



Planning Board

Memo

To: Scituate Zoning Board of Appeals
From: Richard Mark Fenton, Chairman, Scituate Planning Board *RMF*
Date: January 3, 2007
Re: Herring Brook Meadow Comprehensive Permit Application

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Herring Brook Meadow Comprehensive Permit application. Our comments are organized into three areas: critical related documents; general concerns; and specific recommendations.

I. Related documents

Site Approval Letter from MassHousing, dated May 26, 2006. (Provided with application book.) Although we disagree with the finding that the proposed housing design and land use plan are generally appropriate for the site and location, as per the Site Approval Letter, we agree with many of the concerns enumerated by the Site Approval Letter. MassHousing specifically urges the applicant to address these concerns; the Planning Board agrees. Briefly, MassHousing asserts that the proposal should more fully address the following issues:

1. Maintenance of the green buffer along Route 3A.
2. Sufficiency of parking that is being provided.
3. Nitrogen treatment for septic system.
4. Looping of water main.
5. Completion of a Traffic Impact Study to mitigate traffic problems. The study that has been provided entirely ignores increased traffic with rail service restoration, potential bicycle and pedestrian trip generation, issues, and opportunities, and largely neglects internal circulation (vehicular and pedestrian) on the site.
6. Adherence to Smart Growth principles. A list of specific issues, all extremely relevant concerns for this site, is provided including:
 - a. Energy efficiency of units.
 - b. Maximal preservation of useable open space.
 - c. Enhancement of pedestrian amenities such as trails and walkways.
 - d. Additional points of access to integrate the development into existing neighborhood and infrastructure.

- e. Reduction of the number of units to minimize impact on the municipality and to increase livability for residents.

The Planning Board believes strongly that modifications to address these concerns will improve the plan both for the future residents, for the developer (through enhancing the value of the product), and for the community as a whole.

Design Review Committee (DRC) comments, dated Nov. 15, 2006. We strongly support the DRC's recommendations. Because of the professional architecture and design backgrounds of the DRC members and their experience with challenging applications and sites we believe that the applicant would benefit greatly from additional collaborative work sessions with the DRC.

II. General Issues.

1. The project is too large, too dense, and too tall.

The current proposal overall strikes the planning board as too large, too dense, and too tall for the location. (See the Design Review Committee memo for more detail and insight.) This is an area primarily of low density single-family dwellings, with a small number of low-intensity non-residential uses (e.g. retail nursery, restaurant, Knights of Columbus pool and meeting hall, etc.) nearby. Scituate has used by-laws and collaborative work with developers to maintain a very rural feel along the Route 3A corridor through the town, assiduously maintaining a 50 foot non-disturbed buffer along the roadway.

We recognize that the premise of a Chapter 40B development, with a requirement of 25% affordable units, demands a certain density to maintain economic viability. But we suggest a total of closer to 40 units would provide greater flexibility in the actual layout and design, minimize the impact on Route 3A and abutting properties, allow creation of a more appealing, functional, and livable final product. All of this, in turn, increases the appeal and value of the market-rate units--thus balancing lower density with higher quality and marketability. Such a density would still be a tremendous departure from the current character of the area.

2. Overall disturbance of natural conditions, questionable site suitability and poor site design.

The current plan shows a tremendous amount of fill in the building area and relocation of a large area subject to coastal flooding. This raises great concern about disturbing the current natural flow of flooding, as well as changes to run-off patterns (especially with vast increases in impermeable surface) and natural recharge. In particular, it appears that abutting properties may be very adversely affected by increased or redirected changes in flooding and run-off. Reducing the number of units would allow much more flexibility in site layout, reduce the amount of disturbed area, and somewhat ease parking requirements. A landscape plan that utilizes Low Impact Development practices (LID), such as rain gardens, could improve site performance as well as easing visual impact on Route 3A.

A modest decrease in density also dramatically influences flexibility in layout and design. For example, the small number of very large buildings might be broken into more, smaller structures--more in character with the area--and allow an alignment of the buildings' long axes perpendicular to Route 3A, which offers less visual impact. Parking requirements would be reduced, allowing for reconfiguring parking lots into more appealing and efficient landscaped parking boulevards.

3. Transportation safety and efficiency.

The traffic impact study provided is very narrow, using current roadway volume measures and focusing only on the entryway at Route 3A. It also makes no estimate of possible bicycle and pedestrian trip generation. This narrow study not surprisingly asserts a minimum impact at this location. However, it does indicate that the available intersection sight distance is insufficient for traffic exiting the site if vehicles traveling northbound on Route 3A are traveling 55 mph, which is above posted speed but not an uncommon condition. (Sight distance is 500 feet; AASHTO recommends 530 feet.)

