



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

PLANNING BOARD

CITY HALL ANNEX, 344 BROADWAY, CAMBRIDGE, MA 02139

Date:	July 23, 2019
Subject:	Alexandria Grand Junction Overlay District Zoning Petition
Recommendation:	The Planning Board makes the following report with no positive or negative recommendation.

To the Honorable, the City Council,

The Board first held a public hearing on January 29, 2019, to discuss the petition by Alexandria Real Estate Equities, Inc., (“the Petitioner”) to establish a Grand Junction Overlay District encompassing two non-contiguous areas referred to as “Grand Junction Land” (a corridor running to the west of the Grand Junction rail right-of-way from Binney Street to Cambridge Street) and “Development Land” (the former Metropolitan Pipe site at Binney and Fulkerson Streets) with development controls contained in a new Section 20.1000 of the Zoning Ordinance. The Board received information and testimony from the Petitioner, Community Development Department staff, and members of the public. Following discussion among Board members, the hearing was continued without a recommendation so that the Petitioner could respond to issues that were raised. That original zoning petition expired without action by the City Council, and a modified version of the petition was subsequently filed by the Petitioner.

The Board held a hearing on this revised petition on June 18, 2019, and heard a presentation from the Petitioner and testimony from members of the public. In concept, the petition continues to propose conveying the “Grand Junction Land” to the City for use as a public bicycle/pedestrian pathway, and in return allowing an increase in the scale of private development on the “Development Land.” Representatives of the Petitioner explained that compared to the original petition, the revised petition would reduce the overall height and density of proposed development on the “Development Land” while establishing additional setback and open space controls. A group of residents of the nearby Linden Park area, who had met with the Petitioner several times since the prior hearing, proposed an alternative plan that would be somewhat more restrictive, primarily by reducing the overall development potential of the Development Land by one story.

Following deliberation, Board members were not able to reach consensus on a positive or negative recommendation. Instead, the Board chose to draft a communication to the Council with no recommendation, stating the issues that Board members raised as points of support or concern, reflecting the diversity of opinions expressed. This draft was reviewed and discussed by the Board on July 23, 2019.

Zoning Approach

One topic of discussion was the nature of the proposal itself, to increase the development potential of one parcel in exchange for public open space on a separate parcel, as opposed to a more traditional rezoning of the entire district. Some Board members noted that this type of zoning amendment has been enacted many times in recent years, often for larger Planned Unit Development sites. The “K2” study process was cited as an example where the City established an overall plan but it was left to property owners to propose zoning changes. Because the zoning changes would create greater potential value for the property owners, this approach provided the opportunity to negotiate additional public benefits. Some Board members found it difficult to evaluate the proposal’s full potential for public benefits because no letter of commitment has been provided, and it was noted that the negotiation of benefits typically occurs at the City Council. Other Board members were mainly concerned with planning and urban design considerations and would leave the City Council to determine what additional public benefits are necessary. Some Board members also noted that this proposal would affect a smaller area than similar rezoning proposals, and expressed concerns about whether the rezoning of this parcel could set a precedent for other parcels in the zoning district.

Planning Considerations

Aside from the discussion of public benefits, Board members expressed mixed views on whether or not the proposed development standards would be appropriate. Board members did express appreciation for the effort made by the Petitioner to work with neighbors and make significant changes that have resulted in a better proposal. Many Board members remarked that the Petitioner’s proposal and the Linden Park residents’ alternative proposal are not very different in overall appearance and character. Some Board members expressed the opinion that either proposal would be acceptable, while others expressed a preference for the somewhat lower-scale alternative, and others expressed the opinion that the scale of development appeared too large for that location in either case. Some Board members noted that 40-foot tall mechanical enclosures, as shown in the Petitioner’s models of the site, seemed excessive and hoped that such a height could be avoided. Some Board members remarked that the height and density would not seem as excessive if the development were residential, noting that residential uses are incentivized in the current zoning for the district. However, it was also noted that the success of Kendall Square as a center of the life sciences economy and the resulting demand for commercial space was not fully anticipated at the time the current zoning was enacted.

Grand Junction Pathway

Although some members expressed concern about their ability to fully assess the public benefits of the proposal, as noted above, Board members commented on the main concept of dedicating land for the creation of the long-planned Grand Junction Multiuse Path. Board members agreed that this was an important planning goal of the City and would provide value to the public. Some Board members questioned whether the City could acquire the necessary land directly, potentially through an eminent domain taking. Others expressed concern about the cost and

length of time that such a process would consume and noted that this petition would provide a faster and more straightforward way to accomplish that objective, while also noting that the contribution should include the architectural and construction costs of the pathway. Some Board members expressed the view that the additional development rights proposed are likely worth more than the costs associated with the pathway, and that the public should receive additional benefits. Finally, it was noted that for a project of this type and scale that is subject to project review requirements under current zoning, some public benefits could be required as part of transportation impact mitigation, but that would occur through the special permit process rather than through zoning.

Conclusion

Though the Board did not reach a consensus at the June 18 hearing, some members acknowledged that they might consider making a recommendation if there are future changes to the proposal in response to Board members' concerns. Suggestions included continuing to work to reach consensus with neighboring residents, as the Petitioner's representatives stated they would do at the hearing. Other suggestions included considering whether residential could be included, perhaps as part of a broader development plan encompassing additional sites, or considering measures to reduce the anticipated height of rooftop mechanical systems.

Continuation

The Board held a continued hearing on July 23, 2019 to review the draft report prepared by staff. The Board also received an update on new information presented by the Petitioner at the Ordinance Committee hearing held on July 11, 2019, including the additional proposed limitation of rooftop mechanical penthouses to 25 feet in height and the submission of a draft Letter of Commitment describing proposed public benefits including funding for design and construction of the Grand Junction Pathway segment. The Board elected not to amend the comments made above, but acknowledged that this information responds to some of the comments made by Board members in its prior discussion.

Respectfully submitted for the Planning Board,



Catherine Preston Connolly, Chair.