



**Hancock Village
Neighborhood Conservation
District Commission**

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*Town of Brookline
Massachusetts*

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Dear Members of the Zoning Board of Appeals:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Chestnut Hill Realty's 40B proposal for Hancock Village. The Brookline Neighborhood Conservation District Commission has evaluated the present Hancock Village Chapter 40B proposal, employing the Hancock Village NCD Guidelines as its analytic framework.

More generally, it also considered the proposed development's appropriateness for the site with particular reference to the existing development pattern. The Chestnut Hill proposal disrupts the carefully designed layout of open spaces from the arranged shared yards surrounding the buildings to the communal north-south greenbelt along the eastern side of Hancock Village. The proposed apartment building structure with its parking completely covers the characteristic natural landscape feature, the open area with the outcropping of the puddingstone. The siting, regrading and scale of the proposed apartment building and townhouses are incongruous with the scale and massing as well as the architecture of the two-and- one-half story, mostly brick U-shaped apartment blocks. In addition, the proposed plan destroys one the most dominate features of Garden City/garden apartment block designs, the separation of pedestrian and vehicular circulation paths.

The architecture of the proposed new buildings overshadows the existing buildings and bears no relationship to the intimate and cohesive original design. The introduction of so much impervious surfaces and additional parking would contradict the area's signature element, green open spaces.

The original 1947 project included buildings with either flat or shallow planes in a continuous, almost flowing character, surrounded by open space courtyards. The new construction interrupts this flow with additional parking, out-of-scale townhouses and a massive apartment building that is more typical of an anonymous ex-urban development than a historic garden-apartment setting.

Hancock Village's Distinctive Existing Context

Hancock Village is an intact, highly successful planned development embodying well thought-out relationships among its structures, the site's natural contours and its adjacent neighborhood of single-family homes. Developed between 1946 and 1949, it was undertaken by the John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance Company to meet the area's critical need to provide affordable housing for returning war veterans. In consideration for a zoning change from single- to multi-family housing granted by the Town, the company proposed a development that would be more affordable than contemporary single-family neighborhoods but would embody the best thinking about large-scale residential development of its time, as indicated in historical documents. Laid out by Olmsted Associates of Brookline, the result represents the culmination of an evolving strand of American, automobile-age residential development that had its beginning in the mid-1930s as the Garden Village model (distinct from the earlier English Garden City model). Its

hallmarks are respect for the natural and topographical character of its site, separation of pedestrians from automobile traffic, and the orientation of the living space away from the street and towards common greenspace. Each of Hancock Village's dwelling units occupies a townhouse of two stories topped by a peaked roof. Each unit has its own separate entrances, the front door of which characteristically opens into a green courtyard providing pedestrian access to the village streets. At the rear, each has a patio within a sheltered hierarchical system of greenspaces consisting of a communal open space overlooked and bounded on three sides by its townhouse rows and, at its open end, connecting to a network of rustic green corridors that filter through the development. In designing these open space sequences, Olmsted Associates, rather than being daunted by the site's *genius loci*, its rising and falling terrain and its prominent rock outcroppings, used them to provide the development's visual interest. One such corridor, running north-south through the village, incorporates the area's highest point, crowned with puddingstone outcropping, to form a small urban wild.

In addition to weaving the village together with internal more rustic green corridors, Olmsted Associates laid out a more urbane greenbelt of linear parkland along its northern edge. This undulating greensward framed by mature trees simultaneously provides the greenspace into which the communal greenspaces and patios of the northernmost townhouses open and a recreation zone for perhaps a quarter of the site's Brookline residents.

The plan's circulation system is an integral compliment to the village's open space layout. The green zones between the townhouse clusters organize paths and spaces that separate pedestrians from automobiles. Cars are accommodated by a logically coherent roadway system consisting of a central street, Independence Drive, which connects Hancock Village to surrounding communities, and off of which run looped local roadways that provide parking for the apartments and access to two original parking garages. It is important to note that none of the original roads are dead-ends, and that the dead-end so-called Asheville Road within the project, which has already compromised one of the internal green spines, was constructed with no evidence of a planning board review and is not an approved or accepted town road. Overall, the Olmsted Associates' plan is a logically coherent system of residences situated within a green, undulating natural setting.

