

Issued December 20, 2023

**DESIGN REVIEW ADVISORY COMMITTEE
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 16, 2023
ROOM 400, TOWN HALL, WEST HARTFORD, CT**

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

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

ABSENT: David Hines & Elizabeth Pang

Staff: Todd Dumais, Town Planner; Brian Pudlik, Senior 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, 1-19-23, 2-21-23 and 9-7-23*).

T. Dumais – Town Planner – Provided a recap to the DRAC on prior study sessions and where the project is currently.

R. Giolitto – DRAC member – Discussed some of the frustration the DRAC has had with the approach to these study sessions by the design team, specifically noting that the changes presented through the iterative study session process are sometimes responsive to the Committee’s comments, but in other cases introduce design revisions that are either not responsive or worse than prior versions.

Mr. Giolitto then laid out specific objectives for the meeting whereby the design team should focus only on specific concerns of the Committee. On 1800 Asylum those elements included the position of the Asylum entry drive, the townhomes and associated grading and curb-cuts, the scale, height and design of buildings 3 & 4 and their relationship to the other proposed buildings on the site, the size and scale of the hardscape area between buildings 5 & 7, 3 & 4 and the central plaza, the lack of detail around potential “back-of-house” operations for building 3, and finally the dimensions/scale of the main drive, parking spaces and drop off location for the assisted living facility. On 1700 Asylum, Mr. Giolitto asked that the team discuss the proposed gate access control, how they would manage parcel deliveries and whether the Fire Marshal has any concerns with emergency access.

1700 Asylum Avenue Discussion:

M. Lawson – Project Architect for 1700 – Provided a brief explanation of the changes to 1700 Asylum since the last study session, which include better pedestrian connectivity through the site, enhanced planted buffers along Trout Brook Drive, an expansion of the green space around the Champion Oak and the general introduction of landscape design elements of 1800 Asylum into 1700 Asylum. Regarding the entry drive/gate, they propose two lanes into the property and one out, which will allow residents to bypass guests or delivery trucks. Residents will be equipped with a key-fob and guests/delivery drivers will need to be buzzed in by calling an access control operator. Mr. Lawson noted that they would work with Town Emergency Services staff to ensure any concerns are addressed. Regarding proposed building materials, he stated that brick would be used around the base of all buildings. In addition, there will be cast stone elements, fiber cement panels in the middle section of the buildings and prominent, storefront-style glass building entries.

M. Bruton – Project Engineer – Noted that the ownership group is in discussions with SJU regarding possible shared use of parking areas on SJU property for ballfield users during times of high demand.

B. Flemming – DRAC member – Parking for the ballfields is a big concern. Where would overflow go? Mr. Bruton noted that 1800 Asylum would be first option, followed by possible second option at SJU.

J. McClure – DRAC member – Stated that the overall design has improved since the last study session. Questioned whether potential access issues with gate control have been discussed with Emergency Services. Mr. Bruton indicated that they would have those discussions.

H. Schweitzer – DRAC member – Questioned whether there is a staffed gatehouse. Mr. Lawson stated it would not be directly staffed, but that a phone at the gate could be used to reach an off-site staff member. Mr. Schweitzer then asked whether there is an escape lane, should someone enter the property inadvertently. Mr. Lawson stated that there is enough space within the driveway to turnaround before you reach the gate.

B. Flemming – DRAC member – Questioned the utility of the gate at all. Mr. Lawson stated that the owner sees value in a gated complex based on experience with other developments. Operationally, it allows them to monitor who's coming and going and generally makes the development feel more "special".

J. Lawler – DRAC Member – Asked whether parking spaces would be assigned. Mr. Lawson stated they most likely would be.

1800 Asylum Avenue Discussion:

L. Gilmore – Project Architect – Stated that the spine road had shifted slightly to the east to provide a better buffer to the wetland. Also stated that they reduced the number of townhome units and

stepped them back to respect the building line setback. Driveways for the townhomes were moved out to Asylum to allow the units to have backyard areas, which was not possible with parking at the rear. Regarding the proposed assisted living facility, stated that it has been reduced in size.

T. Dumais – Town Planner – Noted for the group that most of the paths that cut through the wetland areas have been eliminated at the behest of staff in order to further reduce direct wetland impacts. Ms. Gilmore noted that the internal and external trail network is still proposed, but is now proposed out of the wetland areas.

L. Gilmore – Stated that they improved the connection between the west and east sides of the development with a cohesive landscaping program. Also showed a bird's eye view of the entire development with the SJU campus in the view. Ms. Gilmore stated that the view helped to put the development in context with the surrounding area and noted that SJU is of a similar scale to what is proposed.

