



TOWN OF ACTON
DESIGN REVIEW BOARD

Review Memorandum: Acton Main Street Senior Housing
Virtual Meeting
March 25, 2021

DRB Members in attendance: Peter Darlow (Chair), Holly Ben-Joseph, David Honn, Richard Keleher, Tom Doolittle; Jon Cappetta (Planning Board Liaison); Matt Murphy (Planning Department)

Proponents in attendance: Kelley Cronin, Acton Housing Authority; John Winslow, Phil Reville, Winslow Architects; Kate Kennen, Offshoots; Maura Camosse-Tsongas, Stone Soup Collaborative.

Documents Reviewed:

- Acton Main Street Senior Housing Design Review Board Meeting Presentation, prepared by Winslow Architects, dated March 25, 2021, including:
 - Development Program
 - Site/Neighborhood Photos
 - Environmental Considerations
 - “Village” Building Site Plan – Summer Shadow Study
 - “Village” Building Site Plan – Winter Shadow Study
 - Site Layout and Grading Plan
 - Basement & 1st Floor Plans
 - 2nd & 3rd Floor Plans
 - 4th Floor & Roof Plans
 - Elevations
 - Perspectives
 - Landscape Concepts
 - Landscape Concept Diagram
 - Landscape Materials - Sun Meadow
 - Landscape Materials - Wet Meadow
 - Landscape Materials - Streetscape
 - Landscape Materials - Entry Gardens (Native)
 - Landscape Materials - Existing Buffer Planting
 - Landscape Materials - Resident Amenity Area
 - Landscape Materials - Transitional Woodland
 - Landscape Materials - Screening Planting
 - Landscape Materials - Restoration Area

The proposed Acton Senior Housing is located on Main Street (Route 27) between Route 2 and Hayward Road at the site of the current Kennedy Gardens. The site is composed of two parcels totaling approximately 2.2 acres; in addition, the development will use an adjacent undeveloped parcel immediately adjacent to Route 2 for its septic field.

The project proponents, the Acton Housing Authority, are proposing to construct an apartment complex of 40 units intended primarily for elderly residents with some units set aside for disabled residents. The housing is designed as modular units contained within four connected structures. The project also includes surface parking for 46 vehicles, including 4 accessible spaces located on a drop-off loop adjacent to the main entrance.

The project has recently filed for its eligibility letter and expects to go before the town for 40B approval in early summer.

The structures are designed to be a New England style vernacular building with a contemporary ethic. In addition to the 40 units of senior housing, the building contains approximately 3,500 square feet of community/office space and provides a community open space. The building is intended to be certified to passive house energy standards. The design was developed taking into account the immediate neighborhood and site lines from adjacent streets. An analysis of environmental aspects of the site was performed, with particular attention paid to solar exposure to allow use of solar panels on the roofs of the structures. Shadow studies of the structures were also prepared.

The design creates four separate buildings connected by a common corridor to provide a massing that is more appropriate for its site than a single large structure. The north/south orientation of the common corridor provides sun to every unit at some time in the day, as well as providing optimum solar orientation on the roofs (the ridge lines of the structures run east/west). The north/south orientation also presents the narrow face of the building to the street, which is more in keeping with the residential scale of the neighborhood.

The main entrance is in building 2, adjacent to the circular drop-off driveway and the accessible parking. The site rises significantly from Main Street to its rear corner; the design addresses this condition by stepping the buildings, with buildings 3 and 4 one floor level higher than buildings 1 and 2. The community space is in building 2 with a large terrace off the back. The primary vertical circulation is in the link between buildings 2 and 3, with stairs and two elevators; stairways are also located at the ends of the structure. Building 1 includes a basement with mechanical spaces for the entire complex; it is the only building with a basement. Building 1 has 4 units located on ground level.

The use of modular construction means there are only three unit types throughout the whole complex. All units can be converted to accessible, although only four will be constructed as accessible initially. Each building floor consists of four units, with the pattern repeated on each level. The units are primarily one bedroom, although there are two two-bedroom units as well. Buildings 1 and 4 use the gables for the top floor and reduce the counts to only two units on those floors; this is intended to maintain the New England vernacular building style. To achieve the intended contemporary farmhouse aesthetic, the overall design of the structure reflects many of the characteristics of the New England vernacular, such as the gable lines, bracketing, and material palette, but the design has been simplified to give it a more contemporary feel.

