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Critique of Proposal for Docket 3673 - 455 Mass Ave

It is encouraging to see a mixed use proposal that attempts to retain a significant ground floor commercial component, particularly in the very heart of Arlington's largest business district. There are some problems however with this initial proposal, but they appear to be solvable with reasonable modifications to the plans.

I offer the Board these comments for your consideration.

Existing Building

The existing building is on a lot of 18,929 sf at the very heart of Arlington's largest business district. The first floor has eleven businesses in an area of 13,483 sf, all of it commercial. The second floor has 3,900 sf of office space.

The largest ground floor space is 3,269 sf for an eat-in restaurant (formerly Papa Gino's). The other large business is the Leader Bank branch office. There are four small eateries, primarily for takeout service. There are also three retail spaces and two salon businesses.

There are loading docks and driveway access to the rear of these businesses.

The second floor has multiple office spaces occupied by the owner of the property, as well as several tenants. It does not appear that any of these office businesses are of the type that would create foot traffic in the Center.

Proposed Mixed Use Building

The submitted plans show ten commercial spaces on the ground floor, plus a large lobby and bike storage area for the residential use. This is a 28% reduction in commercial floor area, from 13,483 sf to 9,711 sf. Much of it comes at the expense of the large eat-in restaurant space, which is being cut in half. Some of it is attributable to the residential lobby which replaces one of the

existing retail spaces.

An option worth considering is shifting the residential lobby and entrance from the Mass Ave side to one of the Medford St storefronts, freeing up the Mass Ave space for commercial use.

The second floor replaces the existing office areas with 12 one bedroom apartments and a single studio. Two of the apartments are designated as affordable. The second floor is approximately 12,330 sf. There is an additional 1,128 sf of residential lobby and bike area on the first floor, for a total of 13,458 sf of residential gross floor area.

Calculation of Floor Area

The application package is vague about how certain floor areas are calculated and provides some inconsistent figures. Most problematic is the second floor area. It can be inferred from some of the figures provided for open space that 10,211 sf is being referenced. This number is apparently obtained by simply summing up the interior floor spaces of the thirteen apartments, ignoring all hallways, stairwells, etc.

This is the third consecutive project in which the applicant has made the same miscalculation. Gross Floor Area is not the interior dimensions of rooms, but is instead defined in the ZBL as

Gross Floor Area: The sum of the horizontal areas of all stories of a building or buildings on a lot, measured from the exterior faces of exterior walls...

The actual second floor area is about 12,330 sf, to which must be added the 1,128 sf of the first floor lobby to obtain total residential gross floor area.

Without a detailed accounting of all of the floor areas it is difficult to determine exactly what the proposed FAR is for this project. It may be as high as 1.67.

Landscaping

Most of the proposed landscaped open space is to be located in the two alley ways flanking the parking garage. They are each about 11'-12' wide and about 70' long, running from SW to NE.

The first 15' of these alley ways will be in total shade throughout the year.

Halfway down the alley, there will be a brief bit of afternoon sunlight each day for six months of the year, and complete shade for the other six months.

At the far end of the alley near the access driveway, the landscaped strip will receive about 36 minutes of mid afternoon sunlight per day for eight months of the year, from late February until late October.

The proposed Wintergreen Arborvitae, Shadblow Serviceberry, Ivory Halo Dogwood, and Green Mountain Boxwood do best in full sun to partial shade. They will likely fare poorly in this location.

The June Hosta, however, does thrive in full shade.

It is recommended that only hardy, shade tolerant shrubs and trees be chosen for these areas.

Usable Open Space

The application states that *“it would be the Petitioner’s position that the existing building is non-conforming with respect to the usable open space requirement contained in the zoning bylaw and the proposed changes to the building do not increase the non-conformity...”*

The ZBL only requires usable open space as a percentage of the Residential floor area. The existing building has no residential component, so is currently conforming to this requirement. The proposed changes however would add more than 13,000 sf of residential use, requiring the creation of 2,600 sf of usable open space.

The applicant further claims “there is no ability to create usable open space.” That is also incorrect. The ZBL 5.3.18 specifically allows this Board to approve of balcony and roof spaces not more than 10’ above the lowest story used for dwelling purposes, to count toward usable open space. The current plans already include such a roof area, serving apartments A4 and A6. There are other potentially usable roof areas that can also serve this purpose as common open space areas for all of the residents.

Logistics

Businesses typically need regular truck deliveries. The businesses at this location currently have good access. The rear entrances are all accessible to vehicles driving right up to their rear doors and there are two loading docks.

This access is sharply curtailed in the submitted plans. The vehicle access is replaced by narrow alley ways impassable to any vehicles. There is no mention of the required loading zone. It is possible that this can be provided in the garage but there is no mention of it in the plans.

There is also the question of garbage disposal for the ten businesses and the thirteen apartments. The dumpster shown in the plans may not have the capacity for all of these users. There should also be a provision for the collection of recyclables.

The parking in the garage is particularly tight, with the drive aisle four feet narrower than required by the ZBL and most design guidelines. This does not impact the general public; only the apartment residents will be inconvenienced.

This is potentially one of the better proposals for mixed use since the Broadway HCA project. There are a number of problems such as those outlined above, but none of these are insurmountable, and can be corrected with some compromise and redesign.

Don Seltzer

