

May 16, 2020

Christian Klein
54 Newport Street
Arlington, MA 02476

Arlington Redevelopment Board
c/o Department of Planning and Community Development
Arlington Town Hall
730 Massachusetts Avenue
Arlington, MA 02476

Re: 882-892 Massachusetts Avenue

Dear Chairman Bunnell:

Solely as a resident of Arlington who lives in the same precinct, I am writing in regards to the proposed redevelopment of the existing single-story commercial building at 882-892 Massachusetts Avenue. I have many concerns regarding this project as it relates to both statutory compliance and benefit to the adjacent neighborhood where I live. I do believe that this parcel could be further developed. However, the proposal as it stands does not serve the existing neighborhood, nor does it serve its future tenants.

Zoning District Concerns:

The project site is in a B2 Neighborhood District. Per Section 5.5.1.B in the Town of Arlington Zoning Bylaw as amended through April 22, 2019 (hereafter ZBL), this district is "intended for small retail and service establishments serving the needs of adjacent neighborhoods and oriented to pedestrian traffic, and mixed-use buildings. ... The Town discourages uses that would detract from the district's small-scale business character or otherwise interfere with the intent of this Bylaw." The existing building conforms very well to this standard. It is comprised of five storefront commercial spaces featuring a variety of services vital to the residents of the neighborhood. There are two restaurants, a local media studio, and a food bank serving the vulnerable members of our community.

By creating a new building with only a single "office" use, it seems only the media studio could reoccupy the building. In regards to microclimate considerations, the Applicant states that "the owner does not contemplate that there will be any installation of machinery which emits heats [sic], vapor or fumes from the site..." The proposed plans do not include any interior shafts leading from the first floor to the roof. As such, no restaurant could move in. It is also unlikely that the space would be amenable to the local food bank.

I do not object to the addition of residential units. To the contrary, I agree that the addition of apartments on this site would be appropriate and desirable. I ask the Board to consider requiring that the ground floor remain exclusively commercial, with the exception of access to the residential units above, to maintain the diversity of small retail and service establishments that exist on the site. To do otherwise would result in a substantial adverse impact upon the character of the neighborhood.

Mixed-Use Concerns:

The ZBL defines Mixed-Use as a "combination of two or more distinct land uses, such as commercial, ... [and] residential in a single multi-story structure to maximize space usage and promote a vibrant,

pedestrian-oriented live-work environment.” (emphasis added). What makes a vibrant environment? Merriam –Webster defines Vibrant as “pulsating with life, vigor, or activity.” This block is already vibrant because of the multitude of different commercial uses, the very active bus-stop, and the ebb-and-flow of high school students. Reducing the number of commercial spaces to only one and closing off the remainder of the Mass Ave. frontage to public engagement makes the building far less vibrant than it is today. I contend this will have a substantially adverse impact upon the character of the neighborhood.

Bus Shelter Concerns:

There is a sheltered bus stop on Mass Ave. directly in front of this building. It is a very busy stop serving both residents commuting towards Cambridge and Boston and students heading to the high school. Few of the bus stops on this route have shelters, making this stop special. The shelter fits here because the existing sidewalk is eight-feet wide and the building is set approx. eight-feet back from the property line allowing generous space for pedestrians to pass easily behind the shelter.

The future of the shelter is unclear in the provided documents. Sheet G-101 notes that the Contractor is to “PROTECT AND MAINTAIN [the] EXISTING BUS SHELTER”. This means the shelter remains during construction, with its structure protected against damage. However, sheet C-102 states “EXISTING BUS SHELTER TO REMAIN, REMOVE AND REPLACE AS REQUIRED”. This means that the shelter could stay, it could be removed temporarily and returned, or it could be taken away and replaced with something else. That would be completely unacceptable.

The renderings provided by the Applicant imply that the bus shelter, and for that matter, the entire bus stop are going away. The image on sheet A9.00 does not include the bus stop or bus shelter. Instead, it shows an exposed bench against the building and metered parking spaces on both Mass Ave. and Lockland Ave. This is highly deceptive, because it falsely portrays the space in front of the building. Removing the bus shelter or replacing the bus shelter with something far less protective of riders will have a substantially adverse impact upon the residents of the neighborhood.

First Floor and Sidewalk Connection Concerns:

The existing building has a significant connection to Mass Ave. The position of the building eight-feet back from the edge of the sidewalk, allows pedestrians to stop in front of the building to look in through the windows without holding up pedestrian traffic. It allowed patrons waiting for a table at a restaurant to wait outside without blocking the sidewalk. Now, it allows patrons (myself included) waiting for take-out to maintain social distance. That additional space allows high school students to have space to congregate while they wait for the walk signal to cross Mass Ave. It also provides enough space for commuters to stand aside while students disembark from the bus before they can climb on.

The proposed plan shifts the building closer to the street and includes planting beds between the building and the sidewalk to keep pedestrians away from the residential uses on the ground floor. The beds are not in front of the commercial space, allowing pedestrians to come closer to the building. This is essential, because there would not be enough space to move down the sidewalk otherwise due to the bus shelter. The commercial space doors are located to either side of the shelter, which at least maintains a direct egress path from that space. However, the proposal to replace the pedestrian zone residents enjoy today with building and planting beds will have a substantially adverse impact on the pedestrians, bus commuters, and high school students from the neighborhood.

Open Space Concerns:

The statement from the Applicant to the Arlington Redevelopment Board (hereafter ARB) indicates that the proposed site plan meets the landscaped open space requirement by providing 10.2% of GFA, 0.2% more than is required by the ZBL. They also note that they are only providing 11.9% of GFA as usable open space, 8.1% less than is required by the ZBL. They indicate that this will require a special permit to remedy.