R. Giolitto – DRAC member – Questioned why the road is still misaligned with Fox Meadow Lane.

M. Bruton – Project Engineer - Stated that the prior aligned configuration was with the medical office building, which has since been eliminated from the plans based on comments from the Committee. Also stated that increasing wetland buffers and the addition of townhomes on Asylum to buffer the development from the residential properties to the south have all led to the current design. The team believes the proposed alignment will still provide for safe circulation, while also discouraging use of the Fox Meadow neighborhood for a cut-through.

H. Schweitzer – DRAC member – Stated that a proper road alignment establishes an urban fabric that helps to make the development a part of the community rather than apart from it.

J. Lawler – DRAC member – Echoed Mr. Schweitzer's comments

B. Flemming – DRAC member – Asked the team to explain the wetland implications of shifting the road? Mr. Bruton stated that the changed alignment allowed for a greater buffer to the wetland areas.

R. Giolitto – DRAC member – Asked whether the assisted living facility could be moved to the west side of the road to allow enough space for alignment with Fox Meadow. Mr. Bruton indicated that there may not be enough space, but they could review options.

DRAC – All members requested the team review possible design alternatives that would allow for proper road alignment.

B. Flemming – DRAC member – Stated he liked the townhomes as well as the residential buildings that flank the road near Asylum, but has mixed feelings on the road alignment issue.

H. Schweitzer – DRAC member – Suggested team also review increasing the assisted living building to five stories if it allowed them to reduce the building’s footprint. Mr. Schweitzer also asked if buildings 7a and 7b (flanking residential buildings) could be moved closer to Asylum. Ms. Gilmore stated they could not due to wetland.

R. Giolitto – DRAC member – Asked the team to explain the apparent change in grade from Asylum Avenue to the townhomes. Mr. Bruton and Mr. Fischer indicated that fill was necessary in that area to allow them to properly match the grade behind the townhomes.

R. Giolitto – DRAC member – Stated that the scale of the townhomes, particularly those on Lawler Road, was too large in the context of the existing residential buildings. Mr. Fischer stated they could review options for reducing their scale.

R. Giolitto – DRAC member – Stated that buildings 3 (restaurant) and 4 (spa) are too large. Ms. Gilmore noted that building 3 is two stories and building 4 is three stories, which is consistent with the rest of the development. Mr. Fischer stated that they are trying to create a special experience on this side of the property by incorporating softer edges and large glass curtain walls that will look out onto the restored ponds.

H. Schweitzer – DRAC member – Stated that nighttime illumination in those buildings will be critical to draw people in.

J. McClure – DRAC member – Expressed a concern that the spa may not be open during evening hours, which will compromise the experience the team is trying to cultivate with the elaborately designed building. Ms. Gilmore and Mr. Fischer stated that the types of spas they are working with are not typical day spas, but rather luxury destination spas with eating facilities and outdoor areas. They envision the business being open more extensive hours than day spas. Ms. McClure further stated that it would be extremely beneficial if the public can still move through and experience the space regardless of the spa hours of operation.

H. Schweitzer – DRAC member – Asked how back-of-house operations would be handled for buildings 3 and 4. Ms. Gilmore stated that they are reviewing potential access off of the Main Street through a service door. Mr. Fischer stated that all trash facilities would be contained within the building.

R. Giolitto – DRAC member – Asked how large the patio area is between buildings 3 and 4. Mr. Fischer stated that it varies in size and is broken up into public spaces and private outdoor dining space.

Mr. Flemming – DRAC member – Asked whether there are fountains proposed in the ponds. Mr. Bruton said yes, as currently proposed.

R. Giolitto – DRAC member – Asked how wide the roadway is. Mr. Bruton stated the parking spaces are 20 feet in depth and the travel way is 25 feet.

T. Dumais – Asked whether the berm adjacent to Lawler Road had been reduced. Mr. Bruton indicated that he was slightly reduced.

H. Schweitzer – Stated that landscaping in that area will be critically important to screen the grocery store loading area from Lawler Road.

K. Parsons-Whitaker – Stated that she is struggling to understand the vision of the developers. On one hand attempting to design a pedestrian-scaled Main Street and other publicly accessible amenities, and on the other hand introducing elaborately designed buildings (3 and 4) as the feature buildings on the site that are private and exclusive. Further stated buildings 3 and 4 are not appropriately scaled in the context of the rest of the development.

B. Flemming – DRAC member – Commended the design team on their effort to-date in moving the overall design for the project closer to success.

APPROVAL OF MEETING MINUTES:

1.
 - a. September 7, 2023 – ***No action taken***

COMMUNICATION

3.
 - a. Proposed DRAC 2024 Annual Meeting and Filing Deadline Calendar – ***Motion: Lawler / Second: Parsons Whitaker – Vote 6-0: Approved***

TOWN PLANNER’S REPORT:

4. None

ADJOURNMENT: 6:11 PM

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

Duane Martin, Community Development Director
Leon Davidoff, Town Clerk