



CITY OF NEWTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Urban Design Commission

MEETING MINUTES

A meeting of the City of Newton Urban Design Commission (UDC) was held virtually on Wednesday, **May 8, 2024** at 7:00 p.m. via Zoom

<https://newtonma-gov.zoom.us/j/87290990710>

Ruthanne Fuller,
Mayor

Barney Heath,
Director
Planning & Development

Shubee Sikka,
Urban Designer
Planning & Development

Members
Michael Kaufman, Chair
Jim Doolin, Vice Chair
John Downie
Robert Linsky
William Winkler
Visda Saeyan

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The Chair, Michael Kaufman, called the meeting to order at 7:00 P.M.

I. Roll Call

Those present were Michael Kaufman (Chair), Jim Doolin, John Downie, Visda Saeyan, and Bill Winkler. Shubee Sikka, Urban Designer was also present.

II. Regular Agenda

Sign Permits

Mr. Kaufman asked if the Commission felt there were any applications they could approve without discussion. The Commission agreed to approve the following signs without discussion:

1. 2086-2098 Commonwealth Avenue – Mayani Dental

Proposed Sign:

- One wall mounted principal sign, internally illuminated, with approximately 22 sq. ft. of sign area on the northern façade facing Commonwealth Ave.

2. 309-321 Walnut Street – George Howell Coffee

Proposed Sign:

- One wall mounted principal sign, externally illuminated, with approximately 16 sq. ft. of sign area on the eastern building façade facing Walnut Street.

3. 417-427 Lexington Street – Milano Jewelry

Proposed Sign:

- One wall mounted principal sign, non-illuminated, with approximately 24 sq. ft. of sign area on the eastern façade facing Lexington Street.

5. 761-771 Beacon Street – Gibson Sotheby's

Proposed Signs:

- One wall-mounted principal sign, non-illuminated, with approximately 22 sq. ft. of sign area facing Beacon Street.
- One wall-mounted secondary sign, non-illuminated, with approximately 22 sq. ft. of sign area facing Sumner Street.

MOTION: Mr. Kaufman made a motion to approve the sign at 2086-2098 Commonwealth Avenue – Mayani Dental, 309-321 Walnut Street – George Howell Coffee, 417-427 Lexington Street – Milano Jewelry, and 761-771 Beacon Street – Gibson Sotheby’s. Mr. Downie seconded the motion, and none opposed. All the members present voted, with a 5-0 vote, Michael Kaufman, John Downie, Bill Winkler, Visda Saeyan, and Jim Doolin in favor and none opposed.

4. 188-192 Needham Street – Great Hill Dental

Applicant/Representative: Andrew Clark

Proposed Signs:

- One wall mounted principal sign, internally illuminated, with approximately 36 sq. ft. of sign area on the western building façade facing Needham Street.
- One wall mounted secondary sign, internally illuminated, with approximately 36 sq. ft. of sign area on the southern building façade facing the side parking lot.

Presentation and Discussion:

Mr. Kaufman asked about the exact location of the proposed signs. Applicant responded the new signs are in the same location as the old signs and showed them on the screen.

MOTION: Mr. Kaufman made a motion to approve the signs at 188-192 Needham Street – Great Hill Dental. Mr. Winkler seconded the motion, and none opposed. All the members present voted, with a 5-0 vote, Michael Kaufman, John Downie, Bill Winkler, Visda Saeyan, and Jim Doolin in favor and none opposed.

6. 899 Washington Street - Eigen Nails & Spa

Applicant/Representative: Ricky, New CC Sign

Proposed Sign:

- Reface one free-standing principal sign, internally illuminated, with approximately 25 sq. ft. of sign area perpendicular to Washington Street.
- One wall mounted secondary sign, non-illuminated, with approximately 30 sq. ft. of sign area on the southern building façade facing Washington Street.

Presentation and Discussion:

The Commission commented that they don’t want the white background to be illuminated at night but with black letters and white background, it is not possible. The applicant responded that he could reverse black and white so the background will be black, and the letters will be white.

The Commission recommended approval for the free-standing sign on the condition that the staff check with Commissioner of Inspectional Services or the Law department if the sign can still be used since it has been abandoned for a few years, maybe more than a decade. Staff checked with Commissioner of ISD, and he has requested the applicant provide a drawing that the free-standing sign is structurally sound. Commissioner requires a drawing of the free-standing sign stamped by a structural engineer.

MOTION: Mr. Kaufman made a motion to approve the signs at 899 Washington Street – Eigen Nails & Spa with conditions. Ms. Saeyan seconded the motion, and none opposed. All the members present voted, with a 5-0 vote, Michael Kaufman, John Downie, Bill Winkler, Visda Saeyan, and Jim Doolin in favor and none opposed.

