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Claire V. Ricker, AICP  
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TOWN OF ARLINGTON MASSACHUSETTS  
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RE: 1021-1025 Massachusetts Avenue  
Preliminary Architectural Peer Review Report

Dear Claire:

I'm writing to provide you with a preliminary review of the proposed 40B development at 1021-1025 Mass Avenue. I expect to discuss the project with the ZBA as soon as their virtual hearing on January 12, 2023 (my understanding is that this date is subject to change). As is typical at this stage of a project, the drawings are very schematic, which puts limitations on the depth of analysis that I'm able to perform. This means that my primary focus at this point is on site planning and overall massing issues, as going into great detail on a building design that may change may not make sense. However, as you will see, I do have a few suggestions for the plans that would modify its footprint (and thereby impact the site plan), or are related to other potential internal issues that should be addressed.

In the spirit of getting information to you and the development team as quickly as possible, this is a somewhat abbreviated report that will be supplemented as the design progresses.

Prior to this letter, on December 20, 2022, I sent you and Christian Klein a memo that requested additional documentation from the Applicant (see list below). As of the date of this letter, none of the items have been received.

This review follows the format of my fee proposal sent to you on November 6, 2022.

**1. Review of the Developer's Application, Plans, and Drawings. Review ,as appropriate, reports from other peer reviewers and Town officials, letters from neighboring residents, etc.**

Applicant's Documents reviewed (comments on documents contained in Section 5 below):

- Project Eligibility Letter for Residences at Mill Brook dated August 19, 2022.
- 1021 & 1025 Massachusetts Avenue drawing set prepared by Patriot Engineering dated September 19, 2022 (7 Sheets).
- 1021-1025 Massachusetts Avenue drawing set prepared by Harrison Mulhern Architects dated September 19, 2022 (13 Sheets).
- 1021-1025 Massachusetts Avenue drawing set prepared by Kyle Zick Landscape Architecture dated September 8, 2022 (7 Sheets).
- Proposed Lighting and Photometric Analysis (no legible date or reference to author).
- Letter to MAJ Investment, LLC from LEC Environmental Consultants, Inc. dated September 15, 2022.
- Transportation Impact Assessment prepared by Vanasse & Associates, Inc. dated June 2022.
- Various other documents included in the complete 40B submission package.

**Documents requested in 12.20.22 DSA Memo:**

- Provide a roof plan, including mechanical equipment, any required screening, solar arrays, etc.
- Modify building elevations so that include all rooftop equipment, penthouses, elevator overruns, etc.
- Coordinate renderings with building elevations (in particular, note differences in siding patterns depicted in elevations vs. renderings).
- Provide entry level plan that includes parking space and aisle dimensions, projected building column locations, designation of accessible spaces, designations of EV spaces, garage door width, etc.
- Provide shadow studies.
- Give peer reviewer(s) access to 3-D model to facilitate additional views of the project from the public realm and neighbors.
- Provide a trash management plan, preliminary construction management plan (CMP), preliminary building code review, tree preservation plan (including any details regarding impact of the development on trees on neighboring sites),
- Provide information regarding energy systems and efficiency (see CEFC comments)

**Town and Peer Review Reports:**

- Memo to Arlington Select Board from Arlington Department of Planning and Community Development dated May 24, 2022 (includes attachments drafted by Conservation Commission and Department of Public Works).
- Letter to MassHousing from Select Board dated June 14, 2022.
- Memo to the Arlington Zoning Board of Appeals from the Department of Planning and Community Development dated November 27, 2022 (includes attachments drafted by Arlington Affordable Housing Trust, Conservation Commission, Arlington Tree Committee, TAC, Town Engineer).
- Memo to the Board of Appeals from Maria Morelli dated March 18, 2022.

**Letters, emails, reports from citizenry of Arlington:**

- Letter to Select Board from Patricia Barron dated September 6, 2022.
- Letter to MassHousing from Patricia Barron dated October 10, 2022.
- Letter to ZBA from Andrew Freeman (undated).
- Memo to ZBA from Jo Anne Preston (undated).
- Memo to ZBA from Carl Wagner (undated).
- Letter to the Redevelopment Board from Jennifer Susse (undated).
- Email to ZBA from Sarah Tuttle dated 16 November 2022.
- Email to ZBA from Stephen Blagden dated 16 November 2022.
- Email to ZBA from Alex Bagnall dated 14 November 2022.
- Email to ZBA from Jane Brunet dated 16 November 2022.
- Email to ZBA from Wynelle Evans dated 18 November 2022.
- Email to ZBA from James Fleming dated 12 November 2022.
- Email to ZBA from Laura Wiener dated 12 November 2022.
- Letter to ZBA from Cheryl Marceau (undated).

