



Issued September 27, 2024

DESIGN REVIEW ADVISORY COMMITTEE
*****SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES*****
THURSDAY, AUGUST 29, 2024
ROOM 400, TOWN HALL, WEST HARTFORD, CT

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

DRAC ATTENDANCE: Chair, Ray Giolitto; Committee Members: Hugh Schweitzer, Brian Flemming, Liz Pang & Jenna McClure Alternate: Jim Lawler & David Hines

ABSENT:

Staff: Todd Dumais, Town Planner & Brian Pudlik, Senior Planner

REFERRAL FROM THE TOWN PLANNER:

1. **1800 Asylum Avenue** – Study session preparatory to the submission of a potential new Special Development District application for the redevelopment of the western portion of the former UConn campus located at 1800 Asylum Avenue. The applicant contemplates the redevelopment to include the demolition of all existing buildings and the construction of twelve (12) new buildings, including commercial / mixed-use and residential, a new private roadway and surface parking lots along with associated site improvements, including landscaping pedestrian pathways and site drainage. (*Most recent prior study session on 6-27-24*)

T. Dumais – Town Planner - Provided a very brief statement on the item before the Committee and noted that the goal of the meeting is for the design team to present the changes that have been made to the plan in response to the DRAC’s comments since the last study session.

L. Gilmore – Project Architect – Noted to the Committee that the project had received approval from the IWWA since the last meeting. Ms. Gilmore went on to provide the following plan updates since the last study session:

- ***The townhomes on Asylum have been refined and the mass further articulated with gables. The canopies are now better integrated into the overall design language of the building.***
- ***At the loading dock of the grocery building, the team studied the extent to which a truck would be visible from the north when parked at the loading dock. Renderings were produced which demonstrate that with the exception of a very small portion of the truck’s cab, it will be fully screened with the proposed screen fence located immediately north of the loading dock ramp.***
- ***A fence will be proposed at the northeast corner of the grocery store parking area in order to comply with “Type E” screening, but the team has not determined the color for the fence yet.***
- ***Presented night renderings of buildings 3 and 4, which show bright illumination within the buildings and around the exterior patio and landscaped areas.***
- ***The design of the assisted living facility has been further refined with the introduction of architectural elements from buildings 2 and 5. Ms. Gilmore noted that the team prefers***

“option 2” (as noted in the presentation materials), as they feel it more successfully breaks up the massing of the building.

- *Although not rendered yet, townhomes 7C-D & 7 E-F will be updated to mimic the changes presented to buildings 7A and 7B.*
- *Presented the initial concept for the multi-tenant pylon sign to be located at the easterly site entry off of Trout Brook Drive.*

J. Lawler – DRAC member – Expressed concern that buildings 3 and 4 could not be repurposed, should the proposed tenants not succeed. Suggested the team conduct a study to demonstrate that the West Hartford market can support the proposed uses.

D. Hines – DRAC member – Stated that generally the architecture is progressing nicely throughout the site. Specific to the buildings 7C-D & 7 E-F, suggested they should be eliminated in order to open up the viewshed into the open space to the north. Regarding the parking area at the southwest corner of the site, stated a preference for eliminating the lobe of the parking lot on the westernmost side to maximize open space in the area. Suggested the overall design of the parking area could be adjusted to replace a portion of the westernmost parking spaces elsewhere in the lot. Finally, Mr. Hines pointed out that refrigerator trucks parked at the loading dock of the grocery store can be loud and disruptive if the diesel engine is continuously running to maintain power to the refrigeration unit. He suggested that these types of trucks utilize electric power to keep the refrigerator unit running if the vehicle is stored in the loading dock for longer periods of time.

J. McClure – DRAC member – Noted that she is comfortable with the truck screening at the loading dock, based on the renderings provided. Regarding buildings 7C-D & 7 E-F, she stated agreement with Mr. Hines that those buildings should be eliminated for the benefit of the properties across the street. Regarding buildings 7A and 7B, stated that she prefers “options A or B” (as noted in the presentation materials), as there is not enough brick shown on “option C” to improve the overall aesthetic. Regarding building 4 (spa building), Ms. McClure questioned whether it would be open as late as the restaurant in order to maintain the active environment depicted in the renderings. Finally, she noted that more refinement is needed on building 6 (assisted living). Specifically, the ground floor treatment is shown to mimic that of buildings 2 and 5, which are mixed use buildings with commercial uses on the ground floor. Because the assisted living building does not have a commercial component on the ground floor, it should not be treated as such.

L. Pang – DRAC member – Stated that she feels the project is too big overall and that the townhomes on Asylum are also out of scale with the existing residential buildings across the street.

H. Schweitzer – DRAC member – Stated that he appreciates the changes to the project overall and in particular to buildings 7A and 7B. Similarly to Ms. McClure, he prefers “options A or B” to “option c” for the surface treatment of the buildings. Regarding building 6, asked how the interior portion of the building would be handled. Ms. Gilmore stated that the entire building would be treated the same way. Regarding buildings 8A-B & 8C-D (Lawler townhomes), questioned whether the changes made to

7A & 7B would also be made to those. Ms. Gilmore confirmed that similar changes would be made. Regarding the pylon sign, Mr. Schweitzer stated that it should be further back from Trout Brook Drive. In response to Mr. Lawler's comments on future viability of buildings 3 and 4, Mr. Schweitzer reminded the Committee that use of the buildings was not a consideration under the DRAC's purview. Lastly, he stated that he does not share concerns raised by other Committee members regarding buildings 7C-D & 7 E-F and has no issues with their placement.

