

PLANNING BOARD REPORT Town of Wellesley - Planning Department

Application Type:	40B Comprehensive Permit Application
Project:	135 Great Plain Avenue (Fieldstone Way)
Case Number(s):	ZBA-2018-25
Applicant:	Northland Residential Corporation
Subject Property:	135 Great Plain Avenue (PID 68-1)
District:	Single Residence District, 20,000 Sq. Ft. Area Regulation District
Date:	Report Issued 6/14/2018
Staff Contact:	Victor Panak, Senior Planner

Planning Board Recommendation - Summary

(For considered review standards, please refer to Review Standards on page 3, including consideration of the Handbook: Approach to Chapter 40B Design Reviews discussed on page 4; please refer to Planning Board Analysis on page 4 for the basis of the Board's recommendation)

The Planning Board has numerous concerns related to this project. Primarily, these concerns relate to:

- The size and uniformity of the building designs and the regimented nature of their location on the site; and
- The insufficient side-yard setbacks and screening provided given the proximity of abutters and the size of the proposed buildings; and
- The distribution of affordable units; and
- The lack of a playground area.

The Planning Board believes that there are changes that should be made to the project that can work to mitigate these concerns, including reducing the number of units, reducing and varying the size of units, expanding the side-yard setbacks and providing additional screening plantings, and making adjustments to the architecture or the layout of the site to introduce more visual diversity.

Project Summary

On March 8, 2018, Northland Residential Corporation (“the Applicants”) submitted an application for a Comprehensive Permit under M.G.L. Chapter 40B to the Zoning Board of Appeals. The Application is proposing the construction of a new 44-unit condominium community on a 12.05-acre parcel of land located at 135 Great Plain Avenue. The subject site is bounded by Great Plain Avenue to the northeast, the Sudbury Aqueduct to the south, conservation land (owned by the Natural Resources Commission) to the northwest, and single family homes bordering the rest of the site. The site is in close proximity to the Babson College Skating Center, Boston Sports Club, the Town Recycling and Disposal Facility, and Olin College. There are very few amenities within walking distance to the site, Wellesley Square being located 1.2 miles away and Needham Center being located 2.0 miles away.

The subject site is currently vacant with the exception of a stone outhouse, the materials of which the applicant intends to preserve and repurpose. The site features significant and varying topography, with a high point of approximately 170' at the northeast corner of the site and a low point of approximately 130' at the edge of Fuller Brook at the southwest corner of the site. Slightly less than one third of the site is within wetlands or an associated buffer area; no construction activity is proposed within these areas. Northland Residential Corporation had previously submitted, and received approval for, a 12-lot residential subdivision on this site, but the Applicant deemed that this new proposal would be more responsive to market demand.

The "Residences at Fieldstone Way" proposes 8 townhouse buildings (3 units each) and 10 duplex buildings organized in three "tiers". The first tier, located along the front property line, would include all 8 triplexes arranged in two rows of 4 buildings. The second tier, more centrally located, would include 3 duplexes surrounding a central shared open space area. The third tier would include the remaining 7 duplexes arranged such that each duplex would have an elevated view over the rest of the property (open meadow) to the rear. Of the proposed 44 units, 8 are two-bedroom units ("TH Type B", all located in the Tier 1 townhouses) and the remaining 36 are three-bedroom units. Eleven of the 44 proposed units (25%) will be set aside as affordable housing for residents making 80% of Area Median Income. The Comprehensive Permit Application does not indicate how the affordable units will be distributed on the site, but the application for Project Eligibility with MassHousing stated that 10 of the 11 units will be in Tier 1 (7 of these will be 2-BR Type B units), and one of the units will be in Tier 2.

Procedural Information

MassHousing issued a preliminary Project Eligibility Letter on February 7, 2018, which qualifies the project for consideration for a Comprehensive Permit. The Zoning Board of Appeals opened the public hearing on April 5, 2018, but did not engage in any discussion or deliberation. Within 180 days, the hearing must be closed absent an extension agreement with the Applicant.

The ZBA held a continued session of the public hearing on April 26, 2018 where the Applicant made an introductory presentation and members of the Board and the public provided the Applicant with preliminary comments.

The ZBA held a further public hearing on May 31, 2018 where the Applicant made presentations related to traffic and engineering site design.