**(REFERENCE MATERIALS)**

- Chapter 40B Handbook for Zoning Boards of Appeal published by MHP in cooperation with DHCD, MassHousing, and MassDevelopment dated March 2017.
- Handbook: Approach to Chapter 40B Design Reviews, prepared by The Cecil Group, Inc. for DHCD, MassDevelopment, MassHousing, and MHP, January, 2011

**2. Visit the site, with (or without) the developer's design team and a Representative of the Town.**

A site visit occurred on December 21, 2022. It was attended by this reviewer, ZBA members, and members of the development team. The project architect was not present.

**3. Conduct unaccompanied reconnaissance assessment of surrounding residential and nonresidential areas within 1/2 mile of the project site.**

(This reviewer has reviewed the neighborhood. If deemed necessary, a written assessment will be provided in a supplemental letter.)

**4. Consult with the Applicant's design team, as appropriate.**

Additional materials have been requested from the Applicant in an initial memo dated 12.20.22.

**5. Provide an oral presentation to the ZBA. Said presentation shall include comments and preliminary recommendations on the following:**

Points from this report will likely be discussed at a ZBA hearing on January 12, 2023.

***a. Orientation of building in relation to parking areas, open space, and on-site amenities.***

All parking for residents is located at the entry level of the building, accessed from a garage door that faces Massachusetts Avenue. Parking spaces on the east side of the street-facing elevation are screened from view by a proposed 1700SF retail space, the resident entry, a trash room, other support spaces, and vertical circulation. The left half (west side) of the elevation includes the garage door, as well as seven, residential scale windows that face parking spaces or the trash room.

Other amenities and service spaces on the entry level include an office, one toilet room, a package and mail room, two elevators, and a tenant gym space. The basement space that is accessed by the elevators or the southern stairwell contains 53 storage cages, resident bike storage, as well as mechanical spaces noted as electric, water, and EMR.

A door adjacent to the northern stairwell provides access from the parking garage to an outdoor passive recreation space on the north side of the building. The landscape drawing indicates a five-foot wide stone dust path that accesses two benches. Seven salvaged logs are called out on the plan. The area of the north-side open space closest to the building is dedicated to stormwater management. It is a relatively flat area, approximately 50 feet by 80 feet (4000 SF) created by an L-shaped retaining wall system that ranges in height from 4 to 10.5 feet. Beneath this flat area is the proposed stormwater infiltration system.

There is a bituminous walkway connection to this north outdoor space from the sidewalk along Massachusetts Avenue along the west side of the building. This walkway could potentially serve as public access the open space, as well as providing an egress path for building residents who may exit the building out of the northern stairwell. Just before reaching the rear wall of the building, the path transitions from bituminous to stone dust.

In the setback between the front of the building and the Mass Avenue sidewalk there is an area paved in concrete pavers that presumably is dedicated to the commercial use. The plans indicate two tables and associated chairs. Also within the front setback is a transformer vault, a bike rack, the bituminous-paved entry into the parking garage, and some landscaping.

The architectural plans indicate usable outdoor space in a courtyard space located on the roof of part of the parking garage. Resident access to the courtyard from the common corridor on the second floor is provided, but there is also access to privatized areas of the courtyard from six of the second-floor dwellings. It is not clear from the drawing how the private patios are separated from the shared public patio. While there are some unit bedrooms that face the common patio, the architectural drawing suggests that there may be a planted buffer to ensure privacy. Common amenities on the patio appear to include tree planters, tables, chairs, and what may be grills.

There are two common roof decks indicated. The north deck is 298 SF, the street-facing deck is 575 SF.

**b. Function, use and adequacy of open space and landscaped areas.**

As noted above, there are four areas proposed for programmable outdoor space. There are some concerns/questions /suggestions associated with each of these areas, including:

