

Arlington Redevelopment Board
Monday, July 20, 2020, 7:00 PM
Meeting Conducted Remotely via Zoom
Meeting Minutes

This meeting was recorded by ACMi.

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

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

The Chair called the meeting to order and notified all attending that the meeting is being recorded by ACMi.

The Chair explained that this meeting is being held remotely in accordance with the Governor's March 12, 2020 order suspending certain provisions of the Open Meeting Law G.L. c. 30A, Section 20. This order from Governor Baker allows for meetings to be held remotely during this time to avoid public gatherings.

The Chair asked if anyone would like to speak to please use the raise hand function and the Chair will allow time to speak during the Open Forum portion of the meeting.

The Chair introduced the first agenda item, Docket #3625, 882-892 Mass. Ave. Continued Public Hearing. The Chair introduced Bob Annese, who represents the applicant. Mr. Annese said that the applicant met with both Mr. Lau and Ms. Zsembery for design guidance as recommended by the Board. Mr. Annese said that after reviewing the EDR section 3.4 of the bylaw that the Board should have the flexibility to grant relief for this project. Mr. Annese introduced John Murphy who said that the floor to ceiling height was increased in the commercial space design; the space is up to 1800 square feet including the increased basement storage. Mr. Murphy said that the project is not financially feasible without the two ground floor housing units. Mr. Murphy said that sometimes deep retail/commercial spaces sit vacant because businesses also do not want to pay for space greater than needed. Mr. Murphy said that he feels that they have the best design solution after taking many people's opinions in mind. Mr. Murphy said that we need housing, there is a demand for it and with this project we can provide it. Mr. Murphy said removing the two ground level units makes the argument irrelevant because this project would not be possible financially.

Adam Wagner from Market Square Architects introduced himself and said there have been significant design changes as a collaborative design effort with Mr. Lau and Ms. Zsembery to enhance the design to fit the location on Mass. Ave. Mr. Wagner said that they increased the height of the first floor retail area and added additional windows so there is no mistaking that it is a retail area. Mr. Wagner said that they are also thinking through the hood vent design in case the commercial/retail space tenant is a restaurant. Ms. Zsembery said she is pleased that the additional retail storage space was added in the basement and the plans for a possible hood vent. Ms. Zsembery said that overall most of her design elements that they discussed were addressed. Ms. Zsembery said that she would like to see the lighter beige colored materials used on the first floor plans carried through building entry at the chamfered corner. Ms. Zsembery asked about the updated plans for open space vs. usable open space. Aaron Mackay, from Allen and Major Associates, said that they tried to maximize the grass areas for the tenants and converted a landscaped island to a bicycle pad. Mr. Mackay said the applicant is willing to remove two parking spaces to increase the landscaped space. Mr. Lau suggested amenities be added to the common space in the back of building for use by tenants. Mr. Benson said he thinks that the project is making a lot of progress in the right direction. Mr. Benson said he agrees with Ms. Zsembery that the front entrance to the residential area should be changed to look more like a residential entrance instead of a commercial entrance. Mr. Benson asked to confirm that the open space was computed from the residential floor area and not the entire land area. Mr. Benson asked about parking and adding a parking space for electric vehicles. Mr. Murphy said that the applicant is comfortable committing to a

parking space for electric vehicles and to Mr. Lau's open space suggestion. Mr. Benson said he is comfortable giving relief for the set-backs because this plan would not encroach more than the existing building and the residential side yard set-back. Mr. Benson said he is not comfortable granting relief for the 4th story step-back on the Mass. Ave. side. Mr. Murphy said that the 4th story units would be too small with the step-back. Mr. Annese asked to take the environmental cleanup costs into account. Mr. Watson said he agrees with Mr. Benson about the 4th floor step-back. Mr. Murphy said that the 4th story units would be unlivable at approximately 300 square feet with the step-back. Mr. Annese said that moving the building back two feet creates more space and a safer space for the bus shelter. Mr. Benson said he is in favor of reducing the number of parking spaces in exchange for a TDM plan. Mr. Benson asked about reducing the number of units on the 4th floor to allow for the step-back. Mr. Murphy said that that would not make sense for the project economically. Mr. Benson said he would be in favor if there is a way to reconfigure the top floor to remove one unit to allow for the step-back. The Chair said that he feels that the applicant has been accommodating in making changes that the Town requested. The Chair said that reconfiguring the 4th floor would lose one of the affordable units which is where we should be focused since affordable housing is in short supply. Mr. Benson said that removing one of the units would not reduce the required number of affordable units. Mr. Murphy said that the other option is to push the building forward to allow for the step-back.

The Chair opened the floor to public comment.

Wynelle Evans, 20 Orchard Place, said she feels that these buildings are generic looking. Ms. Evans said that more time should be spent on the exteriors to make the building visually appealing, especially since the building is on Battle Road.

