

Arlington Redevelopment Board
December 17, 2018, 7:30 p.m.
Senior Center, Main Room, First Floor
Meeting Minutes

This meeting was recorded by ACMI.

PRESENT: Andrew Bunnell (Chair), Andrew West, David Watson, Eugene Benson, Kin Lau

STAFF: Jennifer Raitt, Director of Planning and Community Development; Erin Zwirko, Assistant Director of Planning and Community Development

The Chair opened the meeting at 7:30 pm and turned to the first item on the agenda, multifamily housing analysis and recommendations.

Ms. Raitt stated the analysis was done to analyze possible development opportunities along Arlington's main corridors, creating new businesses while preserving neighborhoods, specifically in the already zoned higher-density residential districts (R4-R7) and in the business districts.

Alexis Smith, Senior Regional Housing Planner with MAPC, reviewed the following analyses:

- * lot size/density – in the business districts, lots are largely compliant; in the residential district, many are not; and
- * buildout – impact of yards and open space; height; floor area ratios; and parking.

Ms. Smith then moved to the main points:

- * eliminate usable open space multifamily requirements and instead double the landscaped open space requirements;
- * slightly reduce front/side yard setbacks;
- * reduce minimum lot area;
- * reduce height buffer;
- * increase FAR across higher density districts;
- * change parking ratio to one space per unit; and
- * six mixed-use or multifamily units as of right.

The Chair moved to questions from the Board.

Board members asked Ms. Smith clarifying questions about setback requirements, proposed height buffer requirements, and setbacks. Board members also expressed concerns allowing buildings which are six or less units to be built as of right. Mr. Watson stated he is in favor of the special permit process, which allows for more discussion and guidance with residents and developers. The Chair agreed. Mr. Benson was concerned about reducing the number of parking spaces, as one parking space per single family does not accurately reflect the number of cars possibly in use. Mr. Benson asked if there would be no setback with three stories; Ms. Smith stated setback would be required for buildings greater than three stories. Mr. Lau supported this. The Chair referred to the Capitol Theatre block as a good model for such setbacks. Ms. Smith stated this setback would apply to both mixed use and residential districts. Mr. Benson stated he is in favor of adding some density, but suggested a combination of usable/landscaped open space. Ms. Smith stated landscape can also be usable. Mr. Benson suggested clarifying the definition, which seems exclusive. Ms. Smith stated that now open space on roofs is allowed for two-story buildings; a bylaw change would allow this requirement to be fulfilled on higher stories.

The Chair opened the floor for questions from the public.

John Gersh asked how Arlingtonians would benefit from proposed changes. The Chair replied that rules in place over the last 40 years have held back mixed use renovation and development, and prevented needed amenities as well as housing alternatives.

Carl Wagner was unhappy about the mixed use building that went up on Mass. Ave. near Stop and Shop. He stated that Arlington does not want to increase density, it's already very dense, and that greater density will not guarantee cheaper housing. He stated proposed changes would make Arlington look less like a town and more like a city, and these should come before the voters prior to Board approval.

Jo Anne Preston asked the Board to take more time to consider the impact on all of Arlington, especially increased school enrollment. She stated that according to a study, the impact of new development is that costs outweigh revenues, schooling being the major cost. She also stated she did not think there was a scarcity of rental apartments in Arlington, and this needs some research. Also, in Arlington Center, the number of residents did not prevent the three empty storefronts. She recommended a less short-sighted approach, especially as it affects the schools.

Asia Kepka, artist, stated she was lucky to be able to buy a house in Arlington 20 years ago, and she could not do so now. She was concerned because a small business near her small street of two-story homes was shut down, and the developer wants to replace it with a 5-story, 20-unit complex. She stated she would like to see the Board address needs of artists and other residents who do not want to be pushed out.

Steve Revilak supported the proposal overall -- allowing a six-unit building by-right and dimensional changes to townhouses. He stated this is a modest proposal, affecting only a small portion of the entire town and looks forward to a Town Meeting vote.

Wynelle Evans asked, of the 185,000 units required for eastern Massachusetts, how many is Arlington expected to provide; how many of those will be affordable; and will those affordable units be affordable in perpetuity? Ms. Raitt stated these are regional goals, and there are no local goals at this time; the only local goal now is to achieve ten percent of affordable 40B housing, to be affordable in perpetuity.

John Worden stated that if the Board talks to local residents they would find that, rather than density, the real concern is over teardowns that disfigure neighborhoods and limit housing affordability. He objected to building six units by-right. Ms. Raitt stated the Housing Plan Advisory Committee (HPAC) met many times. One the Housing Production Plan was adopted, the HPAC became the Housing Plan Implementation Committee; the committee has met. Mr. Worden stated that the approved Housing Production Plan was an invalid vote because one of the members was employed by the MAPC. Ms. Raitt stated that the plan is valid and was adopted by the town and approved by the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development.

