



**TOWN OF ACTON  
DESIGN REVIEW BOARD**  
Review Memorandum: Apartments at Powder Mill  
Virtual Meeting  
May 28, 2020

DRB Members in attendance: Peter Darlow (Chair), Holly Ben-Joseph, and David Honn

Proponents in attendance: Joel Kahn, Equity Alliance LLC, Timothy Wentz, Gate 17 Architecture, and Randy Miron, Bohler Engineering on behalf of Apartments at Powder Mill LLC.

Virtual Guests: Terra Fredrichs, Tris W.

Documents Reviewed:

Comprehensive Permit Site Plan Set, Apartments at Powder Mill, dated 02/10/2020, prepared by Bohler Engineering.

Page titles:

Sheet L-1 Landscape Plan  
Sheet L-2 Landscape Notes and Details  
Sheet 3 Demolition Plan  
Sheet 4 Overall Master Plan

Powder Mill Apartments (overall aerial view rendering), prepared by Gate 17 Architecture.

Powder Mill Place architectural drawings, dated 07/05/2019, prepared by Gate 17 Architecture.

Page titles:

A3.01 Elevation Sheet  
A3.02 Elevation Sheet  
A3.03, and A3.04 Elevation Sheets

The proposed Apartments at Powder Mill project is set on property adjacent to the Assabet River at the border of Maynard and Acton on Powder Mill road. The site is comprised of two parcels, the larger parcel is in Acton and is approximately 2/3rds developed and 1/3<sup>rd</sup> undeveloped river edge woodland that is classified as pristine. It was originally developed as a series of industrial buildings that have recently fallen into disarray. The Maynard plot has two existing residential properties that will remain and a drive to the factory building that will be abandoned. No construction or improvements will take place on the Maynard

side of the site. The site falls under the jurisdiction of the Rivers Act, and therefore protection setbacks within the pristine portion of the land will be adhered to. The surrounding area is commercial and the senior center is in close proximity.

The proponents are proposing to construct an apartment complex with several multi-family apartment buildings, garaged parking, and some surface parking with amenities. This is being developed as a friendly 40B for the over 55 age group. Every resident will have enclosed parking with direct access to their apartments on each level of the garage. The siting of the buildings takes advantage of the river view.

The front building is a smaller residential building which is a 5-story apartment building over a one-story parking garage. This building will have 75 units and 42 (?)garaged parking spaces. There are 42 surface parking spaces at the front of the building. There will be direct access from the parking garage into the building as well as a front entry for visitors who park in the lot outside. The height of the building to top of parapet is 72'-4".

The second building is U-shaped with the long end a 6-story parking garage (375 spaces) facing the street that steps down to 5-story multi-family apartment building. There are a total of 155 apartment units. The height of the 6-story garage is 70', and it is 60' for the 5-story portion to the top of the parapet. The siting and shape of the buildings takes advantage to maximise views to the river.

The unit types are one bedroom one bath, two bedroom two bath, and three bedroom two bath apartments. All of the apartments will be market rate and they are considered market to luxury-sized.

The third building on the site is a single story club house which is facing the river. It sits at the end of the drive and there is a roundabout and HC parking out front.

The other amenities of the site are a pool, grilling stations and firepit set within the courtyard space of the U-shaped building, a community garden, a small dog park and a stone dust path around the outside of the U-shaped building that doubles as emergency vehicle access. On the river side, the path is outside of the 25' setback buffer for the river. The path will also connect with an existing cart path and will be open to the public. Eventually this may be part of a river trail.

In terms of siting of the roads and buildings, all of the construction is located on previously built land, maintaining the pristine portion of the site as is. As mentioned earlier, the Maynard portion will also remain as is. The buildable portion remaining is a rectangular shape that juts into the property at an angle from Powder Mill Road. Two driveways provide access, one leading to the large building complex and clubhouse at the rear of the site, and the other leading directly into the parking garage of the smaller building which abuts the street. There is open space between the single family residences and the 7-story garage which should help to ameliorate the impact of the large massing of the proposed buildings.

The impervious surfaces have been decreased by 53,000 square feet.

The building facades as proposed are a mix of materials and textures primarily brick stucco and glass. The windows are oversized and of various sizes. The materials change at varying heights within each building facade. Additionally, the facades are broken into smaller proportions by offset vertical elements that are topped with a variety of parapets and pediment detail. Each unit has balconies and sliding glass doors. The garages are open air, and the visible side of the 6-story garage facing the street has similar architectural elements as the apartment buildings. The parapets undulate up and down as well. All of this is to break up the massing of the building and to make the building complex visually interesting to the target market.

The landscape design is preliminary but shows main concepts; careful attention will be made to the reestablishment of the riverbank plantings.