The Commission requested the applicant to ensure that the white background is not illuminated at night. The applicant agreed to reverse black and white so the background will be black, and the letters will be white.

The Commission recommended approval of the free-standing sign on the **condition** that the staff check with Commissioner of Inspectional Services Department (ISD) or the Law department if the sign can still be used since it has been abandoned for a few years, since at least 2011. Staff checked with Commissioner of ISD, and he has requested the applicant provide a drawing that the free-standing sign is structurally sound. **Commissioner requires a drawing of the existing free-standing sign stamped by a structural engineer.**

7. 1391-1397 Washington Street - Ninebark

Applicant: Tabitha Leverone

Proposed Sign:

- One wall mounted split principal sign, non-illuminated, with approximately 77 sq. ft. of sign area on the southern building façade facing Washington Street.
- One perpendicular split principal sign, non-illuminated, with approximately 10 sq. ft. of sign area on the southern building façade perpendicular to Washington Street.

Presentation and Discussion:

- The Commission asked staff if all the signs are included in the area calculation and staff confirmed.

MOTION: Mr. Kaufman made a motion to approve the signs at 1391-1397 Washington Street - Ninebark. Mr. Doolin seconded the motion, and none opposed. All the members present voted, with a 5-0 vote, Michael Kaufman, John Downie, Bill Winkler, Visda Saeyan, and Jim Doolin in favor and none opposed.

8. 1197-1203 Walnut Street – Walnut Dental

Applicant: Joshua Lee

Proposed Sign:

- One wall mounted principal sign, externally illuminated, with approximately 4 sq. ft. of sign area on the eastern façade facing Walnut Street.
- One wall mounted secondary sign, non-illuminated, with approximately 3 sq. ft. of sign area on the southern façade facing the driveway.

Presentation and Discussion:

- The Commission recommended to remove the phone number and website from the sign and move it to a window.

MOTION: Mr. Kaufman made a motion to approve the resubmitted signs with a condition at 1197-1203 Walnut Street – Walnut Dental. Mr. Downie seconded the motion, and none opposed. All the members present voted, with a 5-0 vote, Michael Kaufman, John Downie, Bill Winkler, Visda Saeyan, and Jim Doolin in favor and none opposed. The Commission approved the revised principal sign. The Commission recommended the secondary sign for approval on the **condition** that the applicant remove phone number and website with an option to move it to the window.

9. 200-220 Boylston Street - Starbucks

Applicant: Jess Caamano

Proposed Sign:

- One wall mounted principal sign, internally illuminated, with approximately 14 sq. ft. of sign area on the northern façade of building B facing the parking lot.

Presentation and Discussion:

- The Commission asked about the color of the sign and the raceway. Applicant responded that the raceway is white, and the sign is black.

MOTION: Mr. Kaufman made a motion to approve the sign at 200-220 Boylston Street - Starbucks. Mr. Winkler seconded the motion, and none opposed. All the members present voted, with a 5-0 vote, Michael Kaufman, John Downie, Bill Winkler, Visda Saeyan, and Jim Doolin in favor and none opposed.

10. 1-27 Boylston Street – Pink Carrot

Applicant: Amanda Chisholm

Proposed Signs:

- One wall mounted split principal sign, internally illuminated, with approximately 30 sq. ft. of sign area on the western building façade facing side parking lot.
- One perpendicular split principal sign, internally illuminated, with approximately 6 sq. ft. of sign area on the western building façade perpendicular to the side parking lot.

Presentation and Discussion:

The applicant explained that they noticed an unintentional discrepancy in The Street Comprehensive Sign Package between the sign band that was most recently submitted for the northern portion of the West elevation of 27 Boylston Street (2024) and the sign band in the same area that was previously approved by the Urban Design Commission and City Council in 2022. The Commission recommended approval to reinstitute the former sign band as original comprehensive sign package approved in 2022.

MOTION: Mr. Kaufman made a motion to approve the perpendicular sign at 1-27 Boylston Street - Starbucks. Mr. Doolin seconded the motion, and none opposed. All the members present voted, with a 5-0 vote, Michael Kaufman, John Downie, Bill Winkler, Visda Saeyan, and Jim Doolin in favor and none opposed. The Commission recommended approval of the following sign:

- One perpendicular split principal sign, internally illuminated, with approximately 6 sq. ft. of sign area on the western building façade perpendicular to the side parking lot.

