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May 20, 2018

Michael Zehner, AICP
Planning Director
Town of Wellesley Planning Department
525 Washington Street
Wellesley, MA 02482

RE: 135 Great Plain Avenue, Wellesley
Preliminary Design Comments

Dear Michael:

As you know, I will not be able to attend the ZBA hearing that is scheduled for Thursday, May 31. However, per your request, I'm writing to briefly comment on the documents that have been provided to me. My comments are based on the review of the documents, discussions during the site visit, as well as observations from my site visit.

So far, I have received and reviewed the following:

- Memo from Vanasse & Associates to Northland Residential Corporation dated June 23, 2017.
- 135 Great Plain Ave, Wellesley Concept Site and Architectural Package dated February 15, 2018 (Union Studio).
- Site Plans Issued for Comprehensive Permit dated February 16, 2018 (VHB).
- Project Eligibility/Site Approval Letter from MassHousing dated February 7, 2018.
- Stormwater Report dated February 2018 prepared by VHB.
- Project Description/Narrative (undated).
- Zoning Board of Appeals Official Development Prospectus dated 3/7/2018.
- Fieldstone Way Comprehensive Permit Application Unit Summary dated 3.7.18.
- Fieldstone Way Condominium Project Preliminary List of Project Waivers dated 3.8.18.
- Letter to Richard Seegel from Northland Residential dated March 9, 2018.
- Letter to Lenore Mahoney from Town of Wellesley Department of Public Works (draft, no date).
- Letter to Zoning Board of Appeals from BETA dated May 14, 2018.
- Memo to Chairman Robert Levy from VHB dated May 16, 2018 (stormwater summary).
- Memo to Chairman Robert Levy from VHB dated May 16, 2018 (resource area summary).
- Memo to Julie Meyer from Northland Residential dated May 16, 2018 (wetlands protection).
- Memo to Michael Zehner from Deputy Chief DiGiandomenico dated May 17, 2018.

On Monday, May 14, 2018, I attended a site walkthrough. Also attending were you, Peter Crabtree (Northland Residential), Jeremy Lake (Union Studio), as well as one other architect from Union Studio (Christina ?). During the walkthrough, I observed surveyor's stakes that defined the bounds of the sector of the site nearest to Great Plain Avenue, but also saw the "skating pond", that is beyond the "Tier 3" area of the site. Prior to the walkthrough, I observed the neighboring homes from Great Plains Avenue to the east and west of the subject site.

Topics of discussion at the site visit included:

- Nearness and impact of proposed project (primarily at Tier 1 level, the "terrace" closest to Great Plain Avenue), and inability of providing adequate on-project-site landscape screening.
- The likelihood that the entire developed area of the site will have to be clear cut and re-graded.
- Options for mitigating impact of project on neighbors (primarily by increasing the side setbacks).

- Appropriateness of “formal”, axial layout of buildings and circulation on site plan (“very Beaux-Arts”).
- Method of preservation and re-location of fieldstone outbuilding (former carriage house?).
- Logic of tiered site organization, and fact that grade changes facilitate multi-level entries to some of the buildings.
- Size and hierarchy of shared open spaces on site.
- Logic of vehicular entry location at center of site (as opposed to more towards east or west).
- Potential accessibility issues related to site.
- Potential accessibility issues related to buildings.
- Length of Tier 1 parking alleys, and fire department review of plans.
- Coordination of building plans, elevations, and footprints indicated on site plans.

