

231 - 249 Elm Street and 6-8 & 12 Grove Street Second Neighborhood Meeting December 14, 2021

Introduction of team members and roles. Presentation of slides showing current state of landscape and area, as well as updated building, storefront area, landscape concept and floor plan slides in response to feedback from communities and city.

Q – Susan F – How many spaces are there and when you say public parking are the revenues going to the city or to the developers or the owners of the building?

A – We’re continuing to refine that based on some recent changes. It’ll likely be somewhere between 60/80 spaces. They will be publicly accessible; the revenue will not be going to the city, the revenue will be private revenue.

Development Review Application update: The design has been revised since the meeting to include 77 vehicle parking spaces. The commercial garage parking spaces will be available to the public and the count has been calculated to be compliant with zoning.

Q – how much are you expecting to charge for that, and will be monthly (likely to go to employees of the building) will it actually be per hour? Rent for existing businesses – is there any anticipation that the rent will be increasing significantly and likely that none of the current businesses other than the Burn can stay.

A – the parking rates will be consistent with market parking rates at that time across the city in Davis Square, both on hourly and monthly basis depending. With regards to retail, we continue to work closely with the existing tenants, there are some who have indicated that they are not interested in returning to the building, there are others who have indicated that they are interested in returning. Those discussions continue to be actively ongoing.

Q – can you say what percent increase in rent, approximate range, of rental per foot costs you expect to be charging?

A – at this time we are not in a position to know the precise retail rents we will be charging. Part of the reason is the recent retail amendment that was adopted by the City which has changed the configuration of our retail space and how we will lease and charge for it. Ultimately, we intend to comply with the retail amendment. We currently have 12 retail tenant spaces; we are actively working on how to use that space and lease it to prospective tenants.

Q – Susan K – I appreciate you offering this to the people in the area. I have some comments – this is going to be a real change to my quality of life. I live in a very sunny west facing apartment, I see the moon, and you’re going to put a big building there and it’s going to become dark. I will come to terms with that. I think this is an attractive building as far as the commercial part of it is concerned you’re taking into consideration the comments that were made during the last meeting. But I’m still not seeing that you have taken into consideration the residential neighbors. I see that what I will be facing is a wall with windows and a chimney, which is not ideal to me because I’ll have people that will be able to look into my apartment all day long. Have you taken into consideration the concerns of the residential neighbors? I don’t feel that you have.

A – With regard to the residential adjacencies, we have endeavored to be mindful of those. On the Grove Street side, we introduced glass components to soften the brick element on the top right portion and that was something that was based on comments from our previous meeting. On the portion that is adjacent to the residential area, we have made sure to keep the masonry and small window bay so that the residential building doesn't face a wide open panel of glass. The upstairs of the building will not be occupied after 5 pm or 6 pm, so that element is a benefit to the residential neighbors. During the day there will be shades in the building. We can also think of other ways to mitigate that adjacency.

A – I do remember your comments from last August and we have taken them to heart. The windows we have are narrower than other parts of the building next to the residential side. The glass treatment will be different. We can space the windows of the new building so that they aren't in alignment with the neighbors.

Development Review Application update: The spacing and treatment of the windows will be fine-tuned as the project moves further through the design process.

Q – Kendra – I have two questions – it looks like the way you positioned your building next to the residential building you've created an alley where the residents park, are you providing ample lighting instead of a dark alley? You mentioned the conference center that faces Grove – who is using that? Is that for the tenants of your building or that outsiders will come in and use as a convention center?

A – The conference center is intended to be used by the tenants in the building. At certain times it could be used for other uses, but we're not looking to attract a lot of outside attention. It really is intended to be embedded in the building and for use of those in the building.

A – We definitely look forward to working with the residents of 20 Grove so we can calibrate the lighting. The alley is largely on the 20 Grove St side of the property line. We are setting our building back to create a buffer. We would look to incorporate lighting that would keep that area safe and well lit but light fixtures aren't shining into any resident windows. It looks like there are some basement apartments so we have to be careful about how we design that lighting but we want to work with our neighbors.

