

TOWN OF BOXBOROUGH
DESIGN REVIEW BOARD



Design Review Report
Enclave at Boxborough
700, 750, & 800 Massachusetts Avenue
Application: December 23, 2016

Approved by the Boxborough Design Review Board
February 2, 2018

Design Attributes and Guidelines

The Design Review Board derives its authority and responsibilities from Boxborough Zoning Bylaw Section 8100. The Planning Board, which is the Site Plan Approval authority, transmits application plans received to the Design Review Board for review and comment. The Design Review Board reviews the plans taking into account the design attributes listed in Section 8105 of the Zoning Bylaw and further defined within the Design Guidelines, and then makes its advisory recommendations to the Planning Board or other Special Permit Granting Authority as defined in the Zoning Bylaw.

The Design Review Board reviewed the proposed project plans for the properties at 700, 750, & 800 Massachusetts Avenue based on the attributes identified in Section 8105 of the of the Boxborough Zoning Bylaw as follows:

1. Rhythm of Solids and Voids

The architectural quality of building elevations is determined, in large part, by the “rhythm” or “patterns” of the architectural elements on the elevation. The architecture for this proposed development is not consistent with the “forms” from the Colonial period. The design is too busy and should be more balanced. There is a false set of building protrusions/extrusions used to hide or vary massing. A family would not add an L-shaped or parallel building extension/addition unless it was at least the size of a room. A projection of less than 8 feet is not a room. Multiple truncated roof lines of less than room depth allow trim and ornamentation, but are false and ONLY decorative in nature. There is no attractive symmetry and the intentional non-symmetrical primary elevations are false.

Only the wastewater treatment building comes close. The Design Review Board has little concept of how the clubhouse/pool building/area, which is partially facing the public roadway, will appear based upon the elevations not being provided. The only analysis which was able to be conducted for the clubhouse/pool building/area was based upon the 3D simulation which was submitted as part of the application materials.

2. Façade and Openings

The facades are cluttered elements with variations inconsistent with the Design Guidelines target architectural period. The mini mac-mansion style of each proposed building is inconsistent with historic Boxborough. The flow/theme of the design of the windows is awkward. If the windows were all the same size they would look more appealing and be more period consistent. For example, exposed foundation walls are not minimized on the Bucknell Wellesley front and side elevations. They are used for false decoration as they are not load bearing foundation elements and rather inappropriate façade variations.

The majority of the window proportions do not meet the maximum and minimum height/width ratios from the Design Guidelines (height 1.5 to 1.9 times the width) individually and are exacerbated by windows placed immediately next to other windows. They are cluttered and inconsistent in size and symmetry. Where larger glass surfaces may potentially be used as

unifying elements, they simply stick out as another false extrusion. Door placements do not follow a consistent symmetrical axis and are sometimes embedded into other design elements being a part of the architectural statement, the exception being possibly the Bryn Athyn Wellesley side elevation door.¹ The doors with lights on one side are half good, i.e. would be better without a non-symmetrical side light when not on both sides of door. The interesting Doric portico Bristol Manor side elevation entry is diminished by the single row of sidelights removing a potentially effective symmetry.

Based on the lack of definition of placement of building elevations, the dense spacing may create an inappropriate repetition of facades. There may be a densely packed part of the proposed project's internal roadway with all cookie cutter buildings assembled in a manner that is unpleasing. However, as there were no elevations submitted for any significant stretch of the proposed streetscape for the internal roadway (only stand-alone elevations of each building were submitted), it is difficult to determine how the facades of each building or each style relate to one another in a real world context.

The rear elevations for each of the building styles have also not been provided which makes it difficult to determine what view the abutters in the surrounding area would have of these dwellings. This rear view elevation should also be presented as a grouping of buildings to allow for an understanding of how these elevations for the entire proposed project will relate to the abutting properties. The grade changes from the front of the buildings to the rear are significant (up to 8 or 9 feet in some places) and often times create a transition from a two-story building in the front to a three-story building in the rear, which includes a walkout basement. A three-story building including a walkout basement will create a much different visual experience than a two-story building.

3. Massing and Spacing of Buildings

Since the proposed plan intentionally does not have the elements intended for a Town Center complex, e.g., a village core, business district, and combinations of sizes of buildings, it can only be recognized that this attribute is missed by not including multiple mixed uses. The overall massing objective to stimulate a concentrated use of space in the commercial center of town is obviously missed with only densely packed residential buildings.

The clubhouse is a large building which may incorporate some variation, but the Design Review Board has little concept other than how the massing remains a large building with decorative elements since no elevations were submitted. The mix is muddled, being neither public nor domestic in character. An opportunity to link the building floorplan is missed.

Per Section 8007 of the Zoning Bylaw which outlines the determinations the Planning Board must make in order to issue a decision on a Site Plan Approval application, the architectural style, scale, and massing of the buildings are not in harmony with the prevailing character and scale of the buildings in the surrounding area. In particular, this is true when the proposed project is compared to the adjacent senior housing developments at Sheriff's Meadow and Tisbury

¹ However, second story windows above are inappropriately doubled and too wide for the area.