Mr. Kaufman made a motion to approve the sign at 1-27 Boylston Street – Pink Carrot. Mr. Winkler seconded the motion, and one opposed. All the members present voted, with a 5-0 vote, Michael Kaufman, John Downie, Bill Winkler, Visda Saeyan, and Jim Doolin in favor and none opposed. The Commission recommended approval of the following sign:

- One wall mounted split principal sign, internally illuminated, with approximately 30 sq. ft. of sign area on the western building façade facing side parking lot.

The proposed sign is not consistent with the 2024 approved comprehensive sign package, hence applicant is required to apply for a consistency ruling or an amendment.

Design Review

1. 41 Washington Street Design Review

Applicant/Representative:

Ian Gleeson, Owner

Franklin Schwarzer, Attorney, Schlesinger & Buchbinder

John Pears, Architectural Designer

Blair Hines, Landscape Architect, Verdant Landscape Architecture

Documents Presented: Context plan figure ground, context photos, site plan, elevations, floor plans, 3D renderings, lighting plan, planting plan, landscaping plan.

Project Summary:

The project is located at 41 Washington Street on a 25,902 square foot parcel. The proposed development consists of 16 dwelling units. The applicant is seeking a Comprehensive Permit from the Zoning Board of Appeals.

Note from the applicant:

Following the December 13, 2023 UDC meeting on this matter, the development team revisited the design of the project to see if it could address concerns expressed by members of the ZBA, the UDC, and the Planning Department. These concerns related to open space, lot coverage, surface parking, stormwater, and massing, among others. Incorporating the existing structure into the design prevented the development team from making effective strides in most of those areas.

By removing the existing structure, however, the revised design:

- *moves the proposed building closer to Washington Street, thereby providing more separation with the neighbors to the rear;*
- *puts all the proposed parking inside the building;*
- *greatly increases the open space and landscaping options for the site;*
- *increases the side setbacks; and*
- *provides enhanced stormwater drainage.*

The revised design more than doubles the amount of proposed open space from what was originally proposed and eliminates all the surface parking at the site. The rear setback has

increased by over 27 feet from what was originally proposed. The revised design allows the retention of more of existing trees on site and provides a more meaningful vegetative buffer for the neighboring properties.

We feel that the revised design represents a marked improvement over the earlier iteration of the project, and that it addresses several of the concerns raised at our previous meetings with the ZBA and the UDC.

Presentation and Discussion:

The applicants summarized the design. The Urban Design Commission had the following comments and recommendations:

Mr. Winkler recommended to have a railing all the way around on top of the 4-foot retaining wall. Applicant responded that they recognize the safety issue and will provide it.

Mr. Winkler also commented that when there are roof terraces with planting on them, the loads created by the Earth are quite heavy and the drainage going down through the building is kind of tricky. Not sure how much Earth can be put up there. It may be better to think of plants in big pots up there rather than a real roof or a green roof. Applicant responded that they are thinking exactly in the way. They will have a system of roof that has various dry tolerant perennials and populate it with some parts that will be over the rising walls. So again, the weight issue is then transferred directly to a vertical structure. And they would certainly do that once they moved into the construction drawings but point well taken and are in full agreement with the comment.

Ms. Saeyan asked if there's handicap access from side to the elevator? The applicant responded there is access on the right corner of the property, there will be less than 5% grade, it's a gentle slope. It's not a ramp grade, which is usually around 8%. If someone was in a wheelchair, or otherwise limited mobility, they could go to the right of the steps where there's an elevator that takes you up about seven feet. One other point is the play area at the back of the site, it is exactly at the same level as the lower level of the building, and there's an elevator that comes down there. Most people are likely not to walk around the building not, out the door and around the building. But just go down to the lowest level And then they just walk straight out the back door it's and grade and there's the there's the play area and the bench and the seating is right at grade, perfectly accessible.

Ms. Saeyan also commented that the pitched roof in the previous proposal related more to the surrounding buildings and also making the building look more residential than a flat roof. The applicant responded that the reason why we don't have a pitched roof is simple. If you have a pitched roof, you'll get only half the number of units. So, you'd have to do then another story to get back the number of units. We are not reducing the number of units in the building. It's been 16 since the beginning and it's been through three major redesigns and it's still 16 and that is the way it must be because we've done exercises that have proven financially it doesn't work at less than 16. So, you cannot do a pitched roof and get the same number of units in a building. Like any building because you'll lose essentially half the units up there. We would need to add one more story if we were to make a pitched roof, which would be a much taller project.