B. Flemming – DRAC member – Stated that he does not have concerns regarding the size and scale of the development given the wetland constraints on the property, which limits developable area. He stated that he shares Mr. Hines concern regarding noise associated with an idling refrigerated truck and concurs that requiring the vehicle unit to use electrical power would be a preferable solution. Regarding the pylon sign, stated that it is too big and placed too close to the road. Stated that it should be moved further into the site or eliminated entirely. Regarding buildings 3 and 4, Mr. Flemming stated that he likes both buildings and feels as though the architecture has improved drastically over time. Regarding buildings 7A & 7B, he believes the current options are better than what was shown in the prior study session. Overall, Mr. Flemming stated that the team has done a commendable job hiding the bulk of the development from the surrounding neighborhoods.

R. Giolitto – DRAC Chair – Regarding the pylon sign, stated a concern that it will not be effective as currently planned and in addition, is too large. Regarding building 6, stated that the building's terminus at the cornice-line is not strong enough and that options for a stronger building termination should be studied. Lastly, Mr. Giolitto questioned whether consideration has been given to meter placement on the buildings. Ms. Gilmore indicated that the team has considered meter locations and that they will be located at the back of buildings and hidden from view as much as possible.

For the next meeting, the DRAC requested that the team provide additional detailing on dumpster enclosures, trash management, meter locations, and physical samples of proposed architectural materials.

2. **29 Highland Street** – Study session preparatory to the submission of a potential new land use application for the redevelopment of the former nursing home at 29 Highland Street. The applicant contemplates the redevelopment to include the demolition of the existing building and associated improvements and the construction of two (2) multifamily residential buildings, along with associated site improvements, including parking, site lighting, landscaping and site drainage.

T. Dumais – Town Planner – Provided a brief introduction of the project.

J. Levy – Project Representative – Provided an introduction into the “Vessel” modular building concept including the following details:

- *The prefabricated, modular nature of the building construction allows for substantially faster building completion than with typical construction methods. Could be as little as eight months.*

- *The building is all steel construction, is fully sprinklered and powered by solar panels to produce a net-zero project from an energy usage standpoint.*
- *The exterior surface treatment is with a “rain screen”, which is more durable and provides for greater longevity compared to other construction materials.*
- *The primary entry court, which includes both a stairway and elevator, is enclosed by a metal mesh material, but is open air. The roof is provided by a metal panel and skylight system.*
- *The building is designed to be fully ADA accessible.*
- *The nature of the prefabricated modular construction means minimal to no on-site construction waste is generated.*
- *Vessel does not include elaborate tenant amenity spaces in their buildings, which ownership contends do not get widely used in properties that include them. Not building out amenity space saves development costs, which are then passed to the tenants through more affordable rents.*

Mr. Levy went on to provide neighborhood context for the proposed development, including size and scale of existing buildings surrounding the project site. He noted that the height of the proposed building will be similar to that of 15 Highland Street to the south. Mr. Levy then walked through site layout options that were considered through consultation with Town staff and the project engineer, ultimately determining that a two-building layout positioned close to Highland Street with parking to the side and rear of the buildings is the best option. This layout allows for greatest separation from the residential properties to the west, in addition to landscaped buffers on all sides of the building.

R. Giolitto – DRAC Chair – Stated that he has been following “Vessel” since it was introduced to the marketplace and is intrigued by the product. He stated that the two-building approach is preferable to a single, larger building. Regarding the general aesthetic of the building, is comfortable with the modern approach, but would prefer more exciting color accents than the brown alternative presented. Regarding building orientation, suggested that the entry vestibule be flipped such that it faces east towards Highland Street rather than to the west. Mr. Levy agreed that this would be a beneficial change.

J. Lawler – DRAC member – Stated that he likes the building concept, but agrees that reversing the location of the entry vestibule would be an important change. Mr. Lawler asked how HVAC and venting would be handled. Mr. Levy stated that all HVAC equipment would be located on the roof and screened. Venting will not be visible from outside, as venting will take place within an open interior corridor.

L. Pang – DRAC member – Stated that more refinement was needed in all landscaped areas.

J. McClure – DRAC member – Stated that the placement of the building relative to Highland Street should respect the building line and existing setback of neighboring properties.

D. Hines – DRAC member – Stated that he really likes the building methodology of Vessel. Asked that the team consider use of heat pumps and/or geothermal systems as part of the HVAC solution for the

building. Regarding building scale, indicated that he prefers three stories to four stories, as it better reflects the height of existing adjacent buildings.

H. Schweitzer – DRAC member – Suggested that the team provide neighborhood-scale sections to depict the height of the proposed building in comparison to existing buildings. Doing so would help to show whether the building is appropriately scaled at four stories or if three would be better. A section through the site would also be helpful to help depict site treatment and building spacing. A wall section would be helpful for the Committee to get a better sense of how the modular system comes together.

B. Flemming – DRAC member – Stated he really likes the Vessel concept and agreed with Mr. Schweitzer that a wall section would be important to show in a future DRAC meeting.

T. Dumais – Town Planner – Stated that a lighting plan will be important to present at a future meeting in addition to reiterating Mr. Giolitto’s request for additional color options for the wall panel system.

APPROVAL OF MEETING MINUTES:

3. None

COMMUNICATION

4. None

TOWN PLANNER’S REPORT:

5. None

ADJOURNMENT: 6:00 PM

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

Duane Martin, Community Development Director
Leon Davidoff, Town Clerk