



DRB Memorandum

Project: First Village
Project Location: 7,9,19-29 Great Road, Acton, MA
Memorandum Date: 3 February 2016

Drawings Reviewed:

Pre-development Site Plan	Date: 12-23-14
Site Plan	Date: 11-19-15
Units A-F, sheets: A-1, A-2, A-3	Date: 09-17-15
Units H-J, sheets: A-4	Date: 09-17-15
Unit G, sheet A-5	Date: 09-17-15
Coral House, sheets: A-1, A-2, A-3, A-4	Date: 09-29-15
Retail Buildings, sheets: A-1, A-2, A-3, A-4, A-5, A-6	Date: 10-28-15

Proponent Representatives:

Architect: Mahoney Architects, Concord, MA
Civil Engineers: Stamski and McNary, Acton, MA

DRB Members:

Holly Ben-Joseph (HBJ), Kim Montella (KM), David Honn (DH), Peter Darlow (PD)
Absent: Michael Dube (MD),

Date of DRB Review: 01.06.16

The DRB met on the above date to review the drawings. The DRB had a review of the proposal for the same site on August 9, 2015 and issued a subsequent memorandum to the BoS. This memorandum raises many of the same issues raised at the previous DRB review. As far as the DRB could discern, none of the concerns raised in our first meeting have been addressed. The DRB understands that the project involves the transfer of development density from 358 Great Road to this site permissible under the Acton Zoning Code. The project involves both retail space along Great Road and housing on a plateau above and east of the retail buildings. The project involves demolition, relocation and additions to existing structures on the site. The single-family houses will be a condominium form of ownership. All access to the site will be provided from Great Road.

The DRB comments follow:

The housing component project is extremely dense and, if constructed as shown, will resemble the density of the recently completed Meadows project also on Great Road. The density of the Meadows project is an aberration in Acton. The houses appear to be spaced according to the Massachusetts Single and Two Family Building Code requiring a fire code minimum space of 6 feet between dwellings rather than being designed using appropriate site planning principals. The housing layout appears to be simply a mathematical exercise translating that code into the maximum units that can be accommodated on the site. The residential portion of the site plan is not compatible with the intention of Acton's villages nor consistent with the typical densities in Acton. At this density, the DRB believes that this new development will not create an attractive neighborhood nor will it complement the layout of the lower portion of the site nor will it be an asset to Acton.

The DRB recommends that a 10-foot sideyard setback (20 feet between houses) be used. This is a typical dimension used in many Acton zoning districts. If a reduced number of units cannot be proven to be financially viable using greater setbacks, then the DRB suggests an urban rowhouse scheme (which could be accomplished by co-joining the units into two or four family blocks) which will provide much needed landscaped areas. The recently completed housing on Arlington Street in West Acton may be an informative model.

The layout is determined entirely by the vehicular circulation without regard to any pedestrian movement. There are no sidewalks or walking paths indicated. As shown, there is no pedestrian connection between the housing and the retail portion of the project, nor from the housing to Great Road. The DRB recommends sidewalks and paths that will connect the houses together and connect the houses to the retail portion of the project and Great Road. There is no accommodation for play space or neighborly activities. The road will become the defacto playspace; therefore the DRB recommends reducing the density to allow for safe and neighborly activities.

It appears that the proponent has apparently created one site, we assume for zoning purposes, which, having an ADA public accommodation portion of the site devoted to retail has created a housing component with the same restrictive ADA requirement. If so, this is an unfortunate decision. The DRB suggests that the BoS clarify that this assumption is correct. Non-public (private) housing is normally not required to be ADA compliant.

The DRB recommends that the site be separated into public and private accommodation allowing the housing portion to have stairs, walks and other site features not bound by ADA.

The housing portion of the site is approximately 20 feet higher in elevation above the retail portion. The change in elevation is abrupt with all of the housing on the higher plane rather than stepping up the slope. This has created the need for extensive and expensive retaining walls at the back of the lower (west side) housing units. The DRB recommends that the elevation of the road between the houses be lowered, that base elevations of the houses on the east side be raised and that the base elevations of the houses on the west side be lowered. The net result will be a split-level site plan scheme with the building massing increasing in height beginning with the retail along Great Road, then the western houses, then the eastern houses moving incrementally up the hill. A site section drawing should be provided to explain the grade changes.

It was previously suggested that the turn-around circle be flush with the road and landscaped. Additional site drawings are needed.

The DRB applauds the reuse and relocation of the existing buildings as well as the preservation of one or more major trees helping to preserve the character of the site along Great Road.

The amount of parking is reasonable for the retail uses and the lots are not overly apparent from Great Road.

The required plaza needs much more design development. As currently designed, it is unclear who would use it. This plaza will be the “public face” of the project. The DRB suggests enlarged landscape drawings of this area are needed and should be provided for review.

The DRB suggests that bike racks should be provided in the retail areas and plaza.

Outdoor lighting was not discussed but should be reviewed at a later date.

The DRB would like to review a planting once it is developed.

The DRB suggests that all rooftop mechanical equipment on the retail buildings should be fully screened from view from the houses.

In regard to the buildings themselves, the individual design elements of the housing units, such as doors, windows, roof lines and pitches, etc. are appropriate given their adjacency to the historic structures. However, due to the increased scale of the new homes, there will be a significant, visually disparate conflict of scale with the 19th century scaled retail buildings.

The DRB suggests that additional design effort is needed to bridge the gap between the existing (small) residential scale and the new(large) residential scale.

It would also be welcome to see more than one design type for the housing if they are to remain single -family housing. The new retail buildings should be provided with glazed openings consistent with the scale of the existing buildings. New, contemporary detailing is not necessarily unacceptable as long as the scale of the door and window openings and details such as trim boards and door and window trim are related to the 19th century structures.

In summary, the mixed use, lower portion of the site is well designed and will be an asset to the Town. However, the housing component of the project is not well planned. It does not represent the goals of the 2020 Master Plan for buildings that reflect the character of Acton and that create a walkable context. The DRB suggests that the BoS require the proponent to rethink the density and layout of the housing component of the project taking into account the above comments.

Respectfully Submitted,

Design Review Board