



Ruthanne Fuller
Mayor

Barney Heath
Director
Planning & Development

Members

Peter Doeringer, Chair
Kelley Brown, Member
Sudha Maheshwari, Member
Jennifer Molinsky, Member
Sonia Parisca, Vice Chair
Chris Steele, Member
Barney Heath, *ex officio*
Kevin McCormick, Alternate
James Robertson, Alternate

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PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT BOARD JOINT MEETING WITH LAND USE MINUTES

April 13, 2021

Members Present:

Peter Doeringer, Chair
Sonia Parisca, Vice Chair
Kelley Brown, Member
Sudha Maheshwari, Member
Jennifer Molinsky, Member
Sudha Maheshwari, Member
Barney Heath, *ex officio*
Kevin McCormick, Alternate
James Robertson, Alternate

LUC members present: Councilors Lipoff (Chair), Laredo, Kelley, Bowman, Downs, Markiewicz, Greenberg, and Lucas

Councilors present: Councilors Albright, Leary, Oliver, and Crossley

Others Present: Stephen Buchbinder of Schlesinger and Buchbinder, Damian Chaviano of Mark Development, David Roache of Mark Development, Hunter Kass of Alexandria Real Estate Equities, Inc., John Martin of Elkus Manfredi Architects, and Randy Hart of VHB

Staff Present:

Barney Heath, Director of Planning and Development
Jen Caira, Deputy Director of Planning
Cat Kemmett, Planning Associate

Meeting held virtually by Zoom Meeting

1. Public Hearing on #91-21, Zoning amendments to MU3-TOD for Riverside Project

The Planning and Development Board jointed the Land Use Committee for this item. At 8:38 p.m.

Hunter Kass from Alexandria introduced himself and offered to answers questions about the research and development use before the project presentation. He said that there are many rules and regulations in place that keep research and development uses safe, and that the development team plans to deliver a highly sustainability LEED gold building for this project.

In response to a question about the fenestration on the building, he answered that the R&D buildings will be fairly opaque for environmental reasons. When asked by Land Use members about Alexandria's holding and experience in the area, and whether they had experience building near apartments, he responded that the company owns and operates over 10 million square feet in the Greater Boston Area, and between 30-35 million square feet across the country. Many of their buildings are proximate to apartments and residential neighborhoods.

Ms. Parisca asked for clarification about the amount and types of retail options and amenities to be provided in the updated plan. Mr. Kass explained that the exact retail uses are still to be determined, but their plan is for it to be a warm and inviting place complementary to other uses in the development.

Cyrisse Jaffe asked about the future viability of R&D uses, which have been very popular in recent years, which could lead to a flooding of the market if too many R&D buildings are constructed. Mr. Kass answered that Alexandria has been in life sciences for over 25 years. They are confident in their ability to deliver a successful project.

Ted Chapman asked if the activation on the ground floor includes access to the public on weekends and other times when the offices and other building uses might not be active. Mr. Kass responded that any retail on the ground floor would be open during their traditional business hours depending on the tenant.

Carla R. who lives on Clearwater Road said that it is very noisy on the street where she lives. She is worried that this plan might make the noise worse and wonders if the petitioner plans to study the noise level, and perhaps provide mitigation for the noise. Damian Chaviano of Mark Development said that Mark Development is concerned about this as well and will move forward with sound studies and making sure abutters will not be negatively impacted by additional noise.

Paul Giragos asked if the building is made for life sciences use, how versatile are life science buildings if it needs to be converted? Additionally, why didn't Mark Development ask for this use in the first place? Mr. Kass said that lab buildings can easily be converted and re-leased, and the improved ability to recycle and clean air in lab buildings is a desirable feature for other uses. Mr. Chaviano added that the Greater Boston area has been a hub for lab and life sciences for years now. There is a land shortage in Boston and Cambridge and increased interest from those companies to move to suburban towns like Newton and Waltham, which contributed to their decision to pursue a lab science use here.