**North Yard**

- Is the stone dust finish the best selection for long-term maintenance, snow and ice clearing, etc.?
- Slopes indicated along pathway may exceed 5%, which is the maximum mandated by ADA and the Massachusetts Architectural Access Board.
- The section of the stone dust walkway that connects to the rear egress should be bituminous or cement concrete to ensure that it is maintainable in all weather conditions.
- Planting plan may not be accurate, as it is likely that all existing trees will be removed to achieve grading as indicated on plans.
- This at-grade area does not include any active play spaces (it appears to be entirely dedicated to passive enjoyment). Given the unit mix that includes 42 bedrooms that are not “primary” (unit mix is 8@1-BR, 37@2-BR, and 5@3-BR), it is likely that numerous children will live in the building. Can the area above the infiltration system be utilized for a few pieces of play equipment?
- The 6-foot high “screen fence” along the northern bound of the north yard would preclude the possibility of access to the site from the adjacent parking lot. Is this a place that emergency responders may want to access the site (particularly given the minimal side setbacks to the east and west)?
- What is the material of the screen fence (gate is noted as wood, but there is no indication of typical fence material)?
- A gate with a panic bar is indicated in the screen fence at the northwestern corner of the building. Is the public invited to use the open space, or is access limited to the building residents?
- What is the purpose of the “salvaged logs”?
- Lighting plan does not appear to indicate any fixtures in the rear yard seating area.
- There do not appear to be any submitted documents that describe materiality or details of proposed retaining walls. This is important both from an aesthetic perspective and for performance concerns (for example, are they properly designed to withstand hydrostatic forces and horizontal breakout from infiltration system?).
- Where is chain link fence proposed (landscape drawings indicate 6-foot board fence, civil chain link with undefined height).

**South Patio**

- It is this reviewer’s opinion that the setback from the street and sidewalk is insufficient from several perspectives. First, an increased setback would provide more patio space that could be devoted to the commercial space, or potentially for a resident waiting area (school bus, Uber pick up, etc.). Currently, the entry level plans do not indicate an interior space suitable for this function. Potentially this front patio area could be enlarged to a size suitable for a covered bus shelter. This gesture, combined with relocating the trash room off of the main elevation and replacing it with a resident common space (or other more active use) would significantly improve the engagement of the building with the public realm.

An increased setback would also provide additional space for improving the Mass Avenue streetscape. Currently, the sidewalk runs immediately adjacent to the road, articulated only by utility poles and street signage. While the existing overhead services would likely interfere with street trees located in tree grates or a landscaping strip immediately on the street edge, pushing the building further back would allow for larger canopy trees to be planted in the patio spaces and any proposed landscape zones (current landscape plans appear to show trees planted within 8 to 10 feet from the building footprint). Protruding bays on the upper levels above further restrict the potential for significant tree canopies.

As currently conceived, cars exiting the parking structure would likely have to encroach on the sidewalk in order to safely negotiate the parking, bus, and bike lanes. This situation is worsened by the placement of a bike rack within the site line on the east side of the driveway. Even if the entire building were not moved towards the north, the area of the façade associated with the entry drive could be recessed that could alleviate practical issues, but also diminish the prominence of the garage door in the building's primary façade.

Finally, an increased setback from Mass Avenue would help to mitigate the scale of the building as perceived from the public realm. As a frame of reference, the proposed building footprint is closer to the street than the both of the immediate neighbors to the east and west, with bays above that bring it even further towards the street. The four-story sections of the building's façade appear to be almost double the height of the masonry façade on the hip-roof neighbor to the west (see the Street Elevation included in the submitted materials). Reinforcing a setback datum similar to the majority of buildings on the block would help to tie in the structure, even though its scale is significantly larger than most.

#### Second level Courtyard

- The courtyard space is very similar to this development team's building on North Avenue in Wakefield. Analysis of this area would be facilitated with a detailed landscape and lighting plan, which do not appear to be included in the submitted materials of the space. Potential concerns could include maintaining privacy for the units that are on the patio level, as well as noise and privacy concerns of the neighbor to the east.
- The courtyard is east facing, which will provide good lighting in the morning hours, but most of the space will be significantly impacted by shadow for much of the year. A shadow study, which reportedly is underway, will help to quantify this concern.

#### Roof decks

- Architect should confirm that both decks are fully accessible, and that sufficient egress is provided.

#### ***c. Use and treatment of natural resources.***

While not indicated in the site preparation or site demolition plan, it appears that the entire site will have to be cleared in order to construct the building. Strategies for protection of landscaping and structures on adjacent sites should be provided by the Applicant. Stormwater management and protection of Mill Brook are discussed in reports by other peer reviewers.

#### ***d. Building design, setbacks, massing and scale in relationship to the surrounding context and topography.***

As noted above, this building shares similarities with the development team's project in Wakefield. Both are five story, podium type structures, with projected bays to break up the massing on floors two through four, and selective areas where the fifth floor is stepped back to help mitigate the building height. The Wakefield structure steps back the top floor to help its scale relationship to smaller scale residences across the street on the north side and to diminish shadow impact. The main elevation on North Avenue is also stepped back on the top floor, also for scale mitigation, but also to help the overall proportions of the building. While it is taller than all of the neighboring and nearby buildings (and sits very close to the street), the significant space around the building on all sides lends legitimacy to its scale and massing.