Richard Pelletier, 23 Eustis Street, does the commercial space have a dedicated parking spot. Mr. Murphy said that there is no designated parking for the commercial space.

Don Seltzer, 104 Irving Street, said he has concerns about the parking and the calculation of floor area. Mr. Seltzer said that the parking lot is not wide enough for two rows of parking. Mr. Seltzer said he feels that incorrect calculations for floor area and open space were used. Mr. Seltzer said that narrow strips and small areas do not meet the usable open space requirements. Mr. Seltzer said that a 14,000 square foot lot is not adequate for a 21 unit apartment building.

Annie LaCourt, 48 Chatham Street, member of the board of Food Link supports the project. We need the housing. Ms. LaCourt said that she feels lively streetscape would have buildings the same distance from the street and a row of commercial spaces all along. Ms. LaCourt said that the builder should be allowed to build this building at the same height as the neighboring building to allow for the step-back. Ms. LaCourt said that we are missing out on diversity in who lives in this community because Arlington is so uniformly single family, and adding one bedrooms and studios will increase that diversity into Arlington.

JoAnne Preston, 42 Mystic Lake Drive, said that 55% of the housing units in Arlington are multi-family units, not single family homes which is higher than neighboring communities. Ms. Preston asked why fewer units would not make this building profitable. Ms. Preston said that the proposed commercial space is far too small.

Chris Loreti, 56 Adams Street, said he wanted to discuss the authority of the ARB to waive certain requirements. Mr. Loreti said that the ARB does not have the flexibility to rescind the requirements of the zoning by-law unless the by-law specifically says the ARB does. Mr. Loreti said that when he was a member of the Board there were no private meetings between the Board Members and the developer, these meetings should be made public. Mr. Loreti said that other developers have gone before the ZBA before meeting with the ARB. Mr. Loreti said that the developer should get a parking variance from the ZBA. Mr. Loreti does not see the need or the ARB's ability to grant parking relief.

James Flemming, 54 Gardner Street, said the building could easily go to 5 stories and meet the aesthetics of the neighborhood. Mr. Flemming said that perhaps changing the color scheme to match the neighboring brick buildings. Mr. Flemming said that the developer wants to make sure that the commercial space is rentable so he does not see the need for arguments over the size of the commercial space.

Denuta Forbes, 4 Iroquois Road, said she is a Town Meeting Member and agrees with Mr. Flemming about putting more thought into the façade color scheme and design.

Ben Rudick, 40 Webcowet Road, said he hopes that even after the pandemic that remote meeting participation will continue so it is easier for residents to participate. Mr. Rudick said that he is involved in a group called Arlington Neighbors for More Neighbors which is for securing housing for everyone. Mr. Rudick said there is a tremendous amount of enthusiasm in town to have more housing built. Mr. Rudick says he hopes that the bias in these conversations is to improve these projects and not to risk them in any way because Arlington and Greater Boston has done such a poor job building housing over the last 40 years. Mr. Rudick said he has a background in commercial real estate and the developer's financing concerns ring true.

John Worden, 27 Jason Street, said that the Boston Globe had an article that stated that the virus spreads in crowded housing. Mr. Worden said that that is one of the reasons that some think that density is not a good idea. Mr. Worden said he agrees that there is a need for housing in the Greater Boston area, but Mr. Worden said that Arlington has done its share. Mr. Worden said that Arlington already has enough neighbors. Mr. Worden asked why the entire ground floor is not commercial space, this is not the definition of mixed-use that was discussed in 2016 Town Meeting. Mr. Worden said that some feel that Arlington is already developed and we do not need more luxury units.

Aram Hollman, 12 Whittemore Street, said that he feels that the development is too dense, not enough parking, and had inadequate living space. Mr. Hollman said he would like to see an ARB setting as policy that business mixed-use would not lead to a wholesale conversion of commercial space to residential space with only a token quantity of commercial space. Mr. Hollman said that the Town should not have to give breaks to help pay for the necessary remediation to deal with the environmental issues. Mr. Hollman said that affordability is still an issue, most of the units in this development will not be affordable.

Richard Pelletier, 23 Eustis Street, said he is in support of this project but is not sure why there is such a demand for commercial space when there are empty storefronts everywhere and there is a demand for housing.

Don Seltzer, 104 Irving Street, said he found the floor area calculation is off by 50%. Mr. Seltzer said the gross floor area for commercial use the developer only calculated the floor space of each unit, not including hallways, etc.