National Register Eligibility

The integrated design of townhouses, open spaces, paths and roadways that provide Hancock Village's distinctive character remain intact today, nearly 70 years after its development. In recognition of its importance as a culminating example of the Garden Village movement, in 2011 the Town of Brookline and the City of Boston, both in their roles as Massachusetts Historical Commission Certified Local Governments (CLG), declared it to be eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. Such CLG opinions are presumptively dispositive. Among the defining features mentioned in their opinions was the greenbelt. In a concurrence dated June 22, 2012, the Massachusetts Historical Commission agreed with the CLG opinion that Hancock Village meets National Register criteria A and C and possibly B, for listing at the state and local levels. (Meeting only one criterion is required.) The three pertinent criteria are:

- a) Associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history;
- b) Associated with the lives of persons significant in our past;
- c) Embodies distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction.

Neighborhood Conservation District By-Law

In recognition of Hancock Village's historic distinction, the Town of Brookline considered giving it further protection by establishing the property as a Local Historic District (LHD). It determined, however, that such a designation would be inadequate, in that LHDs do not address landscape features, paving, and areas not visible from a public way. Accordingly, the Town established the property as its first Neighborhood Conservation District (NCD), which in the form adopted is the strongest tool available to it to preserve not only the village's built character but also that of its encompassing landscape. The district's guidelines (see Town By-Law Sec. 5.10.3.d.1 in the Attachments) identify the elements of the site plan that are to be preserved: (i) its architectural style and character; (ii) its building size, height and massing; (iii) its façade characteristics; (iv) its roof treatment; and (v) its streetscape, topography, and landscape. Significant negative impacts pertain to (a) removal or alteration of outcroppings; (b) alteration of existing grades; (c) removal of existing pedestrian paths; (d) addition of new impervious surfaces; and (e) loss of open space or the greenbelt

buffer. The Commission has reviewed the proposed project in the context of the Hancock Village guidelines in making its determination as to the appropriateness of the conceptual project design. The Commission is cognizant of the fact that the local guidelines are "Local Requirements and Regulations" within the meaning of the Chapter 40B regulations. The Commission's findings follow.

Analysis and Findings

Conceptual Site Plan

The Commission finds that the proposed conceptual site plan is inappropriate to the existing context of Hancock Village in the following important respects.

First, it violates the hierarchical system of open spaces that form the basis for the village's layout. Specifically, the introduction of 2.5-story flats, their service road and accessory parking within the greenbelt at the site's northern edge destroys it as parkland. The greenspace and its mature trees would be eliminated and the grading plan would be developed to accommodate new buildings, thus destroying the site's undulating character. The results would leave an unusable graded 2:1 slope between the development down to the adjacent homes on Beverly and Russett Roads. Rather than opening into this park, the open ends of the communal spaces—at the northern housing clusters to the west of Independence Drive and the rear patios of those to its east—would confront a roadway, the façades of the buildings they would serve, and surface parking lots. In fact, the present proposal exacerbates the earlier version by inserting seven 44-foot long and 14-foot high garages among the row of blocks of flats proposed within the greenbelt. The arrangement of the proposed flats is antithetical to a cluster of Hancock Village townhouses of corresponding acreage fronting Thornton Road. The houses in the existing cluster open into a shared greenspace, while each of its front entries are connected by paths through lawns to reach the street. In contrast, the front entries of two proposed townhouses share a walk to the street, and their rear yards consist of surface parking and garages.

In addition to eliminating the greenbelt, the proposal destroys the open space corridor running north-south through the site and its crowning feature, its elevated puddingstone outcropping. It would obliterate the ledge and eliminate it as an open space by siting a four-story apartment building atop it. These elements of the design place it in direct conflict with Hancock Village Neighborhood Conservation District guidelines, Sec. 5.10.3.d.1. (v) (a) through (e).