Mr. Kaufman asked the applicant why you can't put the top floor in some kind of attic configuration so that maybe those have sloped ceiling at certain places. Did you look at that? The applicant responded that you lose square footage if you start sloping back. The applicant asked if Mr. Kaufman is talking about like a mansard roof or something like that? Mr. Kaufman responded yes, something like that. There has to be something in between a total true pitched roof and a flat roof that will help to have some more residential look to it. The applicant responded that the rooms are not so oversized that you can lose, say three feet, and wouldn't project something out from the facade, projecting it out other than a foot or so. If it is sloped more than 2 feet, it would really eat into the usable space on the inside of the unit. That matters because you have bathrooms that are certain sizes and because we are meeting every single handicap size for every single unit, and you must have three-foot doors and there's just a lot of height issues that you deal with. And so, by sloping the walls back, for example - you sloped them back three or four feet, you in essence lose that area within the unit when it comes to the sizes of the critical spaces. Kitchens and bathrooms and cabinetry and closets. And so, it changes the plan sufficiently that the units don't work. So, then what you typically do is reduce the number of units and have a different configuration on the top floor. That's normally what they do. But it does reduce the number of units.

Mr. Downie commented the building has gone into a boxy shape, which looks like an apartment building. Comparing the old and new configuration, the advantage with the new one is that the site is much better off with this new configuration. Comparing the old and new roof, the roof on the old one didn't work and it was discussed at the last design review meeting. The other part of this is that the new building design is sort of routed to its site. It sits on a site like a building should sit on a site. The previous design is a house on stilts, essentially with a parking lot, taking up most of the backyard. So, if we start with the implication or the starting point that this developer has come to, which is that 16 units is what they need to be able to make it work financially. The reality is that the new design, is the more appropriate design. Because it the apartments can be efficient. The site is vastly improved and usable. And the cars are not visible. So, in that way, this project is much better now than it was. The only part that that is even slightly disturbing is the fact that it's very much an apartment building look in a single-family residential area. But those sorts of things have happened all over Newton, and they will continue to happen all over Newton. And so, it's something we're going to have to get used to. Being an architect that's worked on senior housing in the past. I know about trying to fit units into those sloped roofs. It's often a disaster, it's incredibly difficult. The new building design is much more realistic. But disagree with John about the white building with the black trimmed windows. There was some discussion of this in a previous design review, they have become far too trendy. Mr. Downie commented that he doesn't disagree with white stucco, that will look beautiful but disagree with black window frame.

Mr. Doolin commented he appreciates the improvement to the site by the current design overall. There's some very creative thinking going on but it's creative thinking for problem solving. And the program introduces several problems that challenge this site in terms of its capacity to have a building this size. While creative techniques can be used to try to ameliorate that, this is a very big, bulky box on an SR3 site, the context rendering shows that. Appreciate that the parking is tucked away. Parking issue is sufficiently solved but it drives the form of the building, which onset is an apartment building. There are a lot of creative things going on here, but the building is too big and supports too many units that then drives other issues that need to be solved.

Mr. Kaufman commented that he appreciates all the site improvements applicant has done. It's a big improvement. Applicant has solved putting the parking on the side and having more open space and more green space, being able to retain more of the existing trees. Applicant can solve that by moving the building forward and having a smaller front yard than was there before.

Mr. Kaufman commented he is taking exception to Mr. Downie in terms of everything, this is the way things go. I think Washington Street is a particularly special street and I think if you drive down, you will notice that most of the homes were built around the same time. There's a very strong sense of Victorian houses and this one is sort of a slap in the face of all this. He thinks there are methods that would make this feel more residential. And he thinks that the applicant should try harder to do that. There are some good examples shown by the applicant. It will be helpful to start breaking the façade. Another good example is 77 Court Street, which was another 40 B where they had 36 units, and they originally came in with a design that was closer to what the applicant is proposing now, and I think the neighbor's kind of sent them away and they came back with something that fits in a lot better with that. They basically took the facade and broke it into three, three smaller pieces with sloped roofs. It can be dealt with dormers, right behind the gable and things like that. So, recommend that the applicant should try harder to do something in terms of the front elevation to really make it feel like you at least acknowledge that you're on the same street with these other houses. This facade is out of context, and it would really be helpful to do something about that. This is a 40B and the applicant is exceeding all sorts of things so why you couldn't go a little bit higher in the height to get to fit in better with the residential.

Mr. Kaufman asked if the applicant is proposing electrical chargers in the parking spaces? The applicant confirmed that they will be providing electrical chargers.

