

From: Don Seltzer

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To: Rachel Zsembery; Kin Lau; Eugene Benson; Stephen Revilak; Shaina Korman-Houston

Cc: Claire Ricker; Disability Commission

Subject: Correspondence: Docket #3810 149 Pleasant St

Docket #3810

Comments on 149 Pleasant St accessibility

TO: Arlington Redevelopment Board

This proposed redevelopment of 149 Pleasant St is a new three family apartment building, subject to the accessibility requirements of 521 CMR. In the original design presented to the Historical Districts Commission nearly a year ago, all three dwelling units would have been required to be Group 1 accessible, due to the grading of the lot which created two 'Ground floors' under the definitions of 521 CMR. After verifying these requirements with the Mass Architectural Access Board, the architect drew up new plans which called for excavating the backyard by several feet, and effectively 'raising' two of the dwelling units above the new grade and making them exempt from accessibility requirements.

The basement unit is now the only one subject to 521 CMR. It is significantly smaller and inferior to the other two apartments, with a single bathroom compared to four. It lacks any laundry facilities, a severe deficiency for someone with limited mobility. Most of the unit is below grade. One of the two bedrooms has only a single window with a below grade northern exposure, looking out into a window well that qualifies as an emergency egress. The second bedroom is marginally better with a small window near the ceiling facing east toward Pleasant St. However, the landscaping plans show that window to be blocked by plantings of yews and hydrangeas.

The entire western exposure has no windows. The southern exposure has the only regular windows but they have no view, looking at the trash barrels, parking area, and a tall retaining wall.

In short, it is a dark, dismal basement apartment. It scores poorly on the 'Grandma' test: would you feel comfortable placing an elderly relative or friend in that apartment?

Looking at the exterior of the building, the applicant is asking for a waiver of the bylaw requiring Usable Open Space. This is regrettable for someone with mobility limitations, excluding them from enjoying the grounds of their home. The justification claimed for a waiver is that the lot is steeply sloped and it would not be feasible to provide any level open space. This is demonstrably false. Much of the front yard is clearly flat and would easily qualify as usable open space. In a few spots it might be necessary to do some very minor regrading, pushing around a little dirt to satisfy the 8% slope over three quarters of the space. In contrast, the applicant wishes to regrade the front yard into a large five foot high mound, eliminating possible access for the disabled occupant living

in the basement apartment. Adding further insult, this artificially added mound prevents full windows from being installed on the eastern exposure. The landscaping that sits on top of this mound will block any view from the small windows being proposed.

Many of my new senior neighbors enjoy our community garden, tending to their individual plots. The gardeners have a wide range of mobility, with many dependent on walkers and rollators to get around. Gardening is an outdoor activity in which all can participate. It would be an excellent use of usable open space in the sunny front yard of 149 Pleasant St. It would satisfy the EDR requirement for UOS, 'shall be so designed as to add to the visual amenities of the vicinity by maximizing its visibility for persons passing the site'.

There are issues regarding the proposed parking and driveway. The issue with the parking is that the plans show a parking space that does not comply with 521 CMR. The code requires an access aisle of at least 5' width next to the vehicle. The area on the drawing appears to be only about 3' wide. Additionally, there must be an accessible route leading to the front door of at least 3' width. The latest drawings show no accessible path, with the parking space hard up against the building. In order to comply with 521 CMR, sections 10, 20, and 23, the lower parking area will need to be widened by as much as 5'.

The applicant is insistent on having a straight driveway with a turnaround section, rather than another option with a very gentle curvature. It is claimed that the gently curved driveway is somehow a safety problem for elderly people. I strongly disagree, and find that characterization of seniors to be insulting. Viewing the applicant's drawings of both options, it is clear that using the turnaround with the straight driveway option is not feasible, as it does not provide sufficient room to make a very tight 90 degree turn to enter Pleasant St. It would require a vehicle with an outer turning radius of under 12' to make that turn. There are no automobiles on the market that even come close to that number.

The second curved driveway option does provide ample space to make a gentler turn, easier for drivers of all ages.

The other claim that emergency vehicles would not be able to access the driveway has no basis. But there is no need to speculate. Dimensioned drawings of both driveway options can be submitted to the fire chief for his review.

Suggestions for making 149 Pleasant St better suited for a limited mobility resident

1. Remove the proposed mound in the front. This will free up space on the front facade for two full windows, providing better natural lighting and ventilation for the accessible apartment.
2. Deny the request for a waiver of the Usable Open Space bylaw. Require that the front yard be kept flat for the use of the disabled tenant.
3. Require that the accessible parking space comply with state law regarding dimensions for the access aisle and the accessible route to the front door.
4. Choose the curved driveway option which is superior in vehicle access and is also better located for fulfilling the bylaw requirement of providing four public shade trees along the Pleasant St frontage.

Thank you for your consideration.

Don Seltzer