Bob Schreiber said that there is a need for thorough review of biosafety and protection of resident health with R&D uses. He recommends expanding the role of the biosafety committee and have them focus on the health of people above all.

At this time, Mr. Chaviano started his presentation, reviewing the timeline of the zoning petition for the project. He explained that both physical constraints of the site and changing market forces during the pandemic made them realize that hospitality use would be a challenge. Mark Development decided to partner with Alexandria when it became clear to them that the success of the project depended on changing the hospitality use to something else.

Mr. Chaviano explained some of the differences in this proposal to the approved plans from July 2020, which include additional parking spaces, fewer residential units, and increased square footage for retail and office/lab use. The key metrics for open space will remain largely unchanged. In the revised plan, some buildings and frontages on the site are staying some, while others are now increased or decreased. Overall, frontage on Grove Street will be reduced.

Mr. Chaviano showed elevations comparing the previous plans and revised plans, as well as how those changes would look from Grove Street and the highway. He explained that even with the change of use on the upper floors, they still plan to activate the ground floor with active amenity spaces like a grocery store or retail.

Mark Development anticipates that peak demand for parking will shift with the switch to lab and life science use. Traffic will increase by a de minimis amount overall, but the parking analysis showed that there is less parking demand at peak hours.

This plan would bring the estimated number of market rate units from 582 to 550. The number of units provided at 50% and 80% AMI will decrease, and the number of units at 110% AMI will increase for a total of 111 affordable units.

John Martin from Elkus Manfredi Architects shared some of the feedback from their engagement efforts, where many folks asked if the height of Building 1 and 2 could be reduced, and based on those conversations they reduced the height of Building 2 and shifted around some of the massing of those buildings.

Mr. Buchbinder then explained that previously, they had planned to include a senior housing use, but have since moved away from that plan. This should simplify their amendment text changes. Because of the proposed changes in use, they propose amending Sec. 4.2.4.G.1 to add a new category, Category D: Laboratory, research, and development and business incubator. However, the maximum gross floor area of all uses in the MU3/TOD district remains the same.

Ms. Caira explained that the city has engaged the same peer review team for this revised petition. It includes site and building design review from Utile, Form & Place, and Horsley Witten as well as Fiscal Impact review from HR&A, Transportation review from Green International, and Stormwater review by Horsley Witten.

Tom Gagen voiced support for the plan, said that this project as designed will provide needed housing and tax revenue for the city.

Liz Mirabile, a member of the Lower Falls Improvement Association board, asked about the change in frontage for buildings facing Lower Falls. Mr. Roache responded that the overall frontage facing Lower Falls will be reduced in this revised plan. She would like to see more visuals showing views from the neighborhood and more about the noise level analysis.

Ted Chapman, a member of the Lower Falls Improvement Association board, said that the previous plan emphasized that the development would provide for most of the needs of residents, while under this plan, residents would need to go offsite to meet some of their needs, and could fall short of the self-contained community Mark Development has promised. He asked if rooftops could be used as additional green space, and how connectivity could be improved between Riverside center and Riverside station. He hoped mitigation funds can be used for Hamilton Field and Rec Center and Riverside Park as well. He would also like the city to study bike and pedestrian connections in this area.

Sean Roche voiced support for the switch to life science lab use but asked the petitioner to reconsider the affordable housing mix and keep the higher number of affordable units. Further, improving connectivity from the Riverside stop to Riverside center should be a requirement of the special permit amendment.

Jay Walter voiced support for these changes. He recognized the loss of affordable housing is a disappointment but sees an improvement in the project in terms of traffic and parking and impact of the massing of the building on the neighborhood.

Lynn Weissberg voiced support for changes to the project. However, the loss of units at the 50% and 80% AMI is disappointing since they are in such strong need, so she would like to see the number of units at those deeper affordability levels in the previous plan retained.

