

Comments on Proposed Hotel/Restaurant at 1207-1211 Mass Ave, Arlington Docket # 3602 – Special Permit and Environmental Design Review

To: Arlington Redevelopment Board and Jenny Raitt, ARB Secretary Ex Officio
jraitt@town.arlington.ma.us; EZwirko@town.arlington.ma.us; DWatson@town.arlington.ma.us;
KLau@town.arlington.ma.us; rzsembly@town.arlington.ma.us; ABunnell@town.arlington.ma.us;
EBenson@town.arlington.ma.us
From: Ann LeRoyer, 12 Peirce St., Arlington, 781-646-7254, annleroyer12@gmail.com, TMM Precinct 17
Date: February 3, 2020

After attending and speaking at the Redevelopment Board hearing on Monday, January 27, 2020, for the proposed hotel/restaurant complex at 1207-1211 Mass. Ave., I wanted to submit these additional comments for consideration. This mixed-use project is an interesting idea and certainly offers some economic benefits to the community, but as a long-time resident of the immediate neighborhood I also have many reservations and questions about this particular redevelopment plan. Please also reference my earlier comments on July 18, 2019, prior to the July 22 hearing.

B2 Use Regulations

The description of the B2 zoning district in the Zoning Bylaw (page 5-24) states:

B2: Neighborhood Business District. The Neighborhood Business District is intended for small retail and service establishments *serving the needs of adjacent neighborhoods* and oriented to pedestrian traffic, and mixed-use buildings. Locations are almost all along Massachusetts Avenue or Broadway. *The Town discourages uses that would detract from the district's small-scale business character or otherwise interfere with the intent of this Bylaw.*

This hotel proposal does not meet the Zoning Bylaw's Use Regulation (5.5.3) which forbids hotel/motel use in a B2 zoning district. It is permitted in B4, and this is a mixed-use project spanning both districts. The B4 description seems to be assumed as the prevailing standard for the special permit, rather than the less-intrusive B2 description for this combined zoning district site. Others have referenced the promises made at the 2016 Town Meeting that only uses already permitted in a district would be allowed in a mixed-use development. See <https://youtu.be/1vDEkBYqFOW>

What official board has authority to change zoning use or provide a variance of this kind – Town Meeting, Zoning Board of Appeals, Redevelopment Board? This basic question needs to be addressed and resolved before any other issues such as FAR or traffic or open space can be addressed fully.

As to neighborhood character, this proposed development does not maintain, and in fact physically overpowers, the R1 and R2 single- and two-family character of the abutting neighborhood on Peirce St., Clark St., and Locke St. A large hotel is not a demonstrated need of the neighborhood, though it may be considered so by the town in general. This project does not seem to be an example of "small-scale business character" compared to other businesses in the adjacent and nearby B2 districts along this stretch of Mass Ave.

One of the arguments made for this redevelopment project is the current run-down condition of the property. The original proposal stated, "The redevelopment of the DAV site and the adjacent outdated automotive use is desirable for the public convenience and welfare." Mr. Doherty also commented: "this proposed development will transform a blighted area..." In fact, he is the trustee of the Mass Ave. Realty Trust which owns the B4 part

of the site, and therefore he is responsible for the maintenance and condition of the property. He is the one who has allowed the property to become blighted!

Traffic and Parking

Clark Street is a narrow private way zoned as R2. What impact does that status have on this type of redevelopment, especially considering that Clark Street is proposed as the only source of ingress and egress? Valet service is proposed as a way to mitigate traffic, but the same number of cars would still be moving around the site, whether by the car owner or the valet. Will valet parking be provided 24/7? What about enforcement? Have the police and other transportation experts in town been consulted?

The revised renderings provided for the 1/27/20 meeting show improved sidewalks on the east side of Clark Street, which is fine, but what is the grade in terms of ADA accessibility? A hydrant near the corner of Mass Ave. is not indicated on the plans and should be added, and walking space accommodated as needed. Is the developer intending to regrade or otherwise improve the street surface?

Clark St. is already used as a regular cut-through street from Forest via Peirce St. to Mass Ave, especially during the morning and afternoon commutes, Ottoson Middle School drop-off periods, and services and events at St. Athanasius Church. The entire Mass Ave. corridor from Forest Street to the Lowell Street merger and Dunkin Donuts presents dangerous traffic conditions for cars, bikes and pedestrians, in particular the young teenagers from the Ottoson. Clark Street is very close to the Lowell Street merger/intersection, making access to Mass Ave. difficult in either direction. Sight lines are often blocked by cars parked on Mass Ave.

The ARB had previously requested a traffic analysis of all of the intersections and traffic patterns on Mass Ave. between Forest St. and Lowell St., but that has not been done. The transportation report by BSC Group provided prior to 1/27/20 only addressed the area immediately around the proposed building. Their conclusion of "minimal impact to the residential neighborhood" is simplistic and not based on adequate research.

The recent approval of a full-service liquor store on the opposite Mass Ave/Clark Street corner (formerly Nicola's Pizza) adds another element of increased traffic to the neighborhood. No off-street parking is available for the store, so that factor, too, should be taken into account in a broader traffic and parking study of the area.

New ideas for painted crosswalks on Mass Ave., walk lights, center islands to lessen the crossing distance, and/or other safety measures within the Forest to Lowell corridor should be considered. The two bus stops near the Appleton intersection also need to be part of the studies. I would urge that the Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) be involved in this analysis since it affects a fairly long section of Mass Ave. and numerous intersecting streets.