This is not the case at the proposed 1021-1025 Mass Ave. building where there is a more intact streetscape of residences of various types and scale, mixed in with small-scale commercial uses. Perhaps most importantly, this site has immediate abutters, along with other nearby existing buildings that provide a frame of reference for the project design. While Massachusetts Avenue is clearly an appropriate corridor for increased density, this should not relieve proposed developments from incorporating mitigation strategies that help a larger-scale building fit into the neighborhood. There is nearby evidence of larger structures that have not succeeded in strengthening the streetscape, and most likely would not be approvable in 2023.

Specifically, in addition to the increased setback that will help to mitigate scale and increase the functionality of the front yard space, there are opportunities to re-distribute the massing of the building in a way that diminishes negative impact on the abutters and creates a more coherent streetwall. Reduction of the height of the building on both the east and west elevations, at least back as far as the rear of the adjacent structures would make a significant difference, and would also allow more direct sunlight into the courtyard area of the building. If maintaining the existing overall volume of the building is essential, volume could be relocated to the northern most leg of the building parallel to Mass Avenue, where impact on neighbors and visibility from Mass Avenue are minimized. Shadow studies will be of great value in analyzing the effectiveness of modifications to the massing.

In brief, this reviewer believes that the proposed massing should be better “sculpted” to fit into the existing context, and as importantly, set a good precedent for future development along this corridor. While there is good use of relatively small-scale articulation provided by protruding bays, variations in cornice line, etc. in the current design.....all elements that are positive.....the overall bulk of the building, combined with the strongly symmetrical façade treatment, create a sense of monumentality where neighborhood fit may be more appropriate.

Relative to the planning of the building (versus massing), the entry level includes 1700 SF of commercial space that will help activate the façade and create a potential community benefit. On the other hand, the remaining 2/3 of the Mass Avenue elevation beyond the resident entry to the west are dedicated to a trash room and the parking garage. As noted above, consideration should be given to relocating the trash room off of the façade, perhaps locating a resident lounge (or some other active space) in its place. Other reviewers have suggested a reduction in parking spaces in order to be able to create a second commercial space. If maintaining parking count is critical, a stacking system could be incorporated to open up more floor space for active uses.

Generally, locating garage doors on primary elevations does not improve a building’s engagement with the pedestrian realm, and typically detracts from building aesthetics. Because the proposed building is very tightly fit on the site east to west, there is no opportunity for entering the garage from the west elevation. There is also no on-site space provided for deliveries, loading, etc. that could be accommodated with an increased side setback. These options should be studied.

***e. Viewsheds of the project visible from the public street, public areas and from the vantage of nearby residential neighborhoods.***

This is discussed in previous sections. It is this reviewer’s hope that the 3-D model can be provided by the Applicant which would facilitate review from all important vantage points by this reviewer, the ZBA, and the public. It is also the most effective tool for studying variations in massing that can help mitigate negative impacts of the structure.

There are two rendered perspective views included in the submitted materials that are useful. Additional birds-eye view renderings, perhaps dropped into Google Earth views from different directions would also help understand “the fit” with nearby context.

***f. Pedestrian and vehicular access and circulation, adequacy of accessible provisions. Of particular interest are the implications of access and egress in terms of pedestrians, bicyclists and motorists. Adequacy of parking.***

Current plans indicate interior, basement storage space for resident bicycles. A bike rack for visitors is indicated adjacent to the entry drive (which may interfere with the cone of vision for cars exiting the parking garage). Generally speaking, whenever possible, it is preferable for resident bike storage to be located on the entry level of the building. If storage in the basement is the only option, consideration should be given to increasing the size of one of the elevators.....and fortifying the cab finish.....to encourage more resident use of their bikes for every-day use.

The bike storage area should include a bike repair stand, and potentially an area for washing bikes.

As briefly noted above, consideration should be given to advantages that may be afforded by a vehicle stacking system. In all likelihood, in order to not increase the building height, a pit-type stacking system would be the preferable approach.

***g. Integration of building and site, including but not limited to preservation of existing tree cover, if any.***

As noted above, as it is not likely that any trees within the project site can be saved, protection of trees on the neighbors site, as well as the provision and maintenance of robust new landscaping is very important.

***h. Exterior materials.***

Generic information regarding façade materials as noted on the building elevations at this point seems reasonable and consistent with many buildings of this type. However, note that there are significant differences in the quality of various types of fiber cement products. Given the scale of the building and its prominence from the public realm, the Applicant should provide additional materials with detailed information regarding their intentions.