General comments and questions:

- References are made in the application materials (and were discussed at the site visit) to the proposed project as “senior directed” and “conceived to meet the needs of older homeowners wishing to downsize.” While there are particular building features that are appropriate for an aging population (discussed elsewhere in this letter), the overall unit mix is not consistent with typical elderly developments (36 units at 3-BR, and 8 at 2-BR, for a total of 124 bedrooms). In addition to the designated bedrooms, 16 of the units have offices with windows (some with closets), 20 units have family rooms with windows, and 8 of the units have storage rooms with windows and somewhat reduced ceiling height. This adds up to an additional 44 rooms that could potentially be used as sleeping rooms. Review of the development, particularly with respect to site amenities, would be greatly enhanced with a clearer notion of what the likely population will be (specifically number of children expected). A clear understanding of the project population would also help in the review of traffic impact, specifically, trip generation.
- There was discussion at the site visit about the distribution of the affordable units throughout the site. Apparently, the greatest concentration of affordable units as currently proposed, is in the Type B Townhouse units, which are the only 2-bedroom units in development. They are also the only units without any additional amenities beyond a half bath on the first level (in addition to the shared full bath on the second floor). While there is no question this type of home-ownership unit is in short supply in Wellesley, the larger units suitable for larger families are likely in even shorter supply. The affordable unit placement is a concern for MassHousing, noting in their PEL that they will review the plans at Final Approval for consistency with the requirement that affordable units are equally dispersed throughout the site.
- Also briefly discussed on the site was the method for moving the existing fieldstone outbuilding. If it is feasible to relocate that building on the site, it seems reasonable to think that the stone entry pillars on Great Plain Avenue could also be relocated (site discussion was related to the decision to not reuse the existing site entry point due to inadequate distance between the two historic entry markers).
- While there are no mechanical drawings included in the submission, reference is made in the Preliminary List of Project Waivers to potential relief related to the locating of building equipment (“air conditioning and electric transformers as shown on project plans”) in the side yard setbacks. Given the minimal side setbacks in Tier 1 area of site, this information is important to review (and is not currently indicated in any submitted materials provided to this reviewer).

Some preliminary comments and questions regarding the site plan:

- This reviewer’s most significant concern is the density of buildings on the site. In addition to density-related issues that may be flagged by other reviewers, there are two problems that follow from the tight packing of 18 buildings of the proposed scale. First is impact on the neighbors that abut the site to the east and west. Given the minimal side setbacks and the need to grade along the edge of the property, it does not appear to be possible to provide adequate landscape buffers on the subject site. This is evident from the landscape drawings that were included in the drawing submission. Second, the density of structures (and their arrangement on the site) does not allow for programmable open space that is significant in scale enough to act as an organizing element. While there is a much larger open space/meadow proposed down the slope past the Tier 3 buildings, it is not clear from the drawings that it would be

