accommodate the tree. Regarding parking for the baseball fields, 136 parking spaces are currently provided (pre-development) and 135 are proposed for the new development. These will be physically separated from the parking dedicated to the residential

buildings. Regarding proposed open space, the two areas opposite one another on the east and west sides of Trout Brook Drive will be tied together with similar landscaping treatments. He noted that extensive publicly accessible walking paths are incorporated into the site design, which will connect the proposed open spaces and tie into the Town's Trout Brook Trail. Regarding parking, Mr. Mancini noted that the west side development will be slightly under-parked and east side development will be right at the required number of spaces, both based on zoning requirements.

L. Gilmore –Newman Architects, designer for the western parcel of the proposed redevelopment, lead a discussion of materials on the western parcel. In reviewing some of the proposed architecture for the west side development, she noted that a mix of materials would be utilized, including brick, fiber cement (wood look) and aluminum paneling. The brick elements will be prominently placed to draw in visitors to the site. Regarding the grocery, faux would fiber cement paneling would be used, in addition to black aluminum and glass.

T. Dumais – Town Planner – Asked the if it was the design intent of the Architect's design to have all four mixed-used buildings have the nearly identical repetition of form, building height and material types across all of the three-story buildings that front on the "village street".

B. Fischer – Project Architect – In response to Mr. Dumais, agreed that as presented, there is too much repetition and noted that as the design evolves, more differentiation will be incorporated into the building elevations.

R. Giolitto – DRAC Chair – Noted that many significant elements of the project are unresolved, such as the medical building, the parking garage and spa building. With this being the case, he questioned plan submission timeframe of the team.

B. Fischer – Project Architect – In response to Mr. Giolitto, noted that legal counsel for the property owner is handling the coordination of application submission for all elements of the project and would be able to discuss that at a future meeting date.

K. Parsons Whitaker – DRAC member – Thanked the development team for their pedestrian plan, including the publicly accessible walking paths through the site. Regarding treatment of hardscape, she noted that the design team should consider permeable surfaces throughout the project area where appropriate and comments that the proposal significantly shifts the site to a more hardscaped environment. She further commented on the open space areas, noting that as currently presented, the landscaping plan is insufficient. That the objective should be to create a park-like setting – not just an open lawn area.

J. McClure – DRAC member – Noted a disconnect between the treatment of the grocer building and the other buildings that front on the Main Street. Suggested that the architects look to improve the aesthetic connection between those elements of the project. Regarding building operations, questioned whether the ground floor commercial tenants would only be accessible from one side or both?

B. Fischer – Project Architect – In response to Ms. McClure, noted that all of the proposed ground floor businesses would be publicly accessible from the front and back of the building.

B. Pudlik – Associate Planner – Questioned whether the team envisions outdoor dining on the sidewalks that front on the Main Street. If so, are the sidewalks wide enough to accommodate that?

B. Fischer – Project Architect – In response to Mr. Pudlik, indicated that outdoor dining will be encouraged on the sidewalks, but was unsure of the proposed sidewalk width.

J. Lawler – DRAC member – Stated that the plan, as submitted, is inconsistent with the community vision for the property. He also noted that the design team has not adequately responded to the DRAC’s stated concerns regarding the incompatibility of the proposed plan in the context of the neighborhood it is located.

L. Pang – DRAC member – Stated that all aspects of the project on the west side, from architecture to landscaping, appears too homogenous.

T. Dumais – Town Planner – Noted a number of elements of the plan that were discussed at prior meetings but still not addressed by the design team. He stated that the parking area adjacent to Asylum Avenue is still too large, and in particular the easterly portion is much too close to the wetland and lacks appropriate buffering. In general, all wetland areas throughout the project area should be given a more substantial buffer than currently proposed and all direct wetlands impacts avoided. Mr. Dumais noted that this was a design choice and could be solved in almost each instance. Regarding traffic improvements to Trout Brook and Asylum, Mr. Dumais noted that the widening of Asylum Avenue, which is exclusively achieved by a southerly expansion of the right of way, is very concerning for the existing residential properties on the south side of Asylum and that this was a significant change since the Committee’s last review.

M. Lawson – Project Architect (east side) – Introduced the DRAC to the vision for the residential development on the east side of the campus. He noted that in determining how to treat the buildings, they explored the surrounding downtown areas and reviewed the vernacular of the buildings in the downtown. He highlighted the buildings modern aesthetic but inclusion of brick and their placement around a new central green lawn areas. The building placement along Trout Brook looks to reinforce the proposed sense of urban place being created.

R. Giolitto – DRAC Chair – Asked why the design team looked at the buildings and urban form in the downtown. He stated that the team needs to look at the neighborhood in which the parcel and land are situated and draw their design cues from that context and not one so far away and inappropriate for this site. He stated that these parcels are not downtown.

B. Fleming – DRAC Member – Noted that he fully agreed with the Chair’s comments.

B. Fleming – DRAC Member – Noted that he fully agreed with the Chair’s comments.

L. Pang – DRAC Member – Noted that the design of the east campus does not feel like it belongs in this neighborhood or in West Hartford.

K. McClure – DRAC Member – Noted that the issues are ones of density and too much parking. She commented that the parking is too crammed in all over the site and overwhelms the design.

K. Parsons Whittaker – DRAC Member – Stated she agreed with her colleagues. She noted that the overall plan was a lovely plan for a downtown but was not successful in this neighborhood context.

R. Giolitto – DRAC Chair – Regarding the building heights on the east campus, noted that five stories was too tall and the building heights needed to be reduced. The size and scale of the buildings was too much for Trout Brook.

B. Pudlik – Associate Planner – Commented that the 5th story setback of 6' proposed by the architect's team was not meaningful and needed to be reassessed. He also stated the architectural style was the wrong approach to this neighborhood.

T. Dumais – Town Planner – Noted that the DRAC would be happy to meet as frequently as the design team was available and suggested having meetings more limited in scope to focus on certain aspects or sections of the project given its overall size.

REFERRAL FROM THE TOWN COUNCIL:

2. **Application of Steele Road, LLC** to Amend the Boundaries of SDD #139 located at 243 Steele Road and SDD #33 located at 253-275 Steele Road and 2021 Albany Avenue by Rezoning a Portion of SDD #139 to SDD#33 and Rezoning a Portion of SDD #33 to SDD #139.

T. Dumais – Town Planner - introduced the formal referral. He noted to the Committee that at this time the application before them was not subject to any design related aspects. The request was for a zone change to two existing SDDs and that if approved, the Applicant would be back before the Town for a formal request that would include design related changes to the development: the construction of a new 18 units buildings and associated site grading, landscaping and parking changes.

With that background, Mr. Giolitto called for a motion on the application. Mr. Lawler moved approval. Mr. Giolitto noted that In light of the fact that this Special Development District application request is for amendment to zoning district boundaries and does not present design related physical changes, the DRAC does not object to request and by unanimous vote, DRAC recommend approval of the subject application. Vote 5-0

APPROVAL OF MEETING MINUTES:

3.
 - a. December 15, 2022 – Motion; Lawler/ Second; Parsons Whitaker: Vote 5-0 - Approved
 - b. January 12, 2023 – Motion; McClure/Second; Parsons Whitaker: Vote 5-0 – Approved
 - c. January 19, 2023 – Motion; Parsons Whitaker/Second; Lawler: Vote 5-0 – Approved

TOWN PLANNER'S REPORT:

4. None.

ADJOURNMENT: 6:15 PM

Cc: Rick Ledwith, Town Manager
Dallas Dodge, Corporation Counsel

Duane Martin, Community Development Director
Essie Labrot, Town Clerk