The landscape design is in early development; the concept is to use vernacular landscapes to anchor the vernacular building using predominantly native species. The landscape breaks down into a series of typologies:

- A streetscape zone along Main Street with street trees and a sidewalk or shared use path with tree species that would provide phyto-remediation to help improve air quality from the adjacent street
- A sun meadow between the streetscape zone and the building tying into the adjacent parcel, using wildflowers that would provide year-round interest
- Wet meadows to collect and infiltrate stormwater on site with wetland-adapted plantings
- A planting buffer along the west edge of the site utilizing the existing plantings of evergreen and deciduous trees, bolstered with additional tree and understory plantings to complement the existing
- A resident amenity area behind buildings 1, 2 and 3 including the outdoor space for the community space, using stone or concrete walls and paving that remind users of the native materials
- A transitional woodland area around building 4 to tie into the existing plantings along the adjacent properties, also including another wet meadow area
- Screening plantings along the north and east edges of the site to protect the neighbors, including a restoration area where Kennedy Gardens had encroached onto a neighboring property
- An entry garden along the east fronts of all four buildings, planted with ornamental trees and understory shrubs and plantings

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

1. The DRB is pleased to have an opportunity to provide input while the project is still in development.
2. The DRB liked the approach of breaking the structure into a series of smaller buildings, giving the overall development an appropriate scale and providing the opportunity to fit the buildings to the site and reduce the potential impacts of the project.
3. The DRB was concerned about the height of the structures, particularly buildings 2 and 3 which have a full attic that will be unused (as opposed to buildings 1 and 4 which locate 2 units within the gables). The additional attic space creates a significantly taller structure (above the 40' maximum height allowed under zoning) with blank space on the facades. Consideration for how to minimize this less desirable aesthetic impact was recommended. The architect indicated that including units in these attic spaces was considered, but there are problems with creating adequate egress from these floors. Similarly, lowering the roof lines would impact overall unit count and create problems for the modular construction approach. The attics could be used as storage for residents. Building 2 could potentially be used for units by extending the elevators and stairs from the link between buildings 2 and 3.
4. The DRB asked for confirmation that the solar collectors would not be shaded by the tall ridge lines of the adjacent buildings (this was confirmed by the architect). The DRB also suggested that the architects study the layout and attachment of the solar collectors to make them complimentary to the overall aesthetic that is being targeted.
5. The DRB recommended that the configuration of the stairways at the ends of the buildings be studied to provide daylight into the ends of the corridors for better orientation. The links between the buildings should also include significant amounts of glass.
6. The DRB suggested that the layout of the main entrance and community space in building 2 be studied to create a view from the lobby out to the terrace for better connection and engagement between the two areas. The exterior façade design should express this as a unique space within the building and should not look like just another set of units.
7. The view of the project from the Main Street corridor will be a particularly important aspect of the overall building aesthetics as it will be the introduction to the entire project; the elevation of that end of the building might want to be enhanced to reflect that importance. A perspective

showing the building elevation from Main Street would be useful to envision the building from this view.

8. The DRB is concerned that the main entrance lacks prominence. There is potential for using the entry plaza for gathering by including seating and other amenities. Consideration should be given to extending the portico out to the vehicle drop-off point.
9. The DRB is concerned that too much of the foundation walls of buildings 3 and 4 will be visible as illustrated by the rendering of the back side of the structure. The project's architect indicated that a similar treatment to the retaining wall on the front side will be used to minimize the exposed foundation.

Landscape Comments:

1. The DRB is concerned about the level of maintenance required for the meadows, and that the size of the meadow is very small for an effective and sustainable installation. The design team agrees with this concern and will work closely with the client to understand their maintenance capabilities and design within those parameters. The use of lawn is assumed for the amenity area; it may also be used in the entry garden and other select areas around the building.
2. The DRB strongly supports the use of native landscape materials, both for plantings and for walls and paving.
3. The DRB asked about the overall stormwater management for the project. The design team responded that the intent is to capture all on-site stormwater and infiltrate it through either the wet meadow areas or through drainage structures within the roadways that direct water to underground infiltration structures. The details are still under development for this aspect of the project.
4. The DRB strongly recommends that the parcels along Main Street west of the project, including the potential future dog park, be considered as a whole and be designed to create a continuous landscape statement across the entire frontage. Adding strolling paths utilizing all parcels would be a significant benefit for the residents. The project's proponent is willing to expand their scope to include the other separate parcels and will investigate if this is possible.
5. The DRB asked if the Kelley's Corner project was influencing the design of the streetscape in front of this project. The design team has been in touch with the town regarding the Kelley's Corner project and will coordinate as both projects evolve.
6. The DRB asked if planning for bicycle accommodation should be included in the design, such as outdoor parking and bike storage rooms. The project proponent thinks this should be looked into.
7. The DRB suggested that consideration be given to the location of the emergency generator with respect to the noise impact on the neighbors.

The DRB thanked the proponents for the opportunity to review the plans at this early stage. The proponents thanked the DRB for the comments and will consider them as they move forward into the next phases of design. The DRB requested a copy of the presentation used tonight for the board's records.

Respectfully submitted,

The DRB