Meadow which contain single-story buildings. These two developments amount to approximately one half of the housing stock in the Town Center Zoning District. Without any elevations which display a significant stretch of the proposed streetscape for the project, it is difficult to understand the spacing between each of the buildings and the feeling this will provide as one travels down the project's internal roadway.

Only on the small spur towards Priest Lane is there a close approximation of the purely "residential" area of the Town Center concept, but even here the cookie cutter fashion is not consistent with intended variation in massing and spacing of buildings. Buildings are nearly touching with only just over 20 feet of separation, which is potentially exacerbated by grade changes and stairs.

Additionally, since no elevations were submitted for any significant stretch of the proposed streetscape of the project (only stand-alone elevations of each building were submitted), it is difficult to determine how the facades of each building or each style relate to one another in a real world context. The Design Review Board has concerns that the size of these proposed buildings and their proposed spacing could create a view which is more consistent with that of a densely packed downtown of shops and storefronts or a solid wall of building massing.

4. Placement and Orientation of Buildings within a Lot

The buildings are entirely too close together for a rural residential setting, being all residential and no mixed use. Any harmonization with the environmental surroundings is ignored in the barrage of close housing. The lack of variation in setbacks creates a more mechanical cookie cutter placement with large structures crammed into a small area, similar to overwrought row houses without the charm.

Given the segregation of the single public building space, the idea of fences for highlighting mixed use is lost.

The lack of any rear elevations prevents the understanding of visual impacts to the surrounding area and abutters. The displayed elevations only benefit the inhabitants of the buildings and not the community.

The lack of elevation, including a walkout basement, lacking topographical detail, may create three stories of façade and a high roofline facing existing residents with no detail provided. The grade of the buildings in addition to relative spacing will have significant visual impacts further exacerbated by lift above grade. Based on the available elevations it can be assumed that it will not be Colonial period in definition, nor necessarily in harmony with the surrounding environment. Per Section 8007 of the Zoning Bylaw, the development shall be integrated into the existing terrain and shall be designed to protect abutting properties and community amenities. In contrast, the lack of detail regarding large front to back grade changes result in unknown and potentially intimidating and overpowering visual elements, i.e., are there barracades of retaining walls and how will they look.

5. Architectural Details, Materials, and Color

Molding and trim is used to decorate or finish building surfaces and doors. The elements in isolation are of quality, despite building material being principally non-wood. Corner elements at gable ends appear to project effectively, the problem lies in the contrived corners and associated roof protrusions.

Window mullions while included in the specifications, do not appear as true divided lights or not applied on both interior and the exterior of windows. The keystone top trim on the Bryn Athyn Wellesley is interesting, however placed on windows of incorrect ratios. The Bethel Wellesley garage windows are interesting if not for the faux fieldstone height and the fact that the garage is not a link building, rather part of the main mass.

Shutters provide a good decorative element but are only appropriate on a window which would have the shutters closed, e.g., if a hurricane was coming, so sizing should be height consistent and half the width of the vertical window frame, sufficient to cover the width of an opening when closed. The Bryn Athyn Wellesley shows shutters incorrect size, except potentially the highest gable end on the side elevations.

The height of the clapboard should be the 3", 4", and at most 4.5" of the material specifications with series according to the Design Guidelines. Where indicated it appears to be appropriate, but greater than 4.5" slat size should not be used. The shakes are interesting but not placed per period approach, i.e., clapboards front and shakes on full side and rear. The faux-Victorian dormer placement of shakes as decorative elements is inappropriate, e.g., the Bethel Wellesley front dormer. It may be interesting if applied like the Boxborough Town Hall, despite being later than the target time period, but this would require proper roof slopes and window symmetry.

Roof trim should have depth and consistency of lines. Where it is appropriate, e.g., on the main house lines, it is a good detail and has depth. Unfortunately, where it is pasted on in false elevation protrusions, it appears false and pasted on. The roofing material and siding color appears to be an excellent match for the Design Guidelines, but how the color schemes for the materials appear is unknown, i.e., it may be an endless repetition.

While color schemes appear complimentary, the colors are not related to the time period represented by a particular style, as the style is a modern combination of elements. Whatever variation is considered should be historically accurate to the Colonial period. The wide range of historically appropriate colors are not used to express the individuality of each structure since they are a cookie cutter style of building. The Design Review Board recommends there should be more variation in the primary colors proposed for the buildings in the project.

Just as there should not be artificial stone-like façade elements, there should not be significant exposed concrete, particularly given the grade changes proposed at the property. There should not be any more than 4 feet of exposure between the ground level and the siding on any building.