The next session of the public hearing is scheduled for the ZBA meeting on June 28, 2018.

The Zoning Board of Appeals will be receiving comments from various Town Boards and Departments, as well as peer-review input from a number of consultants. At this time, BETA has been engaged to provide traffic peer review and Davis Square Architects have been engaged to provide architectural peer review. The following Town Boards/Departments will be providing comments addressing, at a minimum, the identified topics:

Planning Board: Scale, Layout, and Design of Buildings; Other Concerns

Design Review Board: Architectural Design and Materials; Landscaping

Engineering Division: Stormwater Management; Utilities

Police Department: Traffic, Circulation, and Access; Safety

Fire Department: Emergency Vehicle Access

Board of Health: Stormwater and Stagnant Water Issues

Wetlands Protection Committee: Wetlands Preservation

In addition to providing comments related to these topics, Boards and Departments at this stage in the public hearing should be concerned with identifying deficiencies in the submitted application and making requests through the ZBA for additional materials and information.

Review Standards

While exempt from the Site Plan Review process, the Planning Board found it helpful to review the project based on the same *Scope and Purpose* standards found in Section XVIA, *Project Approval*, albeit with significantly more depth of discussion on each associated topic. These standards provide a basic framework for the evaluation of this project. The *Scope and Purpose* for Section XVIA is as follows:

1. Ensure compliance with the Zoning Bylaws of the Town of Wellesley;
2. Protect the safety, convenience and welfare of the public;
3. Minimize additional congestion in public and private ways;
4. Ensure adequate provision for water, sewerage and drainage;
5. Ensure compliance with the provisions of Section XVI, *Restrictions Affecting All Districts*;
6. Ensure compliance with the provisions of Section XXI, *Off-Street Parking*; and
7. Ensure compliance with the provisions of Section XXII, *Design Review*.

As a Comprehensive Permit application, this project is exempt from a number of these provisions, notably numbers 1, 5, 6, and 7; however, provisions 2, 3, and 4 entail thorough review of all aspects of the project related to those concerns, and the Planning Board believes it's input will be valuable in discussions related to Scale, Layout, and Design of Buildings as well as other aspects related to amenities and parking.

For the ZBA's consideration, it is also important to reference the *Handbook: Approach to Chapter 40B Design Reviews* (<https://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2017/10/16/handbook-approachtoch40b-designreviewa.pdf>) a document intended to "provide information and guidance for the design review process undertaken by the agencies subsidizing c.40B affordable housing projects in Massachusetts. Design review is necessary when evaluating new c.40B housing developments for consistency with the requirements of the c.40B regulations in terms of use, site planning and building design." *Attachment A: Key Design Issues* and *Attachment B: Guidelines for Reviewing Designs* of the Handbook are attached for the ZBA's consideration.

Planning Board Analysis

The "Residences at Fieldstone Way" project is located in a predominantly residential neighborhood with very low density and significant sections of land that remain undeveloped. Aside from the surrounding single family homes, the area also features some large commercial and municipal facilities, but all of these are very well screened, situated on large parcels of land with ample open space, and located far from the visibility of any public ways. The Applicant has designed a condominium development that will echo the design elements present on many residential homes in the vicinity and generally be consistent with the residential character of the area. However, a number of concerns related to scale and neighborhood

compatibility remain that the Applicant should be able to address with relative ease. The Planning Board's primary concerns relate to the Scale, Layout, and Design of Buildings.

Scale, Layout, and Design of Buildings – The project's 44 units on a 12.05-acre lot yields a housing density of 3.65 units per acre. When wetland areas are excluded from the area of the site, the project's housing density increases to 4.63. This number is more useful from a qualitative perspective in considering the visual impact of this development from the public way and from within the development itself. Planning Staff conducted a study of the housing density values in the vicinity using data from the Assessor's Office and the MAPC. The average housing density in the study area is 1.6 and the median housing density is 1.9. This project's density therefore exceeds the standard for the neighborhood, albeit not by an unreasonable amount. Given the type of development, such density levels are acceptable.

