



Issued January 23, 2025

DESIGN REVIEW ADVISORY COMMITTEE
*****SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES*****
THURSDAY, JANUARY 16, 2025
ROOM 400, TOWN HALL, WEST HARTFORD, CT

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

DRAC ATTENDANCE: Chair, Ray Giolitto; Committee Members, Angela Cahill, Brian Flemming, Jenna McClure and Liz Pang. Alternates: Jim Lawler

ABSENT: Alternate David Hines

Staff: Todd Dumais, Town Planner, Brian Pudlik, Senior Planner & Robert Gosselin, Associate Planner

REFERRAL FROM THE TOWN COUNCIL:

1. **29 Highland Street:** Application filed on behalf of Vessel RE Holdings LLC and Vessel Technologies, Inc., contractor purchaser of 29 Highland Street, for change of zone of approximately 2.3 +/- acres of the site from a RI single-family zone to a RM-1 multifamily residence district with Special Development District Designation overlay for the redevelopment of the site into a new 112 unit multifamily residential development which will qualify as a “set-aside development” under General Statutes Section 8-30g. Associated parking and site amenities are also proposed. *(One prior informal study session held on this project in August, 2024 and one formal study session on December 12, 2024)*

T. Dumais – Town Planner – Introduced the application and provided a summary of the DRAC’s requests from the prior meeting in December.

N. Rubler – Applicant – Stated that the team worked to respond to the DRAC’s comments from the prior meeting. He presented updated project renderings, which depict their responses. Mr. Rubler went on to make the following points on the updated plans:

- ***Stated that the building can generally be made any color and given the panel system used, can be colored in a “paint-by-number” kind of fashion, provided the panel coloring is coordinated with the construction requirements.***
- ***Regarding the front of the building, the door has been centered in the entry court area and that landscaping and hardscape has been added to create a more formal entry.***
- ***Regarding the finish of the entry court stairway, stated that the New London example is not representative of the galvanized finish that wish to achieve in their buildings. The team has since moved to a different manufacturer who is able to provide a brighter/shinier finish.***
- ***In response to DRAC’s request to paint the stairway white, Mr. Rubler said they could do that, but galvanization is the preferred approach due to its long-term durability.***

- *At the rear of the building, a ramp has been added at the entry door to address accessibility into the building. The ramp is necessary due to site grading and the first-floor elevation of the building.*
- *Regarding building coloring in response to DRAC's comments, stated that they added a grey band across the top to establish a cornice line and added vertical grey banding at the corners to add visual interest.*

T. Dumais – Town Planner – Asked that the applicant review the change to building placement and parking lot configuration changes.

E. LaBatte – Project Engineer – Made the following comments regarding changes to the site plan:

- *The building has been pushed 10 feet further west to allow a greater separation from Highland Street.*
- *The dumpster enclosure, formerly located along the westerly property line, has been divided into two separate enclosures; one on the north side of the property and one on the south side to allow easier access for building residents to move it further from the residential properties on Concord Street.*
- *The parking spaces on the south side of the building and parallel to the drive aisle have been widened to make them more accessible and so they can act as designated loading spaces through coordination with building management.*
- *As noted by Mr. Rubler, the building entry area has been refined and made more of a focal point.*
- *Bollard lighting has been incorporated into the front walk.*

R. Giolitto – DRAC Chair – Asked what the front setback of the existing buildings north and south of the project site is relative to what is now proposed. Mr. LaBatte stated that the existing buildings are at the 50-foot building line and the proposed building is now at 30 feet.

J. McClure – DRAC member – Stated that new building placement is likely better, but without any visual aids to show the building relative to the existing buildings on the street, it is difficult to tell if the placement is acceptable. Ms. McClure then asked whether the large trees depicted in the rendering are existing or proposed. Mr. LaBatte indicated that they are existing. Ms. McClure stated that if the trees are to remain as depicted in the renderings, they would help to screen the building.

Ms. McClure then asked whether walkways would be required on the north and south stairways to allow for egress. Mr. LaBatte stated they would review options for walkways.

Regarding the rear building entry, Ms. McClure asked why the ramp was necessary. Mr. LaBatte stated that it is necessary for accessibility due to the first-floor elevation. He further stated that they positioned the ramp to not block any windows. Ms. McClure stated that the rear building entry looks like a service entrance, given that there are no architectural features that indicate that this is a public entry, such as an awning, lighting and/or additional fenestration around the door.

Regarding the rest of the building, Ms. McClure reiterated the comment that something must be done to better articulate the long blank wall. She encouraged the team to study color patterning options or options for incorporating the faux wood paneling in some fashion that is not as formulaic as previously presented.

R. Giolitto – DRAC Chair – Made a statement that DRAC’s expectation from the prior study session was that the development team would provide the Committee with several color and pattern studies of the façade, which the Committee could consider and provided feedback on. He further stated that what was provided for this meeting, not only insufficient, but submitted too late for the Committee to have adequate opportunity to review in advance of the meeting.

J. McClure – DRAC member – Reiterated the point that the Committee wants to see options for building color and patterning.

N. Rubler – Applicant – Stated that their team generally prefers the aesthetic of a white box, but will do what the Committee wants if that is their preference. He further stated that they want to do what is right for the community, but they need some direction from the Committee as to what they want to see.