The Applicant's plans include ZERO usable open space. The definition of Usable Open Space in the ZBL indicates that it is "part or parts of a lot designed and developed for outdoor use by the occupants of the lot for recreation, including swimming pools, tennis courts, or similar facilities, or for garden or for household service activities such as clothes drying; which space is at least 75% open to the sky, free of automotive traffic and parking, and readily accessible by all those for whom it is required. Such space may include open area accessible to and developed for the use of the occupants of the building, and located upon a roof not more than 10 feet above the level of the lowest story used for dwelling purposes. Open space shall be deemed usable only if at least 75% of the area has a grade of less than 8%, and no horizontal dimension is less than 25 feet." (emphasis added) There is no area on this site that meets this requirement.

I do not understand the Applicant's assertion that only a special permit is required to eliminate the requirement for Usable Open Space. Since this would constitute a significant deviation from the requirements of the ZBL, it would appear that a Variance would be required. The Applicant has not addressed the requirements for a Variance.

Bicycle Parking Concerns:

The Applicant did make an attempt to comply with the ZBL in regards to bicycle parking. There are short-term spaces in the residential lobby and behind the building at the far end of the parking lot. There are long-term spaces in the basement.

The ZBL notes in Section 6.1.12.B that "Bicycle parking as required by this Section refers to the accessory storage of bicycles (which may include trailers or other customary accessories) in a secure manner that allows for quick and convenient access, storage, and removal of the bicycles by users who are making trips to or from the associated principal use." (emphasis added)

The ZBL differentiates between short- and long-term bicycle parking, noting in Section 6.1.12.C(2) that short-term spaces are "intended primarily to serve visitors, such as retail patrons, making trips of up to two hours to a particular use; however, it may serve other bicycle users as needed. Short-term bicycle parking is typically located in a publicly accessible area near pedestrian entrances to the use they are intended to serve." The short term spaces are located just about as far from the retail entrances as they possibly could be. This is not in keeping with the intent of the ZBL.

The ZBL indicates in Section 6.1.12.C(1) that "Long-term bicycle parking shall be intended primarily to serve residents, employees, and other persons who would require storage of a bicycle for a substantial portion of the day, for an overnight period, or for multiple days." As noted earlier, bicycle spaces are required to "provide quick and convenient access, storage, and removal of the bicycles..." Looking at the proposed floor plans (A1.00 and A1.01), it appears that the procedure for parking a bike in long term storage involves coming in through the corner entrance, through doors into the common corridor, taking the only elevator to the basement, exiting the elevator, avoiding a post nearly in front of the elevator door, and navigating a series of tight turns before arriving at the door to the long-term bike storage. The reverse procedure would be required to take a bike back out. The only alternative is to take the stairs. There is no possible way to describe this as "quick and convenient".

(As an aside, I also note that the Applicant's rendering on sheet A9.01 clearly shows a bicycle being ridden on the sidewalk in violation of Title III, Article 1, Section 5 of the Town Bylaws.)

The locations of the bicycle parking areas do not abide by the requirements of the ZBL and should not be considered acceptable. Indeed, they will have a substantial adverse impact upon the patrons and residents of the building and a substantially adverse impact upon the use of bicycles.

Conclusion:

Throughout this letter, I have pointed to issues with the proposal that pose a substantially adverse impact. As you are well aware, by Section 3.4.3.E of the ZBL, the ARB shall not deny a special permit "unless it finds that the proposed use does not comply with the Environmental Design Review Standards listed below to such a degree that such use would result in a substantial adverse impact upon the character of the neighborhood or the town, and upon traffic, utilities, and public or private investments, thereby conflicting with the purposes of this Bylaw." I believe that a full review of the proposed building project should lead to a finding that the project will have a substantially adverse impact on the neighborhood, and it is in conflict with the purpose of the ZBL.

I do believe there are steps which could be taken to greatly improve the proposal. The Public Hearing Memorandum issued by the Department of Planning and Community Development references a prior application made and approved in 1988 which sought to add up to six two-bedroom apartments above the existing masonry building. I would fully support this approach. It maintains the open space in front of the building. It maintains ground level commercial space on Mass Ave. It preserves the original 1910 façade, an example of early twentieth century commercial building construction. If the Applicant sought to provide eighteen residential units, surely the project would remain viable, and the town would still be able to claim three new affordable units.

Future renderings and elevations should either include the existing bus shelter, or they should include whatever the Landlord is proposing to replace the shelter. Since the shelter is on Town property and may be the property of the MBTA, any change to the shelter will require careful scrutiny by the public.

The Applicant also needs to demonstrate that the project is in compliance with the Commonwealth's accessibility access law (521 CMR). A quick review of the plans indicates that the New Hampshire based architecture firm is unfamiliar with local regulations. It is unfortunate that the Environmental Design Review Standards do not include review of accessibility features.

This might also be a good time for consideration of what post-Covid housing should look like. Is funneling that many residents through limited vertical conveyances a good idea? Should there be an exploration of how to limit the number of interactions between the various apartments to allow the residents to come and go without exposing themselves to their neighbors? These are questions to which I have no answers, but I think it would be valuable to ask the Board of Health for their opinion on this and other future multi-family and mixed-use developments.

I appreciate the good work that you and your Board do on behalf of the residents of Arlington. I look forward to your discussion and deliberation on this proposed project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Christian Klein', with a stylized, flowing script.

Christian Klein

54 Newport Street