The following are the DRBs comments on the development as presented:

Site comments:

1. The DRB supports the location of this unique to Acton project. It is located close to a shopping center and the senior center. The buildings have been logically sited to take advantage of the views and recreation opportunities of the Assabet River. Its primary massing is set well back from the public street.
2. The DRB is very appreciative of the improvement to the site's pervious surfacing, the access to the river with a path and the connection of the path to an existing path along the river's edge. In addition, we support the idea to maximize development in the disturbed area while keeping the wooded area pristine. We also understand that limiting work within these tight borders has forced the amenities to be fit into rather tight spaces, and we hope with a few adjustments that the amenities can be connected in some way with a relationship to the river and to each other rather than being dotted around the site.
3. There is concern that the pool's location in the courtyard will be in shade most of the time since it is surrounded by 5-story buildings on 3 sides. The DRB recommended to do a sun-shade study of the area to determine the amount of sun the area will get, even if the pool is not the only amenity. (and will be open only 3 months of the year). The pool is completely isolated and cut off from the river. The DRB pointed out that when the residents are in these enclosed public spaces there is no connection with the river.
4. The DRB wonders if it is possible to provide a stronger link between the outdoor amenities of the pool area and the club house. As is sited now, the club house is not connected with any of the other outdoor amenities. The DRB understands the desire of the developers to have the clubhouse act as a welcoming building at the end of the drive with easy access to HC parking but would prefer to see better linkage.
5. One option the DRB pondered is whether the pool should be located where the clubhouse currently stands and the clubhouse be located within the main apartment building in place of a few units. This would serve to open up the view to the river when you drive in.
6. The DRB is concerned that the clubhouse, in combination with the apartment buildings, will block the view to the river upon arrival to the property. In addition, as it is sited now, the view upriver will be blocked by the main building. The DRB suggested looking for an opportunity at ground level to open up a portion of the building to provide visual connection from the court to the river.
7. Since the ground level parking garage, which is closest to the street, will have a strong visual impact, the DRB recommends that the architecture should either read as apartment units or that it be screened with either a green screen or heavy landscape plantings.
8. The DRB recommends to move the perimeter path outward, as close to the river as possible, (along the setback line) to provide space for landscaping between the bottom floor units and the public path. It would also be nice to add seating along the water and other amenities to connect to the river.
9. An audience member requested that town residents be allowed access to the path along the river (the proponents said access is provided) and that seating be provided.
10. An audience member asked about having an indoor pool, and the proponents said that indoor pools are complicated to construct.
11. It was asked if there will be bike parking and the answer was affirmative. In addition, the cross-town connect will be providing rides to residents.

Building Architecture Comments:

1. The DRB appreciates the siting of the buildings to maximize the views, the limiting of surfacing parking, the large windows and and interesting massing with key bays and balconies. However, the building feels foreign to this area, not of New England.
2. These will be the biggest buildings with the greatest mass in Acton. Most building in Acton adhere to the zoning maximum height of 36' or less. These buildings are almost twice the height. Given their scale, it is especially important that the architecture takes visual cues from other classic large-sized buildings of the region such as mill buildings. This is especially poignant as the buildings are sited along a river. The DRB pointed to a photo of the Maynard mill complex as one example of a successful river bank image. The DRB recommends the project team take a look at this and other mill buildings for inspiration . The beauty of the mill buildings is that due to their impressive scale they appear very clean and simple. Yet due to their immense scale they can in fact be fit out with plenty of detail that in context of utilizing a single facing material, generally only brick, the depth of detail feels subtle within the context.
3. Again due to the very large scale of the buildings, the DRB recommends that the building facades be simplified. There is plenty of interest generated by the unique massing established to follow the rivers edge, the many projected bays introduced, and the many vertically stacked residential decks. The current elevations proposed offer too many changes of material at a variety of heights, offer an incongruous combination of large punched window openings and stacked curtainwall windows, and way too many cornice top details.
4. The facades can be simplified, yet still offer plenty of detail, and therefore be significantly improved by:
  - Simplifying the material transition lines of the building. Keep the change from brick to stucco at one uniform height across the building. It is suggested as an option that perhaps the stucco finish is only used at the top floor level to establish an entablature line.
  - Or possibly eliminate the use of stucco and face the building completely in brick.
  - Utilize one interesting cornice line detail repetitively at the tops of the buildings, rather than the three to four varieties presented.
  - Utilize only punched window openings. Eliminate the use of the currainwall. The proposed punched windows are oversized at 6ft high and the DRB thinks this is a very nice scale.
5. The DRB is concerned that the floors of the parking garage are sloped and that this will be an unattractive view from Powder Mill Road. If possible, the DRB recommends disguising the ramps with cut out windows or a green screen.
6. .
7. The DRB recommends the the proponents provide perspectives of the building from Powder Mill Road from both directions.

DRB members unanimously believe this project will be an asset to the Town and it's residents and support it moving forward. The project effectively will redevelop prime water front property from a languishing asphalted post-industrial site to a much needed rental housing to the under-served 55 and over community. The DRB thanks the proponents for taking time to present the project to us, and would welcome another visit when the building facades have been reconsidered and further refined, when the clubhouse and landscape designs are more fully developed with reviewed elevations and renderings of the complex from Powder Mill Road have been completed.

Respectfully submitted,

The DRB