The study uses conservative growth estimates (1% per year in Scituate) and does not account for projected peak hour traffic increases associated with opening of the Greenbush rail station. This condition must be considered, with the station opening in 2007.

Equally important, this should be a full multi-modal transportation study, taking into account the opportunity to encourage bicycle and pedestrian travel to the Greenbush Rail Station and business area. Consideration should also be given to vehicle, bike, and pedestrian circulation within the site. The proposed sidewalks are discontinuous, and the current parking layout is very inefficient, with a problematic main internal intersection and little or no emergency access available to the back side of buildings.

III. Specific recommendations.

1. Lower site density.

This current design is very institutional and unappealing, but the development has the potential to actually fit into its surroundings much more effectively. We specifically recommend that the design reduce the total number of units by 25% to 33%. A total of roughly 40 units would allow a more flexible, creative, and appealing layout and we sincerely believe still be economically viable because of the enhanced marketability. In a tightening housing market quality becomes a very important attribute.

2. Improve site design and layout.

A number of tools could help ease the current institutional feeling of the design, which is out of character with the neighborhood. Specifically:

- Provide no waivers for height and wetlands requirements. See the Design Review memo regarding height remedies.

- Create more, smaller buildings, turning as many as possible on end to present a smaller face to the roadway. Also preserve the Route 3A and side setbacks as provided in the by-law.
- Develop a landscape plan that utilizes low impact development practices such as rain gardens and natural vegetated swales. Allow for inclusion of such features in the setback areas. Also allow for permeable surface pathways in these areas.
- Specifically reference the Design Review memo for design recommendations that can enhance the building and site appeal and function.

3. Encourage multi-modal transportation.

Walking and bicycling can not simply be options; the design of this development must reduce the automobile impacts on the site, neighbors, Route 3A, and nearby destinations (i.e., Greenbush area) by actively supporting and encouraging non-motorized travel. To that end, require a comprehensive, multi-modal transportation study for the site, including bicycle and pedestrian trip generation estimates and opportunities, and accounting for increased volume associated with rail service restoration. Institute a series of measures to increase travel safety and efficiency:

- Create a full internal system of “parking boulevards” and pathways which are designed to optimize parking efficiency, calm traffic, and encourage bicycle and pedestrian travel. Use tools such as geometry (narrow lanes, median islands), reverse angle (back-in) parking, and extensive landscaping to slow speeds and increase efficiency. This should also enhance emergency access to both sides of structures on the site.
- Complete an internal bike- and walkway system from buildings to parking to natural areas.
- Specifically complete a fully functional bicycle and pedestrian way from the site network to and along the rail corridor, including a bicycle/pedestrian crossing of Herring Brook, toward the Greenbush station area.
- Complete a crosswalk on Route 3A at the entry intersection, to allow access to the Chief Justice Cushing Park west of Route 3A.
- Specify the location of indoor and/or outdoor bicycle parking on site.

4. Smart Growth Principles and Public Amenity

The Site Approval Letter from MassHousing clearly requests the implementation of smart growth principles, which if done properly also fulfill the public amenity requirement of the 40B guidelines. These are embodied in detail above, and summarized here:

- Reduce density to maximize design and thus appeal of the site for residents and neighbors.
- Optimize on-site bicycle and pedestrian travel and maximize the useable open space.
- Tie into the greater bicycle and pedestrian network, with a focus on non-motorized commuter access to mass transit (in this case, the Greenbush station).
- Specifically assure quality, permanent public access to the trail along the former rail corridor.
- Provide a Route 3A pedestrian crossing at site entrance to reach Chief Justice Cushing Park.

Conclusion

Overall this is an environmentally sensitive site, and creation of high density housing is a great departure from the current character of the area. However, recognizing the intent and power of the Chapter 40B law, Scituate's need for affordable housing stock, and the impact of rail service restoration, there is potential for an effective and even appealing transit oriented development at this location. The key will be a holistic approach to the final design that prioritizes minimizing environmental impact and adverse affects on the neighborhood and creating a safe, appealing site for the new residents that encourages efficient transportation decisions and thus reduces automobile impacts.

Therefore we strongly urge that the developer's architects, engineers, and landscape architects meet with the Design Review Committee (and representatives from the Planning Board and Zoning Board of Appeals) in a collaborative session to explore creative, even state-of-the approaches to optimizing this site and development. The result can be a project that's even more financially successful and appealing to buyers, neighbors, and the community at large.