6. Roof Slopes and Shapes

Roof pitch is generally at least 8 over 12 (rise over run) on buildings, except in the case of a hip roof where a greater pitch reverses the traditional lower rise and are actually higher/jutting. The Bethel Wellesley roof on the side elevation is wholly inconsistent with roofing pitch guidelines. Roof pitch of gables, mostly false, are equal or less than the roof pitches of the buildings. There is no attempt to introduce link buildings so there is no linking, just variations on rectangular mass roofing with gables and dormers.

Roof shapes are not simple, they are intentionally complex. Simple gable, gambrel, saltbox, and hip roofs are not part of the proposed project.²

Dormers appear only mostly consistent on the wastewater treatment building. It is unknown if the clubhouse dormers appear consistent. Elsewhere they appear to be variation driven, e.g., above garage entrances as in Bucknell Wellesley, versus traditionally placed functional/symmetrical dormers. Bethel Wellesley appears close to traditional above the garage. The Bryn Athyn Wellesley and Bristol Manor pseudo-dormer appears the worst combination of the jutting elevations, dormer only by virtue of the extraneous garage overhang.

The tower-ish profile jut out on the Bristol Manor side elevation is poorly proportioned window wall combination of disproportioned windows inconsistent with the Design Guidelines. While it breaks up the mass in a disproportioned manner, it is again not a real addition size.

7. Signage and Lighting

The center island in the entrance/exit off of Route 111/Massachusetts Avenue supports a freestanding sign for the proposed project. It is not indicated what may be mandatory according to the Design Guidelines for sizing in the zoning district, but the overall surrounding supporting structure and bracing for the sign go well beyond any signage concept. The Police Station and Library properly indicate the scope of signage intended. It is unclear what the monument is, however, the flanking light piers seem to be completely out of character of the town. The precast material seems out of character and a shortcut even if the form and function were consistent with the Design Guidelines. The Design Review Board recommends granite is used and a more simple design be implemented.

The flagpole placement is not indicated at the more public clubhouse building or dwellings.

The lighting plan seems comprehensive. It is unclear how the street lighting fixtures are downward facing per the requirements of the Zoning Bylaw, however, the house fixtures appear aesthetically more compatible albeit on the decorative side.

² With the minor exception of the simple wastewater treatment building roof.

8. Landscaping

The species of new landscaping appear to be consistent with the Design Guidelines including the recommended dogwood, red maple, red oak, and white pine. It is unclear for all roads and walkways if the vegetation meets the 14-16 foot height. However, removal of all the trees in the work area prohibits compatibility with existing features from being preserved. Sheet 27, General Note 11 states “The entire work area shall be cleared ... trees and stumps...” Sheet 27, General Note 12 states “all topsoil and subsoil within the work area shall be removed.” Major ledge removal and blasting will create an environmental exposure. This is inconsistent with the Town Center vision as expressed in the Design Guidelines. Existing old growth trees should be preserved to the maximum extent possible.

There is a significant retaining wall behind proposed Building 39 which seems to be over 100 feet long. It appears this is actually a structure, as opposed to a landscape feature due to its proposed height and does not meet the required setback for the zoning district.

No information has been provided on how the grade changes from the front of each building to the rear will be handled. It is unclear if a slope, walls, steps, rip rap, etc. will be used to make this transition and if any type of plantings will be used to soften the appearance of this grade change.

It is also unclear if the landscaping strengthens or buffers the visual area. It is unclear if there is compatibility “... with the existing wildlife habitat and its regional context.” It should be noted here that the development will require significant site disturbance and topographic changes to implement the proposed project.

Conclusion

In looking at the development as a whole and the wide variation from the Town Center vision inspired Design Guidelines, the Design Review Board has significant fear there is the potential result for the creation of densely packed identical buildings within a private compound. The density should be decreased and the spacing of the buildings increased significantly.

The Design Review Board recommends the Planning Board implement a condition which requires the Applicant to submit some type of plan or development schedule which clearly identifies where each style of building will be located, the specific primary color for each building, and the total number of each building style and primary color which will be created in the proposed development and further the Design Review Board should review the detail and provide feedback prior to the issuance of a Building Permit. The Design Review Board also recommends there should be a reasonable amount of variation in terms of the number of each individual style of building and the primary color for each building which is proposed for construction in order to avoid a monotone, repetitious-looking development.

Boxborough’s general character is summed up in the phrase “scenic, historic, and rural character.” The grade changes, setbacks, rear elevations, and structures are overpowering and clearly not in harmony with the site and are intimidating to the abutters. Allowances were made in the Zoning Bylaw specifically to support a mixed-use Town Center at the location of the

application. The current proposal eliminates any potential for a mixed-use project at this site. Further, the subject properties add no access and create a private compound separate from the town with no mixed-use development. While it is subjective as to whether there are design elements that are aesthetically pleasing, or good in the context of other sections of the town or region, the review criteria here is documented by the Design Guidelines. It appears that not only is the proposed project very inconsistent with those changes, more importantly the project significantly violates and is inconsistent with the attributes of the Design Guidelines.