Ms. Saeyan recommended to expand on what Mr. Kaufman mentioned about breaking up the façade. She recommended to look at the building on California Street, it's a new apartment building where they introduced wood looking panels to the white panels. Have also seen some of them in Cambridge to where they introduced different cladding material to flat white panels. And on the roof, if the applicant were to use a mansard roof, if the applicant didn't want the roof to be too high, maybe the sides of it is pitched but the middle is flat. In the front, she recommends breaking it vertically to introduce projections, break the façade. The roof lines don't all have to be continuous. Sometimes, it can be different roofing. So, the first level may have a different kind of roofing that projects out and as you go to the upper levels, it's a different level just to give it a bit more scale, especially in front facing Washington Street, to break it horizontally and vertically to get out of the boxy look.

Mr. Winkler commented that he was really surprised that this would be proposed because, as Michael said that single family houses sometimes, they have two units, but it's totally that way along the whole route there and as Jim said, it looks like an apartment building. So, it seems out of context. He read the notes from the special permit request and the executive summary, and it seemed there were perhaps 26 items where the proponent is asking for a waiver, including FAR, and building height. It is a single-family zone neighborhood. And it seemed like there were so many things there that disturbed and bothered him. And so that's quite a bit. He understands that this is a new trend to pop these things into neighborhoods, but it seemed like with so many exceptions, that it was going a little bit too far in that direction. Mr. Schwarzer clarified that this is

not special permit, it's a comprehensive permit under 40 B. So, it's a different regime. So just to clarify that if this were a special permit, yes, it would be a very different, different project indeed. Mr. Winkler commented that for this site and neighborhood it seems like there certainly were a lot of exceptions. And he understands that the applicant can do anything but it's a question of maybe the correct thing to do is the appropriate thing to do.

Mr. Winkler commented that maybe the applicant could consider too is that it might not be necessary to express everything, spandrels to make things read is a two-story glass spandrel etc. And maybe just using the one-color stucco, not white. Sort of to calm the whole thing down and not express everything. If you are going to really a disruptive mass, then calm it down. It's really a lot of bulk on this site in this neighborhood. We're now stretching the building out to within I guess 12-15 feet from each of the property lines. So, I feel a little bit of concern for the neighbors around it as well.

Mr. Kaufman asked if any members of the public would like to comment, to raise their hand. There was no one who raised their hand to speak.

Mr. Downie commented that Michael talked about the basic feeling of Washington Street in this area, and he agrees that it's very much a Victorian residential area. Watertown street has a lot of that same feeling as well. And there's one or two decent sized apartment buildings along there, one of which is a flat roofed one. That has almost turrets at the corners that are and it's a shingle building, and it fits in well. He thinks it's probably not nearly as bulky as what we're looking at here. But it has the same sort of break in the context if you want to put it that way. And so, it's a handsome building from this basically the same era maybe a little bit later. But it's on Watertown Street, probably near Crafts Street, built in probably 20s or 30s.

Mr. Kaufman commented that it will be helpful to look at some of these examples, on Court Street, California Street, on Watertown Street. Make this feel more residential. The fact that streets like Watertown street have different things going on and, so one could justify doing something like this on a street like that. But Washington Street seems unique in terms of the fact that it looks like almost all those houses were built around the same time. And it would really be nice to at least acknowledge that in this design and try to at least, tip your hat to the fact that this is a Victorian street built in that era. We are only really talking about the front facade. So, the rest of the building can work very well.

Mr. Schwarzer commented that this is very helpful, it's always it's always useful to come in and hear your comments and glad to bring this back and hear your thoughts live well. Mr. Kaufman asked if there is little extra wiggle room in terms of height and things like that because this is a comprehensive permit? In other words, because you are doing all these things that are beyond the zoning and seems to me this would be one other place. If you were to do this to improve the look of the building. Mr. Schwarzer responded it's something they can investigate. Height is, of course, a sensitive issue in its own way. And applicant has dropped it a little bit, but they will look at it. Mr. Kaufman commented that it is height versus aesthetics, you know, height for height's sake isn't always a good thing.

Mr. Kaufman commented UDC appreciates the applicant coming and presenting to UDC. The site plan is a thousand times after.

III. Old/New Business

The Commission reviewed the minutes of April meeting.

MOTION: Mr. Winkler made a motion recommending approval of the regular meeting minutes for April as submitted. Mr. Kaufman seconded the motion. All the members present voted, with a 5-0 vote, Michael Kaufman, Jim Doolin, John Downie, Visda Saeyan, and William Winkler in favor and none opposed. The decision is hereby incorporated as part of these minutes.

IV. ADJOURNMENT

Mr. Kaufman made a motion to adjourn the meeting and there was general agreement among the members.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:57 p.m.

Respectfully submitted by Shubee Sikka

Approved on June 12, 2024.