Ms. Zsembery said that the 4th story step-back still needs to be discussed. Ms. Zsembery said that in pushing the building back and creating softening with the landscaping at base makes Ms. Zsembery comfortable that the building meets the provision that is intended in the by-law. Mr. Lau said he agrees with Ms. Zsembery and feels comfortable granting relief since the building has been pushed back. Mr. Lau said that the step-back makes very little difference in the shadow studies. Mr. Lau said that he would like to see amenities added to make the usable space usable. Mr. Lau said the one-bedroom units in a building with an elevator will allow residents to age in place and help the town to diversify. Mr. Lau said that not everyone can afford to purchase a single-family house in Arlington.

Mr. Benson said he likes the project. Mr. Benson said he wanted to address the Boston Globe article that was mentioned. Mr. Benson said that people should not be concerned that there is a relationship between COVID infection rates and

density. Mr. Benson said that overcrowding in apartments is the factor that causes the increase in COVID infection rates. People should not be concerned about density. Mr. Benson said that for the step-backs, open space, and width of the driveway maybe the proponent should go to the ZBA for a variance.

Mr. Watson said he likes the project but does agree with Mr. Benson. Mr. Watson said it is not clear to him that the Board should grant all of the relief requested under the Board's EDR and Special Permit authority.

Mr. Annese said that he agrees with Mr. Benson with respect to the EDR section of the bylaw 3.4.4 discussed earlier. Mr. Annese said he interprets the bylaw to say that the ARB has flexibility to grant relief. Mr. Annese said that he thinks that this building will serve a very important purpose in this town. Mr. Benson said that if the Board uses 3.4.4 the Board can get to flexibility to open space and parking, but not step-backs. Mr. Murphy said that the plans can be changed to push the building forward three feet to create space for the full step-back on the 4th floor.

The Chair said that Town Counsel agrees with Mr. Annese's interpretation of 3.4.4. The Chair said that one of the things the Board has always done is to advance affordable housing and we have a developer who is here to provide that housing with relief. Mr. Watson said that he feels that the current pushed back building design is a better design than pushed forward with a step back.

Ms. Raitt said that she has consulted with Town Counsel multiple times and with Inspectional Services as to what the Board is allowed to do. Ms. Raitt said that EDR intended to provide the Redevelopment Board with improved powers to get the kind of development needed along the town's main corridors. Ms. Raitt said that items that need to be addressed can be built into the special conditions of the permitting process. Ms. Raitt asked the Board to consider if adverse impacts outweigh the overall project benefits. The Chair said that he strongly urges the Board to approve this project. The Chair closed the hearing to public comment.

Ms. Zsembery moved to approve the project with the conditions that the proponent work with the Planning Department to update the usable space to include outdoor amenities for the residential units, work to continue to improve the design of the corner entry, move forward with site plan that includes 23 spaces, provide a transportation demand response plan, the developer commit to including at least one electric charging station, work with department for final approval of signage, and include venting for commercial use. Mr. Lau seconded, approved 4-1 (Mr. Benson opposed).

The Chair introduced the second agenda item, Presentation and Discussion: Whittemore Park renovations. Ms. Raitt introduced Carlo Urmy and Ali Carter, Arlington's Economic Development Coordinator, who presented the designs to the Board. Ms. Raitt said that this is a Community Preservation Act funded project and came about as part of the Mass. Ave. phase II redesign. Mr. Urmy said that the new design will allow for a central lawn area, more entrances to the park and a circular walkway. Mr. Urmy said that the monuments and signage would be included in a zone around the walkway with a more cohesive design. Mr. Lau suggested removing the fencing between the park and the retail area to increase the foot traffic in the area. Mr. Urmy said that they are concerned about the health of the trees in that area and do plan to add benches or tables in the area at a later date. Mr. Lau asked if it was possible to include a public paid bathroom in the area. Ms. Carter said that the paid bathrooms are very expensive and out of the scope for this project. Mr. Lau said people using the bike path could use a bathroom in this area. Mr. Watson asked about bike parking in the park. Mr. Watson said that bike parking was an issue when the Aeronaut beer garden was being held. Ms. Carter explained that phase II is ADA accessibility around and Jefferson Cutter House and phase III bike parking can be addressed. Ms. Raitt said that in the third phase bathrooms and bike parking should be addressed. Ms. Zsembery said having secondary gathering spaces in the park

would be something to take a look at instead of planting the whole space.

The Chair introduced the third agenda item, Meeting Minutes (4/27, 5/4, 5/18). Mr. Benson moved to approve the meeting meetings for 4/27 with amendments, Ms. Zsembery seconds, and approved 5-0.

Mr. Benson moved to approve the meeting minutes for 5/4, Mr. Watson seconded, approved 5-0.

Mr. Benson moved to approve the meeting minutes for 5/18 as amended, Mr. Watson seconded, approved 5-0.

The Chair opened the floor to comment from the public for the Open Forum portion of the meeting.

There were no comments

Mr. Lau moved to adjourn, Ms. Zsembery seconded, approved 5-0.

Meeting adjourned.