



## Town of Brookline Massachusetts

PLANNING DEPARTMENT  
**Alison C. Steinfeld**  
Planning Director

Town Hall, Third Floor  
333 Washington Street  
Brookline, MA 02445-6899  
(617) 730-2130 Fax (617) 730-2442

May 19, 2016

Mark S. Zuroff  
Zoning Board Appeals

Re: Puddingstone at Chestnut Hill  
Comprehensive Permit Application

Chairman Zuroff,

The Planning Board considers the proposed six-story, 500-foot long apartment building to be incongruous with the surrounding context of two-story townhouses designed with semi-private usable open space areas. Furthermore, the project's elimination of virtually all open space and character-defining natural resources reinforces this incompatibility. If the Town were to have had a conceptual design meeting with the applicant prior to the submission of the application, the Board would have recommended applying a widely recognized, universal design principle; namely, that increased density is more efficiently situated at the edge of a site on the public way, which in this case is Independence Drive. This possibility would better enable the project to achieve several high-priority, though not mutually exclusive, goals of developing more affordable housing, conserving the character defining qualities of the historically significant site and nearby conservation areas, and maintaining the community standards of the nearby single-family neighborhood. Considering that the developer has already committed to funding improvements to Independence Drive estimated at \$350,000, redeveloping the edge of the site on this public way would be efficient and opportune.

Nonetheless, the constraints of Chapter 40B require the ZBA to address the design of the site proposed, not its location. It is within these limitations that the Planning Board confines its recommendations to the ZBA.

**Sight Lines and Viewsheds:** The 5.5 acre site is largely made up of puddingstone that is 15 to 20 feet at its maximum height above grade. Not only does this prominent natural resource lend a distinctive character to the site, it provides a viewshed and walkable open space corridor that visually and physically links the twenty existing townhouses in this quadrant of the complex to the 100-acre Hoar Sanctuary. At about 77 feet high and 457 feet long, the apartment building consumes the expanse of this corridor. Situated among the twenty existing two-story townhouses, and with relatively shallow setbacks, the massive bulk imposes an oppressive, wall-like effect on the occupants of the smaller structures.

- **Use of Existing Topography and Natural Resources:** As mentioned above, the most striking natural feature of the site is a prominent two-story ledge of puddingstone that would be completely eliminated; no vestiges of this feature would be incorporated into the site design as a technique for integrating the new project into the existing context. Steeper grading at the edges of the apartment

building foundation only emphasizes its height. The proposed planting schedule provides screening of merely the ground floor level at best.

- **Site Configuration and Functional Open Space:** The project proposes the construction of an apartment building and three new townhomes without any redevelopment of the twenty existing townhomes in this quadrant of the complex. Demolishing the existing buildings and constructing larger structures in a configuration that is more consistent with the development pattern would allow for a more compatible site design. In combination with the paved drive and surface parking, the plan provides little, if any, functional open space in a manner that is consistent with the surrounding context. Set at higher elevation in relation to the surrounding townhomes, the apartment building has setbacks that range from 25 to 40 feet, which are shallow if one compares the scale of the apartment building in relation to the two-story townhomes on three sides of it. The typical setback within the links of townhomes is about 20 feet, for reference. As a result, the site plan has a shoehorned effect because of the insufficient setbacks, massive footprint of the apartment building, and the lack of open space.

Despite a lot size of 5.5 acres, the project offers no greenspace amenities for occupants, as the current development pattern offers. Furthermore, the configuration of the lease lot boundaries to accommodate the three new townhomes actually takes away the rear yards from the existing units outside of the project site, which is a considerable deficiency of the plan. A plan that breaks up the massing of the apartment building into two smaller buildings or concentrates the development along the edges of Gerry and Sherman Roads could retain open space amenities and prominent natural features of the existing site.

Reconfiguring the site plan and the lot boundaries to conserve these natural resources and open space would certainly involve demolition of existing townhomes. Although the developer may not want to demolish existing residential structures as a matter of economic feasibility, the cost of demolishing the existing structures located between the proposed new building and Sherman and Gerry Roads compared with the cost of removing such an expansive amount of puddingstone (a prominent site feature, it covers the majority of the 5.5 acre lot) might possibly be a financial savings.

A plan that retains the qualities of the development pattern and provides functional open space and landscaped buffering, especially in the area closest to the Sanctuary, without taking away amenities from nearby residents would better integrate a new project into this context.

- **Building Typology and Scale:** The proposal introduces a building typology—a high-rise apartment building—that is foreign to the existing context of two-story townhomes. Even though more site sections are needed, in general the six-story structure with partially below-grade garage levels and roof mechanicals is in extreme contrast to modest townhomes in close proximity. The Planning Board is concerned that the scale of this 457 foot long, 77 foot tall building would have an adverse impact on the viewsheds and light and air resources available to the Brookline residents living in the nearby townhomes. Breaking up the building into two smaller buildings should be seriously considered.

The Board would expect to view in a digital 3D model various perspectives of the site from the Town-owned Hoar Sanctuary, which is at a lower elevation than the apartment building, to better analyze the visual impact from this passive recreation area open to the public. From the materials provided, the Board would recommend a deeper setback and reduced height and massing at the area of the apartment building closest to the Hoar Sanctuary.

- **Building Massing:** In addition to its massive footprint and height, the apartment building itself has little articulation to lessen its monolithic effect. Reducing the height and length of the apartment building so that its bulk is closer to Independence Drive would relieve some of the wall-like effect and conserve valuable open space closer to the Sanctuary. In addition, further articulating the footprint of the structure or creating two smaller buildings could create open space amenities for the tenants and allow for more landscaping. For perspective, the proposed FAR of 1.31 of the 40B lot is over 2.5 times the maximum required for a district already zoned as multifamily. (The proposed FAR of 0.46 presented to the ZBA on May 9 is inappropriately based on the area of the Hancock Village complex not the area of the 40B lot.) To accommodate 226 units, under the generous provisions in the bylaw for multifamily zoning, the site would need to be over 10 acres.

The Planning Board recommends additional site sections and shadow studies to further assess the site design and impact, especially on the Town-owned Hoar Sanctuary and surrounding townhomes, and a more legible grading plan.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Linda Hamlin', with a large, stylized initial 'L'.

Linda Hamlin, Chairman