The issue of tour buses or other shuttle vehicles has not been fully addressed, but it needs to be if that is an intended clientele for the hotel. Where would buses park for short stops and overnight? What size buses would be allowed on Clark Street and other side streets?

I'm sure there are many other questions that experienced transportation experts would want to address as well. For example, there is only one handicapped parking space among the 27 spaces now provided for the hotel. Does that ratio meet the Town's requirements? What about handicapped parking for restaurant customers?

Environmental Design and Related Concerns

Trees

I am especially concerned about the possible loss of some very large trees behind the DAV building. Will those in fact be removed if the building is approved, and what compensation will be provided, per the town's Tree Protection and Preservation Bylaw for tree removal and replacement? The tree warden and Tree Committee should be included in any review of these redevelopment plans before they are approved.

Height and Massing Dimensions

Other more knowledgeable reviewers, including Don Seltzer, have addressed some of the proponent's failures to meet dimensional zoning regulations in the proposed plans so far. All of these problems need to be addressed, especially the height, corner and upper story step back requirements which will most impact the neighborhood.

From Peirce Street, the current building will look almost six stories tall, given the slope from Mass Ave., with the ground floor parking area creating a fifth floor. The mechanical equipment box on the roof becomes almost a sixth floor from the Peirce/Clark intersection and nearby houses. I question whether the total height from the rear elevation would meet the zoning requirements of four floors or 50 feet overall. Additional elevations and site plans are needed for all three visible sides of the building in order to evaluate the dimensions.

Circulation

Much more information is needed about vehicular circulation on and around the project site, as noted above. Some additional concerns have to do with truck loading and unloading locations and traffic patterns, time of day and length of delivery times, location and use of dumpster(s) and related waste management, and lighting impacts. For example, given the new location of the dumpsters at the end of the driveway, will standard-sized trash pick-up trucks be able to reach them?

Surface Water Drainage

Has the applicant submitted an engineered site plan showing surface water drainage systems and a stormwater management plan, as previously requested? I did not see it in the January 27 materials. As noted, this site slopes down into the back yards on Peirce St. and further toward Mill Brook. Several large trees are located behind the DAV building and their removal could affect erosion and drainage problems for the abutting houses.

Neighborhood Heritage

This topic did not come up in the January 27 hearing, but I wanted to repeat some comments from my July 18, 2019 memo to the ARB. While the current buildings on the proposed redevelopment site are not designated as historic, several buildings in the neighborhood are listed in the Arlington Historical Commission Inventory:

- 1210 Mass Ave (The Children's Room in an old Victorian house, 1880),
- 11-13 Lowell Street (the former Benjamin Locke Store from 1816, now residences),
- 23-25 Clark Street (two-family house, c. 1919),
- 11-13 Peirce St. (now a four-unit residence, Housing Corporation of Arlington, 1919).

The 11-13 Lowell and 11-13 Peirce Street buildings are also listed in the state MACRIS historic inventory, and 11-13 Lowell Street (1816) is also listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The historic Old Schwamb Mill (1864) is also in the immediate vicinity, at 17 Mill Lane, and is listed on all three inventories.

Sustainable Building and Site Design

The recently completed LEED checklist shows an improvement in the project from a score of 21 to 52 out of a total of 110 points, but that is not a particularly strong demonstration of effort to create a sustainable design in line with Arlington's vision of itself as a progressive community.

Hotel Management

I do not know if the ARB, Select Board, Board of Health, or another entity has responsibility for this aspect of the project, but I would like to know more about the proposed hotel manager or a management company. Is the hotel to be operated by a local on-site manager, or will it be sold off to a national or international chain in the near future? What guarantees does the town have for management and oversight?

Concerns have been raised about past abuses at Homewood Suites regarding prostitution and drug dealing, as well as other "non-traditional" uses of hotel rooms. Neighbors want assurances that any business that might be operated at this location will be safe, legal and appropriate to its surroundings in a residential part of town. As also noted above, the owner/trustee of the current B4 part of the property has not been a very responsible landowner in terms of the derelict cars, trash and other material now on the site. What guarantees can be put in place for the abutting residents to feel assured that the new development will be managed properly?

Affordable Housing

This proposal does nothing to address the Town's often-stated and broadly demonstrated need for affordable housing. This is just the opposite and serves a completely different demographic.

Closing Comments

I have raised many concerns that are shared by ARB members, DPCD staff, and fellow neighbors, and I also want to emphasize that this is not a NIMBY complaint. I agree that better mixed uses could and should be provided on these B2 and B4 properties that will provide needed economic and tax benefits for the entire community. A small hotel with a restaurant seems to be a viable suggestion. As a Town Meeting member, I voted in favor of the mixed-use zoning bylaw change in 2016.

However, the particular project design as proposed is just inappropriate for this corner site. Aside from the basic failures to meet various zoning regulations, the building is just too large and is not in keeping with the residential and small business character of the abutting neighborhood, which is zoned primarily as B2 and R1 and R2.

Thank you for taking these concerns into consideration and for continuing to work with Mr. Doherty and his team to propose a building and site design that would be more right-sized and fitting for the neighborhood.

Five years from now, we all want to be able to feel good about the decisions that have been made to improve this stretch of Mass Ave.

Ann LeRoyer