

Hancock Village Planning Committee Report

The Hancock Village Planning Committee (“Committee”) was formed by the Town of Brookline in order to review proposals by Chestnut Hill Realty (“CHR”) to expand the housing units at Hancock Village by approximately 460 units and to facilitate a forum for community input and reaction to that proposal.

Part of the Committee’s charge was to explore the possibility of recommending changes to the zoning that would accommodate the placement of more density closer to the Boston side of the development, which could have necessitated a change in allowed height and in the parking requirement. The other part of the charge was to make a judgment about the acceptability of the proposed expansion and under what conditions such expansion might be deemed acceptable by the Town and the abutting neighborhood.

The Committee first met on March 4, 2009 and has held 7 meetings and a well-attended site walk. All of these meetings were publicly noticed and opened to the public and each was very well attended by the public.

The Committee came to identify a number of concerns expressed nearly unanimously by the public comments, including the following:

1. School population impact on already overcrowded schools and other negative fiscal impacts to the Town;
2. Preservation of open space, particularly immediately to the west of Beverly and Russett Roads;
3. Exacerbation of drainage problems west of Beverly and ongoing water quality issues from outflow into the Hoar Sanctuary;
4. Increased traffic along Grove-Independence-West Roxbury Parkway and Newton Streets.

These items will each be discussed in turn:

1. *School and fiscal impact:*

(a) The current conditions:

By some calculations, the current Hancock Village development produces a net revenue loss of \$2,000,000 per year to the Town. This is because the real estate taxes paid by CHR for Hancock Village to Brookline is more than offset by the cost of municipal services provided, especially when it comes to educating the school children that reside in the development. The average cost to educate a child in Brookline is approximately \$16,000 annually. Of the over 670 children that attend the Baker School, the Committee understands that about 40% come from Hancock Village. Hancock Village is adver-

tised, at least by word of mouth, around the globe as the perfect setting for families coming to Boston for medical area jobs, fellowships or education. Moreover, the Committee learned that the size of the incoming kindergartens over the past few years has grown substantially town-wide and the trend shows no signs of abating. This has put a great deal of pressure on both the existing school buildings and budget. The Runkle and Heath Schools are currently being expanded to accommodate the existing student population. Given the difficulty of accommodating the currently growing school population with the existing housing stock, there is real concern that adding an appreciable number of additional school-aged children from an expanded Hancock Village will have a devastating fiscal impact on the entire Town.

Besides the fiscal impact of an expanded school age population from Hancock Village, there is concern about the effect on the Baker School and the South Brookline school age family community. Under current conditions, the Baker School is not large enough to accommodate all of the households in South Brookline which historically have sent children to the Baker School. In 2001, due in large part to the influx of families with children into Hancock Village, the School Committee found it necessary to turn about 2/3 of the prior core district for Baker school into buffer zones. Given the geography and traffic patterns South of Route 9, these neighborhoods are not adjacent to any single other school. As a consequence, the buffer parts of the neighborhood are assigned to one of four schools depending on space availability. An expanded Hancock Village school population will push more children from the buffer zones to schools outside of the neighborhood and it may require the expansion of current buffer zones to facilitate the displacement of more school children to schools outside of South Brookline. There has been talk of adding a ninth k-8 school in South Brookline, but those suggestions remain only ideas given the enormous cost of building a new school and then maintaining the facility and the staffing every year.

(b) senior housing:

CHR has proposed limiting the proposed high-rise portion of its expansion to senior housing. The Committee has learned that this could take the form of either a 55 and over community in which at least 80% of the units must have one family member who is 55 or a 62 and over community in which everyone in the development must be 62 or over. The inclusion of an age-restricted housing component was explored by the developer as a way of reducing the number of school-aged children generated by the development. The idea was that doing so might mitigate against what both fiscal impact analyses projected – a net revenue loss to the Town – mostly attributable to the costs of educating additional school children. The effectiveness of these proposals in reducing or eliminating additional school children is questionable.

First, CHR is not proposing that all of its additional units would be senior housing restricted, leaving approximately half of the proposed new 460 units without any restrictions.

Second, CHR has expressed a preference for 55 and older house, not 62 and older. This would not adequately address the problem as 20% of the units in the high-rise would still be open to families. Also, for those units that do require a person who is 55 and older, the Committee has observed that there are three-generation families in Hancock Village already, as well as a current parent body at Baker School that includes many families with at least one parent over 55.

Third, with respect to both 62 and over and 55 and over developments, there are a number of questions concerning the enforceability of such limitations and their durability. Town Counsel has explained some of the pros and cons concerning imposing these restrictions by zoning change, special permit conditions and by deed restrictions. The Committee is not satisfied that any of these methods will provide the mechanism needed to adequately control the expansion of the school age population from Hancock Village.