John McElduff, a member of the Lower Falls Improvement Association, shared a concern about the lack of data for the impact of life science use in traffic plans. He is pleased that peak hour traffic should be reduced but is concerned that overall traffic could be worse since the data is not comprehensive.

Marion Knapp said that revenue gained from this project can be used to provide needed maintenance and updates for the city.

Cyrise Jaffe, a member of the Lower Falls Improvement Association, said she was concerned about an over reliance on life sciences and that there is not a community space or center accommodated on this side. She asked the city council to think critically about who is being served by this project.

Erin Kandamar, a member of the Lower Falls Improvement Association, said that this current plan is not very transit oriented. The MBTA has cut service due to the pandemic, and people might move away from using public transit due to health concerns which can increase traffic in the area. Public transit supports the economy and is good for the environment, and she encourages the city to support improved public transit options.

Paul Giragos echoed Ms. Kandahar's concerns about increased traffic and asked how the shift in peak traffic would benefit the neighborhood. Mr. Hart from VHB explained that with the shift to R&D use, there will be an impact more so on peak parking demand, rather than traffic.

Doris Ann Sweet said the pivot to life science space is important to the economic health of the city and asked if the petitioner would consider shifting some of the affordable units from the 110% tier to the deeper affordability levels. Additionally, park improvements to the Riverside greenway will be very important as work is needed there.

Ian Lamont said that allowing major developers to renegotiate their projects in this way sets a bad precedent in the city. These changes are largely being driven by profit. He asked who investors and unseen stakeholders in the project are and if they could be identified. Mr. Chaviano said that a capitalization project has been put together for the project. Alexandria is a partner in that.

Daniel Harris said he believes these changes will be important to the future of the city in terms of sustainability and the need for increased housing. The switch to lab and life sciences will provide economic benefits and decrease traffic. He voiced support for the developer bringing back more deeply affordable units.

Scott Humphrey said that there is a lot of biotech use being built in the area, which can flood the market. He believes that the city is too willing to bend to what the developers ask for.

Benita Danzing broadly supports the proposed changes. She believes it will provide needed tax revenue, reduce peak hour traffic, and create high paying jobs. The buildings will be sustainable and provide needed affordable housing units.

Lois Levin voiced support for these changes. She believes it will provide a place for professionals to do important work, and employees and visitors will benefit from being right on the green line and leave cars at home. This is a well-planned project that will use the parcel well and provide needed housing and high-quality mixed-use development.

Jack Green stated that this plan should mitigate traffic and address any confusion that might come with a roundabout in the area.

Randall Block said that the city is not very experienced in approving tall buildings. The wind comfort of pedestrians should be addressed in these plans with clear criteria to ensure that a wind analysis is conducted for Riverside and for other mixed-use zones in Newton as we build buildings taller than the usual 2 or 3 stories.

Sue Parsons is in favor of the project and the direction it is going in, and wants the city to work with Mark Development to push for greater affordability in the affordable units and.

Peter Harrington said that his sympathies are with the Lower Falls community in this matter. He expressed disappointment in the shift away from more units at the lower end of the AMI scale. It is not the city's responsibility to ensure the investment of the developer.

Scott Rodman voiced support for thoughtful development for affordable housing and development for seniors, and for this project. He asked for data and information about what it would take financially or in terms of square footage for the developer to consider going back to the higher amount 50 and 80% AMI units in the affordable housing mix, and if it is viable to improve the connection between Riverside station and the center. Mr. Chaviano said he could come back with information about the square footage at the next meeting. He could not speak to the economic viability of those connectivity changes.

Nancy Zollers spoke in support of the project and associated changes. This project is important for the city, adds needed housing stock, and the developer has been a good partner to housing advocates in the city and has shown a willingness to compromise and work with the surrounding neighborhood and the city.

2. Adjournment

Upon a motion by Mr. Brown, seconded by Ms. Parisca and unanimously approved, the Planning and Development Board voted to hold and continue the item. The meeting was adjourned at 10:41 p.m.