



Issued February 11, 2025

DESIGN REVIEW ADVISORY COMMITTEE
*****SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES*****
THURSDAY, JANUARY 23, 2025
ROOM 400, TOWN HALL, WEST HARTFORD, CT

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

DRAC ATTENDANCE: Chair, Ray Giolitto; Committee Members; Brian Flemming and Liz Pang. Alternates: David Hines & Jim Lawler

ABSENT: Committee Members; Angela Cahill & Jenna McClure

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. (*Prior informal study session held on this project August, 2024 and two formal study sessions held on December 12, 2024 and January 16, 2024*)

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

N. Rubler – Applicant – Stated that based on the DRAC’s feedback from the prior meeting, in which the Committee expressed a strong preference for a two-building layout, the team decided to revert back to that plan. In addition, Mr. Rubler made the following comments:

- ***They plan on showing façade color options to the Committee today, but noted that their design team strongly prefers plain white.***
- ***The renderings have been corrected to accurately depict the mature trees that will be saved.***
- ***The color options that the team thought were most successful are depicted in the newest renderings, while those were viewed as less successful are provided on basic marked-up elevation sheets.***

R. Giolitto – DRAC Chair – Thanked the Design Team for their effort and suggested to the Committee that the objective for the meeting is to provide the applicant with 2-3 options that are preferred and should be studied more.

J. Lawler – DRAC member – Expressed appreciation to the applicant in their willingness to revert back to the two-building concept. He further stated that the separation of the buildings significantly improves the perceived mass of the project and is therefore more respectful to neighborhood. Regarding the color options presented, Mr. Lawler stated that he prefers all white now that the building has been separated. Lastly, Mr. Lawler asked whether the southerly building could be shifted west to further improve the perceived massing. Project Engineer, Mr. LaBatte indicated that the building cannot be shifted back any further due to existing site constraints.

L. Pang – DRAC member – Stated that she prefers the two-building concept and prefers the all-white building color option.

B. Flemming – DRAC member – Stated that the two-building concept is a strong preference. Mr. Flemming also stated that all white is also a preference with the change to two buildings. He stated that all of the wood color options appear to heavy. Regarding the plantings depicted, Mr. Flemming stated that the red-color shrubs depicted in between the buildings look stunning in contrast to the white buildings and asked whether any trees could be incorporated along the northerly property line. Mr. LaBatte stated that trees could be planted along the northerly property boundary due to the steep slope and lack of space.

D. Hines – DRAC member – Stated that he appreciates the change to two buildings, but did not state a preference on the color options presented. He further stated that he would prefer if the southerly building could be shifted back and would also prefer if both buildings were reduced to three stories.

R. Giolitto – DRAC – Chair – Stated that absent Committee members Jenna McClure and Angela Cahill noted in written correspondence prior to the meeting, that they prefer options 7 & 8 in the rendering package, where some wood color was incorporated into the building.

T. Dumais – Town Planner – Read Ms. McClure’s written comments into the record, which included the following:

- The design is moving in the right direction and the scale feels much more appropriate to the neighborhood.***
- Appreciates the street view, looking north. With that, she is comfortable with the setback from the street. The large existing tree on the southeast corner is a major asset and should be protected at all costs!***
- She would like to understand what is happening in the entry court between the two buildings. Are plantings appropriate for amount of sun that will reach the ground? Is the bollard lighting enough to activate this space? First priority is making sure this space feels lit and safe.***
- Appreciates the color studies of the east façade; however, but they do not include all of the studies requested. She is in favor of using oak in some capacity, but does not like the ALL oak scheme. The consistent stripes feel too rigid. She would prefer to see an option that includes the oak in a more dynamic way – working with the panel sizes of course.***
- At the ground level of the entry court, does the kalwall come down to the ground or is it the mesh material? Need to understand those facades, too.***

- *Will need to see all facades around the building.*
- *Updated landscape and site plan must be submitted for Committee review prior to a vote*

T. Dumais – Town Planner – Read Ms. Cahill’s written comments into the record, which included the following:

- *She questioned whether the west elevation would match the east elevation in Options 1-8?*
- *She ranked the east elevation options as follows:*
 - *Acceptable, in order of preference: 3,2,7,8,5*
 - *Not acceptable: 1, 4 or 6*
- *She expressed concern with all three of the north / south elevations, but suggested #3 could work with wood panel on both corners. She stated that a better approach might be something like the east elevation option 7. Or 8.*

R. Giolitto – DRAC Chair – Stated that he likes the white, but if wood-color is used, he likes option 7, but without the band at the parapet.

T. Dumais – Town Planner – Suggested that the Committee not lose sight of the context in which these buildings will sit. That the all-white option may be too stark a contrast to the adjacent, existing buildings.

L. Pang – DRAC member – Asked whether a plant irrigation system is proposed and whether an existing tree condition survey had been conducted. Mr. LaBatte stated that no irrigation is planned, but understands that any new plantings will need to be manually watered after installation. Regarding an existing tree inventory, he stated that an Arborist evaluated all existing trees and found some to be good condition and others to be in poor condition.

Ms. Pang also asked whether a fence or guardrail may be necessary at top of the slope along the northerly property line. Mr. LaBatte stated that it is not necessary.

T. Dumais – Town Planner – Stated that staff believes a guardrail or fence should be incorporated along the northerly property line and that the outstanding staff comment on this issue will remain.

R. Giolitto – DRAC Chair – Asked whether a rear or side entrance could be incorporated within the entry vestibule so that residents parking in the rear do not have to walk around to front of building. Mr. Rubler stated that it is not possible – that the front entry is the only one that will be used by residents and the side doors will be for emergency egress only.

Mr. Giolitto asked about the plantings proposed at the front of the building, which appears to be instead of grass. Mr. Dumais stated that the plans indicate a ground-cover planting that grows up to 18 inches in height, which is in violation of Town ordinance limiting to 12 inches. Mr. Rubler stated they would change the plant to one that grows to 12 inches or lower.

B. Flemming – DRAC member – Asked what the material are color will be for the proposed fence along the westerly property boundary. Mr. LaBatte stated it would be wood stockade, which is the same as existing.

Regarding the proposed bike racks, Mr. Flemming asked that the team review more innovative options that are more modern in appearance to match the aesthetic of the building.

Lastly, Mr. Flemming asked for details on the dumpster enclosures. Mr. Rubler suggested they design the enclosure with a similar rain screen cladding as the one used on the building.

D. Hines – Asked whether the proposed buildings are at the same elevation as the street or lower. Mr. LaBatte stated that the street is actually slightly lower and the buildings themselves would be at the same elevation.

R. Giolitto – DRAC Chair – Requested that in preparation for the next DRAC meeting, the applicant submit a full updated architectural plan set, in addition to an updated rendering set that includes a modified version of option 7 shown without the color band at the parapet.

APPROVAL OF MEETING MINUTES:

2. Minutes from the January 16, 2025 Special Meeting: ***Motion; Lawler/Second; Pang. Approved***

COMMUNICATION

3. None

TOWN PLANNER'S REPORT:

4. None

ADJOURNMENT: 5:34 PM

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

Duane Martin, Community Development Director
Leon Davidoff, Town Clerk