The use of areas of brick as shown could be an effective way of referencing existing context, however, the color of those areas as depicted on the renderings may not be the best choice for that purpose. Also, similar to the issue of range of quality of cementitious siding, more information regarding the proposed “thin brick” would be useful in assessing the long-term maintainability of that product.

There does not appear to be any information on the building elevations regarding window materials. Also, there is no indication at the garage level of any ventilation provisions. Will it be “naturally” ventilated (in which case, areas with open grates need to be shown), or if fully mechanically ventilated, is there any equipment mounted on the exterior of the building. Is there any façade-mounted equipment associated with the commercial space that should appear on the elevations?

There is a gas service shown in the utility plan. Are there exterior-mounted gas meters that need to be indicated on the building elevations?

***i. Energy efficiency.***

The developer has committed to providing a narrative that will outline their proposed approach to energy efficiency. Note that new energy code requirements are significantly more impactful than previous editions, particularly in communities that have opted in to the Stretch Code and are planning to adopt the Specialized new code. Analysis of applicable codes should be included in a preliminary building code analysis.

***j. Exterior lighting***

Submitted materials include a lighting plan, but it does not include any lighting in the north yard or the courtyard. There is some spillover evident along the western façade of the building that should be addressed.

***k. Proposed landscape elements, planting materials, and planting design.***

As noted above, landscape plans are included in the submitted materials, but certain aspects of the plans need to be supplemented or corrected.

***l. Feasibility of incorporating environmental and energy performance standards in the design, construction and operation of the building.***

To date, there is no indication that expresses the developer’s desire to design and construct to a third-party-verifiable level (such as LEED, Passive House, Enterprise Green, etc.). New state Specialized code, if adopted by Arlington, would require Passive House Pre-certification.

***m. Any other design-related considerations identified by me, ZBA, Town staff, working group, or the citizenry of Arlington.***

- Is there suitable emergency access around the exterior of the building?
- All site-related drawings should include locations of neighboring buildings.

- Any proposed ground-mounted mechanical equipment should be shown on site plans.
  - Basement space and proposed uses may be large enough to require two means of egress (it is currently shown with only one stair).
  - Will accommodations be made for resident storage and charging of electric bikes (storage in units is considered to be hazardous)?
  - Common roof space on second level and roof area may require two means of egress.
  - Is back-up power required by code (in particular, see requirements for accessible means of egress) or desired for resiliency, etc., and if so, where will the generator be located and what type of fuel will it use?
  - The neighboring building to the east is very close to the property line and in line with the proposed basement for the new structure. How will the structural integrity of the neighbor's building be maintained during and after construction given the depth of the required excavation. Site sections that include the neighbor's basement, foundation, etc. should be provided for review.
  - All units are required to conform with MAAB Group 1 requirements, and all common amenities must be fully accessible and connected by an accessible path.
  - Has the project been reviewed by the Fire Department?
  - A preliminary building code analysis should be provided.
  - The graphic scales on all of the architectural plans are not correct. Revised plans should be provided.
  - The single accessible bathroom across from the Tenant Gym on the entry level may not meet code requirements.
  - Has the design team studied building footprint(s) that could preserve the large sycamore tree?
  - Consider the provision of a more open main entry stair to encourage use (and create visual interest).
  - Building is missing a sign band.
  - Uplighting should be removed from the plans.
- n. Techniques to mitigate visual and other impacts.***
- Increase the setbacks and create step backs to address negative impact to the immediate abutters and improve the relationship to the public realm (see multiple comments above).
- 6. Participate in a minimum of one follow-up meeting with Town Staff to discuss the hearing presentation. Potentially attend meeting(s) with municipal staff and the development team ("working sessions"), most likely by Zoom, to address the ZBA's charge(s) to the developer. (TBD)**
- 7. Provide a written report(s) and oral presentation(s) to the ZBA on the Applicant's submission(s) prior to the close of the public hearing that addresses, at a minimum, the aspects of the development identified in number 5 above. Said report and oral presentation(s) shall also include recommendations relative to design-related conditions to be incorporated in a potential approval of the Comprehensive Permit, including but not limited to modifying specific aspects of the site and building design in order to improve the overall development and its relationship to its surroundings and to mitigate potential negative impacts. (TBD)**

Thanks for the opportunity to work with you on the analysis of this project. I hope you will contact me with any questions or concerns about this preliminary report.

Sincerely,



Clifford Boehmer, AIA