- programmable (see Grading and Drainage Plan that indicates 4 and 5 foot mounds that break up the space). Given the number of people who may occupy the site (minimum of 124 bedrooms), it is this reviewer's opinion that the Community Green is severely undersized.
- Depending on projected population of the development, a tot lot for children/grand children should be considered.
 - Other amenities for the green may be worth considering, e.g. patio area associated with the relocated stone house.
 - The fact that the proposed development is significantly in contrast with the existing pattern of nearby residential development requires that its perception from the public realm be carefully considered. It is likely that this deviation from more typical Wellesley projects has prompted the comments regarding the "lack of creativity" and "regimented" nature of the site plan. While it is not this reviewer's belief that the development cannot be relatively "self-contained" and "atypical" as far as site plan and building typology, it is critical to mitigate the development's impact so as not to degrade nearby existing properties. In this case, the impact is concentrated on the structures to the east and west.
 - The Tier 1 buildings along Great Plain Avenue connect nicely with the street with pronounced building entries and walkways connecting to a sidewalk along the street (the rear elevations face an internal parking lane).
 - While at the site visit, there was some discussion about the potential of moving the entry drive close to where it currently is, and the possibility of developing another building type along the eastern lot line. There is also the potential to use a landscaped driveway close to the eastern edge to help increase the buffer (which would result in longer parking lanes).
 - Probably the biggest technical concerns regarding the site plan is in regard to handicap accessibility. While the project is exempt from any requirement for fully accessible, Type 2 units (because it is home ownership), it is not exempt from the requirement that all site amenities to be accessible to all residents of the development. The 30-foot grade change across the three Tiers makes this challenging. The site plans do not appear to show an accessible path to the lower meadow open space. There only indicated route is a maintenance access drive to the area that seems to be sloped at 12.5% (far too steep to be part of an accessible path). In addition to site accessibility requirements that apply to all open space amenities, accessible paths must be provided to mail kiosks, trash areas, the community building, and to a public way (in this case, Great Plain Avenue).
 - Similarly, while the development is exempt from Group 1 units (because of the "townhouse exemption"), it is not exempt from MAAB 10.1 that requires all public use and common use of all new construction multiple dwellings (i.e., all of the three-unit Tier 1 structures) to be accessible. Note that even though the entries to the buildings are designed for individual units, "public and common use" spaces include entrances to buildings that must be accessible to "residents and/or visitors" (current building designs indicate steps up to entry porches). It is important that all accessibility requirements be addressed, whether through the design or through the variance process. Obtaining an Advisory Opinion from the Architectural Access Board is strongly recommended.
 - Is any accessible parking proposed for the site?
 - There does not appear to be a designated area for school bus pick up and drop off.
 - How is trash and recycling handled on the site?
 - Is any bicycle parking provided on the site?
 - Snow storage space has not been delineated.
 - Do driveways in front of garages need to be as long as indicated? Cutting down on length would decrease impermeable surface area.
 - Should a maintenance shed be included in the program for care of on-site common amenities?
 - Mention is made in the submission materials that farm stone walls will be preserved whenever possible. It is not clear from the plans what is intended (there is also mention of salvaging stones and using in new site plan).
 - Pathway to aqueduct is a terrific amenity, but not clear from materials that it's actually committed to in the plan. Note that it is likely that this path would also have to meet accessibility requirements.

- The fire department has requested a “swept path analysis” of the site plan, which could result in changes to the vehicular circulation plans. The developer may benefit from proposing to provide fire protection (sprinklers) in the duplex homes, even though it is likely not required by building code. This may provide some flexibility in the site plan from the perspective of the fire department. A meeting with the fire department to discuss site plan options is strongly recommended.
- Transformer location(s) are not indicated on the site plan.
- Is emergency power provided for the sewer pumps?
- No site lighting plan has been provided.

Some preliminary comments and questions regarding the building designs:

- Notwithstanding concerns related to tight packing of the site, all three building types are attractive, and while not in the same style as nearby structures, the scale and level of detail is consistent with large single family homes found nearby and in most neighborhoods in Wellesley.
- Building elevations indicate materials that are high quality and consistent with most housing in Wellesley. Included are fiber cement board & batten and clapboard siding, as well as red cedar shingles (presumably siding), PVC trim, architectural grade roof shingles, standing seam accent roofs.
- Long elevations of buildings are broken up with porches, large gable dormers (into unoccupied attics).
- Townhouse structures include single story wings that break up massing.
- Tier 2 and Tier 3 buildings engage the slope of the landscape and present attractive elevations on both uphill and downhill sides.
- Duplex buildings and 3-bedroom townhouses include generous amenities; “embedded” two-bedroom townhouses to a significantly lesser degree.
- Accessibility concerns expressed above in site comment section apply to stepped entries at triplex (townhouse) buildings (MAAB section 10.1).
- Stated goal of targeting older population is achieved in some three-bedroom townhouse units that include a bedroom on the first, potentially accessible level. Type A and C duplex units include a space where an elevator could be installed. Two-bedroom units are not targeted to aged or aging-in-place populations.
- As was mentioned at the site walkthrough, some of the building plans are not coordinated with building elevations or site plans.
- Given concerns about the regimented appearance of the development, consideration should be given to creating a variety of color schemes to create further visual interest and to de-emphasize the fact that most of the buildings within any Tier are identical.

I hope that you find these comments useful, and I look forward to further development and discussion of 135 Great Plain Avenue. Thanks for the opportunity to assist the Town in its review of this important project!

Sincerely,



Clifford Boehmer, AIA