Mr. Wagner asked about recusal, and Ms. Raitt and the Chair replied they would not address this.

Mr. Worden requested that the new plans be shelved until MAPC and CHAPA can say where they would put the new school that would be required, and who is going to pay for it.

Mark Rosenthal stated he is distressed that town boards such as this repeatedly make decisions without discussing it with the populace; expect busy townspeople to come to meetings, knowing full well that most won't; and then make decisions that are not known to the public until it's a fait accompli.

Chris Loreti stated the Board is taking the easy way out with the height buffers, and that many different zones near each other makes it hard for coherent planning. He liked the "rhythm of the corridors" but there is no agreement about what the appropriate rhythm is, and the Board needs to consult the zoning map more closely. He agreed about not relaxing the special permits but asked rhetorically if the Board had ever rejected a special permit application. Regarding open spaces, landscaped open space would only be increased from ten to fifteen percent, but many older structures already exceed that open space.

Pam Hallett complimented the presentation but stated a survey done a year and a half earlier showed an overabundance of parking; also, bike parking needs to be addressed regarding helping people park the bikes and keeping them safe. She took issue with audience members criticizing the Board for lack of public notice, stating there have been many public meetings, and the minutes are available to the public.

Ben Ruddick spoke in supported increased density, which would increase the tax base of the town, brings in young families like his, and result in more affordable housing because more housing would be built.

Neal Mongold, architect, supported increased density. He agreed with Board members Mr. Benson and Mr. Lau about the challenge of proximity of different districts along the slice of Mass. Ave. He favored one parking space per unit. He suggested designers be allowed to find their creative way and not everything needs to be identical. He questioned the public value of landscapes if located on a roof or balcony.

Larry Slotnick also supported increased density and hoped that relaxing some zoning requirements would make the Mass Ave strip less of a “mishmash” and increase the vibrancy of the area. He stated the tax base would increase and that new people coming into Arlington might not necessarily burden the public school system.

Charlotte Milan supported increased density, as well as less than one parking space per household.

The Chair closed public comment and moved to the next agenda item. Ms. Raitt asked if the Board wished to continue moving forward with these proposals. The Board expressed interest in continuing. A January 16 meeting was added so they could continue to review warrant articles and zoning language.

Mr. Benson requested more graphics showing proposed changes and comparisons, and requested to see the parking survey that was previously referenced. Mr. Watson approved of the evening’s proceedings but was concerned about the timing to get this to Town Meeting because of the level of public interest. Mr. Lau approved of the public feedback this evening. Mr. Benson asked what maximum buildout would look like. Ms. Raitt stated the analysis will be conducted once the warrant articles are filed and we are clear what is being proposed. Mr. Benson mentioned studies that show the types of houses where services are greater than taxes seem to be three-four bedrooms, with a lot of kids; small apartments, high end condos have taxes greater than services provided; this needs to be discussed. The Chair stated the Master Plan addresses the need for these kinds of diverse housing choices. Mr. West asked how to address the ebb and flow between nodes (East Arlington and Arlington Heights) emphasizing commercial areas that then drop off into residential areas and open spaces. Ms. Raitt suggested that we work on visualizations to illustrate what is being discussed. Mr. West stated density, tax base, and population diversity should be discussed in Town Meeting. Mr. Watson stated it was important for the public to understand that the Board can’t prescribe what developers will do but can establish some boundaries.

The Chair suggested the department prepare warrant language and the Board will continue its discussion. Ms. Raitt stated she would bring the draft warrant articles to the January 7 meeting, along with any other supporting documents. Mr. Benson asked about the January 10 meeting. Ms. Raitt stated that it is a public meeting with a brief presentation and world café style engagement for participants to learn about the early proposals.

The Chair moved to the next agenda item: Signs. Ms. Zwirko presented an analysis of the signage section of the zoning bylaw, produced by Roger Eastman and colleagues from . Mr. West spoke favorably about the analysis. The Chair stated he agreed with the proposal to keep sign requirements in zoning bylaw and remove them from the town bylaw. Mr. Benson stated he has many comments and disagreed with regulations regarding movie marquees and gasoline stations. He expressed concern that some of the proposed recommendations would not give the Board enough authority. He also stated many houses in his neighborhood have more than one sign (house numbers, political signs, alarms, etc.), which is a “violation,” and this should be addressed in the regulations. Mr. Benson suggested making a distinction between commercial and noncommercial speech protection. Mr. Lau asked how enforcement would be addressed. The Chair stated this was the zoning enforcement officer is in charge of compliance with the bylaw.

Mr. West moved to adjourn; Mr. Lau seconded. Board voted all in favor.

Meeting Adjourned.

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