On a related note, even if the 62 and over or 55 and over schemes could be effective in restricting school aged children in the impacted units, the Committee is still concerned about the resulting echo effect. New senior friendly apartments will be attractive for residents currently living in Hancock Village, which will then create vacancies in non-restricted units, which will then likely be filled with families with school-aged children. Moreover, CHR has expressed its intent to advertise within South Brookline and the rest of Town that the new apartments are a great place to age in place. There again, such moves will create vacancies in other housing units in Town, which will again likely be filled by the most common new buyer demographic – families with school aged children.

(c) flats and single bedrooms

CHR has argued that the flat design, rather than a 2-story townhouse design, particularly with single bedrooms, will not be attractive to families. The Committee does not find this persuasive. Hancock Village pulls families from Buenos Aires, Tel Aviv, Haifa, Seoul and other big cities with Universities in which high rise apartment living is typical for families. With respect to the single-bedrooms, this is a small percentage of the proposed expansion. Moreover, the proposed single bedroom units are huge and may even include “loft” space that would easily accommodate a child’s bed room.

(d) commercial use

Some members of the community suggested granting a zoning change that would accommodate commercial uses, including a hotel, a nursing home, or a retail strip along Independence. No one idea received complete support by all members of the Committee. Regardless, none of these ideas were seriously pursued as CHR expressed no interest in adding commercial uses to this site.

2. Preservation of open space

In every iteration of CHR's plans, it places housing in the currently large open green space west of Russett Rd and Beverly Rd. This is one of the most frustrating issues for area residents. No matter how many times or how loudly the neighborhood has asked CHR not to develop this open green space, the plans never wavered from the existing plan to cover these areas in asphalt and housing. It is unclear to the Committee whether there is a restriction that remains in force that would preclude CHR from building on these open spaces, which are zoned S7, in contrast to the rest of Hancock Village, in order to provide a buffer zone. On the other hand, the Committee understands that these parcels will not qualify for cluster housing in the format proposed by Chestnut Hill Realty and that there is not enough room to include a necessary access road to accommodate S7 sized lots. Nonetheless, even if these restrictions did not render this open space unbuildable, it is the Committee's opinion that CHR should not be seeking to build parking or housing in this space. CHR has received a great deal of benefit from Brookline and the immediate neighborhood and CHR has, in the Committee's estimation, an obligation to be respectful of the community's strong desire to maintain this open green space, which abuts and affects the Hoar sanctuary north of Independence Drive.

3. Drainage problems - water quality in the Hoar Sanctuary

There is currently a drainage issues for the houses along the west side of Beverly due to poor drainage and run off from Hancock Village. Moreover, there are ongoing water-quality problems with the run-off from Hancock Village into the stream that runs through the Hoar sanctuary. The Committee is concerned that increased development, particularly the addition of impermeable surfaces in the green open space, will exacerbate and contribute to additional drainage and water quality issues.

4. Increased traffic:

While the Committee understands that there are many parking spaces that remain empty in Hancock Village, the Committee remains concerned that a large number of additional units will certainly bring with it a large number of additional cars. Moreover the continuing dearth of public transportation increases the chances that those additional vehicles will be used on a regular basis. Under current conditions, Independence and Grove are already a commuter highway for cars traveling to the medical area from the southern suburbs. The addition of more cars emanating from within the neighborhood can only make matters worse. The Committee is particularly sensitive to this issue given the recent devastating accident involving a car traveling on Grove/Independence striking a 6th grade boy from Baker School causing severe injuries.

Conclusion

The Committee expressed a number of concerns to CHR that needed to be overcome if it was to support plans for a significantly expanded Hancock Village. While the Commit-

tee was willing to entertain zoning changes in order to accommodate a smarter design that met the Town's and neighborhood's concerns, CHR has not presented any plans that satisfy those concerns. In particular, CHR has never reduced the number of units that it wishes to build. Consequently, the Committee cannot support the proposals that CHR has put forward. Moreover, the Committee has not been able to come up with any alternative that would accommodate CHR's desire to expand to anything near the numbers it has proposed while still addressing the concerns set out above. If CHR wishes to radically change its proposal in a way that will address these concerns, then the Committee would be happy to consider it.

In addition, the Committee wishes to note its conclusion that, despite initial statements by the developer, there is very little development that he can do "by right" on this site. Any development of more than three units will require design review under Section 5.09 of the zoning bylaw, and any development of six units or more will require a special permit for inclusionary housing. In addition, any development of any significant size may require a special permit for relief from the height or other requirements of the zoning bylaw.

Any additional development on this site might well fail to qualify for a special permit. In the judgment of the committee, contrary to the requirements of Section 9.05 of the Zoning By-law, the proposed use would adversely affect the neighborhood. If a variance is required, the more stringent basis for a variance also does not appear to have been shown.

The Committee urges that, as part of any special permit process, consideration of the concerns noted during this process should be factored in to the deliberations.