Although the housing density is reasonable, the size of each unit and the design of each building pose significant concerns. There are a number of factors that help contribute to this issue. These issues of scale apply primarily to buildings in Tier 1, but these concerns remain valid in the other Tiers as well. The buildings are situated on the site in a very regimented fashion such that each of the 3 tiers will likely be obvious to any visitor. Within each tier, the buildings display an unacceptable level of uniformity, with no variation in ridge lines, no variation in style, and an extremely linear layout. A 20-foot setback is provided from both side-yard property lines in Tier 1, but the Planning Board feels that this is insufficient given the scale of the buildings and that, regardless, the Applicant should be required to provide very robust landscaping in these setback areas. All these factors exacerbate the large mass of the proposed buildings, which range from 6,580 sq. ft. (not including basements) to 8,186 sq. ft. For reference, the TLAG threshold for Large House Review in this zoning district is 5,900, and all 18 proposed buildings would individually be subject to Large House Review. The Planning Board recommends a number of changes to the project that would help alleviate some of these negative impacts:

- a) **Reducing the number of units in Tier 1.** The Planning Board recommends that the townhouses in Tier 1 be changed to duplexes, thus reducing the number of units by 8 and reducing the overall size of each building in Tier 1 by approximately 2,500 sq. ft. This would allow for greater setbacks along the side-yard property lines and more robust landscaping throughout the first Tier of the development. It may even allow for more interior space to provide a playground, as recommended by the Health Department.
- b) **Making a general reduction in the size of each unit and incorporating greater variety in the size of units.** A general reduction in the size of every unit could have the same positive effects as a reduction in number of units. It would also make the units (both affordable and market-rate) in this development more reasonably-priced. Currently, the project proposes 6 different unit configurations (7, if Tier 1 Type C-alt is considered). The Planning Board would prefer to see a greater variety in unit types that would also manifest in a greater variety of exterior building designs, heights, and massing. A more varied architecture can help mitigate the perception of massing and would also resolve some of the Board's concerns related to the regimented nature of the site's layout.
- c) **Revise the exterior architecture of buildings to reduce uniformity.** Although the topography changes significantly *between* Tiers, the topography *within* Tiers remains relatively consistent. As proposed, every building within a Tier would have the same ridge height and almost identical architecture. More variety in general should be introduced, but the Planning Board is particularly concerned about the consistent and high (36-40 feet) ridge heights. Such consistency is not found anywhere else in Wellesley and it accentuates the massing of the buildings, the rigidity of the site design, and the segmented/tiered nature of the development.

- d) **Expand the side-yard setbacks and include more screening.** Given the height of the proposed buildings in Tier 1 and the proximity of adjacent abutters, the Planning Board is concerned about the minimal 20-foot setbacks and the lack of screening provisions. The Board recommends that the Applicant expand the setback areas and propose the planting of robust screening vegetation, both understory and canopy plantings.

Other Concerns – The Planning Board’s primary concerns relate to the scale of buildings, and resolving issues related to the scale of buildings would help resolve many of the other concerns that the Planning Board has with the proposed project. Aside from the above listed issues, the Board would recommend that the Applicant address the following:

- a) **The distribution of affordable units.** Although the Comprehensive Permit application does not provide details on the location of the 11 affordable units on the site, the Applicant’s application for Project Eligibility with MassHousing indicated that 10 of the 11 units would be located in Tier 1. Tier 1 is evidently the densest and least affluent of the Tiers and the arrangement of the site will make this abundantly clear to any visitors. The hierarchical nature of the site is a concern in-and-of-itself, but grouping all the affordable units in the least desirable and visibly least affluent portion of the site is unacceptable. This issue could be resolved in a large number of ways, but ideally the units’ locations are equally distributed on the site, or the arrangement of the development is altered to remove the hierarchy and eliminate the concerns related to affordable unit distribution.
- b) **Lack of playground.** The nearest playground to the project site is approximately 1.5 miles away (30-minute walk). The Planning Board believes this is a need that the site should provide to its residents and recommends that a playground be provided accessible to all residents.

