

Guest commentary: CVS and the Atwood House

Next

By John L. Worden III

Posted Apr 29, 2010 at 12:01 AM Updated Apr 29, 2010 at 4:12 PM

Guest commentary by John L. Worden III

In the past few days, several people have asked me about the CVS building being built at the site of the former Buick dealership on Massachusetts Avenue, between the high school and the Baptist church. Why is it so big? Why is it so close to the street? Why is such a big building being made of wood rather than masonry? Why is it progressing rapidly while the historic Atwood House appears neglected and abandoned? What about the promised affordable units in the Atwood House?

The answers, to some extent, can be found in the permit of the Arlington Redevelopment Board (ARB), issued about a year ago. Since I attended many of the hearings prior to that decision, I do know something about the project.

The size and shape came out of the process that led to the ARB decision. Originally, CVS wanted to build a typical suburban brick box, centered in a sea of asphalt, and to tear down the Atwood house, replacing it with an ATM kiosk. The ARB and the public objected strongly to these concepts — in fact, our present planning director, Carol Kowalski, speaking as a resident and prior to her present appointment, made a particularly good presentation of more suitable designs which CVS had erected in other communities.

The ARB's preference is for new commercial development to have the "street face" pretty much directly on the street, as is the case with most of the storefronts in the commercial nodes, so as to avoid parking right along the sidewalk. In this case, it would have been better set back a bit with grass and landscaping between the building and the sidewalk.

One of the only redeeming factors about the project was that the Atwood House would be preserved and redeveloped as much needed affordable housing — real affordable housing where all units have below market rents, rather than the 40B type where only 25 percent are "affordable." The Housing Corporation of Arlington (HCA) prepared preliminary plans, which included an extension to the rear, and provision was made for ten parking spaces behind the house, which would be accessed from the left (or west) of the CVS store.

The ARB's permit contains several pertinent references. For example: "The Atwood House is to remain. It is important that the current design retains the Atwood House in its current location on the site ... The Atwood House, and the current design of the CVS building itself present an appropriate streetscape for this part of Mass. Ave. in this area." (Pages 4-5). "The Atwood House

is listed as a significant building under Arlington By Laws, as is the Baptist Church next door. The applicant has stated that the Atwood House will be retained on the site, and the proposed plan reflects that.” (Page 7). “The retention of the Atwood House and the siting of the CVS building near the sidewalk have improved the presence the development makes on the avenue.” (Page 8). “The Atwood House shall remain at its present location on the site.” (Page 10).

But on that same page 10 comes this wrenching statement: “No requests to move or demolish the house by amending this special permit will be made within 24 months of the date of the issuance of this permit.” Nowhere in the foregoing nine pages of the permit is there any reference to demolition or moving — this phrase seems to have come out of thin air.

HCA is prepared and committed to going ahead with the conversion of the Atwood House for affordable housing in an historically appropriate manner. Since the land is being leased rather than sold, they need a land lease — at a nominal price, which would provide a nice charitable deduction for the Noyes property owners — for a substantial period in order to justify the investment they are prepared to make and to satisfy perpetuity requirements. However, the developer has made no moves toward the promised restoration.

The ARB retains jurisdiction over the project. They should immediately amend the permit to require redevelopment of the Atwood House to proceed simultaneously with the CVS construction, with no occupancy permit being given for the latter until the former is also complete. In that way, the promises of the developer and the decision of the ARB will be honored, the developer will get a charitable deduction, and the town will get some affordable housing units in a restored historic house — what some call a “win-win-win” solution.