R. Giolitto – DRAC Chair – Stated that the role of the Committee is not to make design suggestions. Rather, he suggested that the team work with staff to discuss options with the goal of bringing back at least three color/patterning options for the DRAC to consider.

J. Lawler – DRAC member – Stated a preference for the original two-building concept, where the break in the separation of the buildings helped to break up the overall massing of the project, especially with the open stair elements facing Highland Street. As a single building, you lose the visual interest, which needs to be reintroduced through building coloring and patterning.

Regarding the ramping at the rear of the building, Mr. Lawler stated that all ramping should be handled in the interior, if possible, as the current plan for exterior ramping is visually obtrusive and not successful.

B. Flemming – DRAC member – Encouraged the team to employ an artist who could assist with preparing color and pattern studies. Mr. Flemming echoed comments of other Committee members in stating that the long blank wall is problematic and is not the right approach. He also stated that the two-building concept is preferred.

Regarding specific design details, Mr. Flemming asked the following questions:

- **What is the fabric membrane detailed in the plans?**
 - **Mr. Rubler stated that it is literally a fabric material that is stretched into place to form the ceiling of each residential unit.**
- **Asked if the roof is sloped and how does it drain.**
 - **Mr. Rubler indicated that the roof is sloped and all roof drainage is directed to an integrated system within the building.**
- **Asked whether bike racks are planned for the site.**
 - **Mr. LaBatte stated that bike racks will be added in a tbd location outside of the building. They will be of a modern aesthetic to be in keeping with the building.**
- **Asked whether the building will go dark at night, or is any lighting proposed.**
 - **Mr. Rubler stated that generally the intent is for the building to go dark at night.**

Finally, Mr. Flemming reiterated the point made by other Committee members that a canopy or some other architectural feature needs to be added to better articulate the rear building entry.

L. Pang – DRAC member – Also stated that she prefers the two-building concept and agreed with other members that additional color and patterning studies must be submitted. Ms. Pang asked for an explanation of the provided site section. Mr. LaBatte stated that the change of grade from west to east made it challenging to site the building and that they decided to reduce the grade on the west side, which effectively sinks the building and more respectful to the neighbors on Concord Street.

T. Dumais – Town Planner – Stated that the site section is deceptive in its depiction of the existing view from Concord Street because the tall element shown only exists at one small portion of the existing building. The experience for most residents on Concord Street is of a one-story building.

L. Pang – DRAC member – Stated that a landscape island should be incorporated at the northwest corner of the site in order to allow for more buffer plantings.

A. Cahill – DRAC member – Had the following comments and questions:

- *The early architects that used minimalist white box forms, did so only as a starting place in the evolution of their buildings. The final design was never that simple; certainly not as simple as the proposal before the Committee. The proposed building, therefore requires more visual interest.*
- *Some type of weather protection is needed, such as an awning or some other architectural feature, at the building entries.*
- *Galvanization is a good idea, if done well, in high traffic areas, but paint or powder coating should be considered where possible.*
- *In the construction phase of the project, make sure that any existing elements that are being reused, such as sidewalks, should be refreshed to look almost new.*
- *Asked whether all mechanical equipment will be hidden.*
 - *Mr. Rubler indicated that they will be.*
- *Lighting levels in the parking lot appear to low. Asked the team to review.*
- *Asked whether any meters would be visible on the exterior.*
 - *Mr. Rubler stated that no meter panels will be located outside the building.*
- *Asked what the intent is for the depicted landscaping at the front of the building.*
 - *Mr. Rubler stated that the intent is for a “no mow” landscaping treatment.*
- *Asked that the team double check renderings depiction of trees against the actual on-site conditions.*
- *Asked whether any signage is proposed.*
 - *Mr. LaBatte stated that a monument sign is currently noted on the plans.*
 - *Mr. Rubler stated that their preference is for no sign.*
- *Asked whether the stairs on the north and south ends of the building are all-the-time access.*
 - *Mr. Rubler stated that they are not and are intended for emergency egress only.*
 - *In response, Ms. Cahill stated that consideration should be given to making these available at all times.*
 - *Mr. Rubler stated that they want to control access only through the main entry doors.*

R. Giolitto – DRAC Chair – Stated that the Committee has a general concern that the renderings are inconsistent with in-the-field observations of completed and in-progress Vessel buildings, which creates a sense that they may not get what is ultimately agreed upon by the Committee.

Regarding detailing at the building entry court, Mr. Giolitto asked for a section through that building element to better understand the various elements that make up that feature.

N. Rubler – Applicant – Made the comment that most communities are simply not offered the types of options being provided to West Hartford. That typically only gets a couple of options to choose from. This project presents a different opportunity because the design of this double-wide entry structure has not been done before in a Vessel building.

T. Dumais – Tow Planner – Asked how the interior corridors are maintained given that they are open to the elements on the ends of the building. Mr. Rubler stated that those areas are power washed regularly.

APPROVAL OF MEETING MINUTES:

2. Minutes from the December 12, 2024 Special Meeting: ***Motion; Flemming /Second; McClure. Approved***

COMMUNICATION

3. None

TOWN PLANNER'S REPORT:

4. None

ADJOURNMENT: 6:04 PM

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

Duane Martin, Community Development Director
Leon Davidoff, Town Clerk