Attached Documents

- *Exhibit A: Map titled “135 Great Plain Avenue Housing Density”, prepared by the Wellesley Planning Department in May 2018*

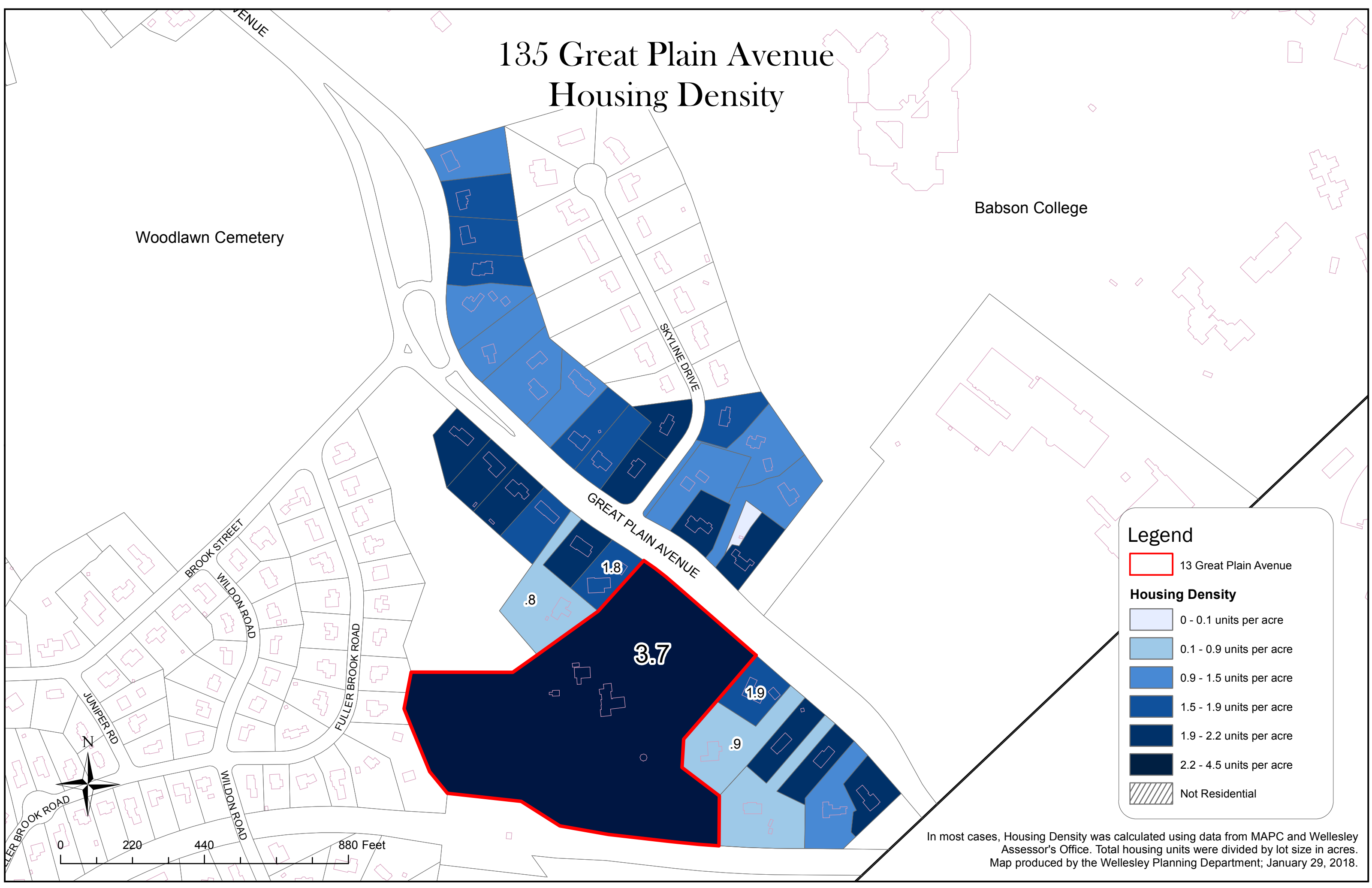
135 Great Plain Avenue Housing Density

Woodlawn Cemetery

Babson College

Legend

- 13 Great Plain Avenue
- Housing Density**
- 0 - 0.1 units per acre
- 0.1 - 0.9 units per acre
- 0.9 - 1.5 units per acre
- 1.5 - 1.9 units per acre
- 1.9 - 2.2 units per acre
- 2.2 - 4.5 units per acre
- Not Residential



In most cases, Housing Density was calculated using data from MAPC and Wellesley Assessor's Office. Total housing units were divided by lot size in acres. Map produced by the Wellesley Planning Department; January 29, 2018.