Second, the proposal is inconsistent with Hancock Village's defining scale and architecture, and focus of sections (i) through (iv) of the Hancock Village Neighborhood Conservation District guidelines. As is set forth more fully under the 40B design-review criterion "Building Massing," the proposed C-shaped apartment building violates the character of Hancock Village by introducing a generic, podium-style apartment design, with an elevator and double-loaded corridor structure, in close proximity to the village's existing two-story townhouse clusters.

The flats proposed within the greenbelt are also out of character with Hancock Village's existing townhouses. They are wider in dimension, they do not have similar rear yard depths, and some are placed at odd angles, making their lack of conformity more glaring.

Third, the proposal violates Hancock Village's defining circulation concept, the separation of pedestrian ways from vehicular circulation. The layout within the northern greenbelt is particularly inappropriate in this respect. It situates paved parking areas and structured garages between the proposed flats whose only pedestrian access is the new roadways serving them. The resulting dead-end roadways are inconsistent with the NCD guidelines intended to preserve the existing curvilinear circulation patterns. It should be noted that the configuration of the proposed roadways also raises serious concerns about traffic safety.

Building Massing

Whereas the proposed townhouses are inappropriate to their site, the apartment building is entirely out of scale with its context. A symmetrical, largely monolithic structure 51 to 74 feet in height, depending on grade and the elevation, it would be located at the village's highest point and would therefore loom over the adjacent townhouses. It would put the townhouses to its immediate west in shadow and blot out their sky-shed. The north and south elevations of the

apartment building present the most bulk, ranging from 400 to 530 feet long. The Commission noted that the site section submitted by the developer was chosen to minimize the differentials in height, topography, and distance between proposed and existing structures. The conflict between its massing and architectural style and that of the village's townhouses is not ameliorated by the busy hipped roofs and faux mansards; these architectural treatments do nothing to mitigate the building's symmetrical box-like structure and horizontal bulk.

Topography and Environmental Resources

As noted above, Olmsted Associates' Hancock Village townhouses, paths and open spaces utilize the site's distinctive topography and characteristic rock outcroppings to give the village its defining character that of residences set densely but appropriately within a green natural environment of great visual interest. The project would destroy that character at the sites it proposes to redevelop, first by leveling the rock outcropping and replacing the urban wild within the north-south open space corridor with an apartment block and second, by replacing its undulating linear park with a development zone that would flatten its contours and destroy its mature trees to accommodate parking. The Commission also notes that most of the proposed housing closest to Beverly Road is inappropriately sited four feet above the adjoining topography (to the north and south).

Existing Development Patterns

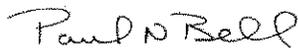
The discussion above focuses on the incompatibility of the present proposal with the fully realized integration of housing, open space and circulation within Hancock Village, with special emphasis on the village's residential scale and its greenbelt open space and puddingstone highlands. The proposed elimination of the greenbelt linear park is also significant because it destroys a feature that, in the terms employed in the 40B handbook, was designed to be a buffer between Hancock Village and the adjoining single-family neighborhood on Beverly and Russett Roads. In its place, the submission proposes new development that is aggressively close to these homes. In fact, it appears to further aggravate the impact of this development by placing paved areas even closer to the rear property line than in the 2012 submission, despite concerns about inappropriate setbacks raised by the Town in response to that proposal.

The Commission's Conclusion

The Commission has carefully considered this 2013 Chapter 40B Proposal within the framework of the Hancock Village NCD Guidelines. In doing so, it focused particularly on the features that distinguish the village's historically significant design and on its relationship to the abutting neighborhood, as well as on the NCD guidelines adopted to conserve Hancock Village's design and integrity. The Commission finds that the proposal in its current iteration is not appropriate for the reasons set forth in this report and cannot support it in its present configuration.

We appreciate your consideration of the NCDC's comments on the proposal for new construction at Hancock Village.

Sincerely,



Paul Bell
Chair, NCDC

Cc: Dan Bennett, Building Commissioner
Alison Seinfeld, Director, Planning & Community Development
Mel Kleckner, Town Administrator
Mark Zarrillo, Chair, Planning Board