Development Review Application update: The driveway and parking lot for 20 Grove St are existing and the design does not involve any changes to that parcel.

Q – Joe – What are your pests mitigation plans – rat problem in the square has exploded in the past two months? How is this going to overlap with other major construction – specifically the Elm St and Herbert St, seems like almost half the square might be shut down at the same time. Loading zones were going to be in the parking garage – do you plan on getting semis/tractor trailers in there? I see tractor trailers parking in front of my house on a regular basis. What is the total height of the building? I saw 62 ft 10 inches but it looked like there was another story on top of it which would probably be the solar panels. What is the total height?

A – with regards to coordination in the square – we're certainly committed to working in a coordinated and collaborative fashion with the city and well as public and private stakeholders. I believe some of those projects require zoning ordinances and amendments, whereas our project does not. We do plan and have had discussions to work in a collaborative fashion to the extent possible. With regards to trucks, we certainly have designed it to incorporate all of those loading and deliveries internal to the building. One of the main challenges is that deliveries do happen curb side, so that was a major design intent so that it mitigates noise.

A – Loading for the building will be completely offsite, we’ve made a very deep loading dock so we have flexibility for the types of deliveries. We don’t expect many semis but it is deep enough for them. Loading is both for the lab tenants and also for the retail spaces along Elm Street. In terms of pest mitigation, we’ll be working with construction manager during the demolition to be proactive about that. It will be included in our specifications of the contract. The height is 62 feet 10 inches, there is a mechanical penthouse on the roof. There was a recently passed zoning amendment that regulates mechanical penthouses. The limitation on the penthouse height is 20ft and we will live within those requirements of the amendment.

Development Review Application update: The total height of the building has been refined and is 61'-0" per the Somerville Zoning Ordinance definition of building height. This measurement is from average grade to top of roof structure and does not count the mechanical penthouse. There will be an enclosed loading area that can accommodate trucks as large as WB40s and a service corridor for the retail spaces from the loading area is being provided.

Q – Ulysses – First, the mechanical penthouse – is that actually shown in the current drawings or has that yet to be added, because that solar array is very clear. Whether the solar array is going to be fixed or sun tracking for increased PV capacity? Whether the roof is going to be light colored or dark colored? The recent amendment about changing the calculations for retail space sizes – are any of the city councilors can explain the nature of that amendment?

A – The mechanical penthouse is shown here; with that recent amendment we need to look at how that impacts our current design. We expect what we have is close to the final. We can look into sun tracking for the PV; we have done some overshadowing studies for the site, and we’re trying to locate PV as much as possible to capture good sunlight and generate electricity on site where we can. The portions that are overshadowed are light colored roof. I will give my briefest version of the amendment – in the small business overlay for every 100 ft of retail storefront, we need 6 specific storefronts. We’re approx. under 200 ft.

Development Review Application update: In areas with only a membrane roof and no roof deck or green roof, the membrane will be white to reduce the urban heat island effect. Any of areas of the roof not dedicated to required rooftop equipment will be used for green roof, roof deck or made ready to support photovoltaic arrays. The mechanical penthouse layout has been refined since the public meeting to meet the 20’ height limit required in the mechanical penthouse zoning amendment. The footprint of the penthouse has increased with the increase being positioned mostly on the northern side of the site to keep the penthouse as far as possible from Elm St and Grove St, thereby prioritizing sight lines from the pedestrian realm.

A – I can provide a brief explanation. It requires a certain number of ground level commercial spaces based on building width. That’s to get into the technicality of it all.

Development Review Application update: The small business overlay is now incorporated into the base zoning which is available online.

Q – Chris – I have two questions – can you post the list of attendees who are listening in on this? We often don’t know all the people who are just here. I appreciate that you went out and did measuring of retail spaces along Elm – did that end up resulting in lowering the floor to floor height from ground level to second floor?

A – I’d be happy to follow up with Jordan to see if there’s any privacy dynamics and provide a list to the extent possible.

A – the original proposal had a 20ft floor to floor for our ground floor, we reduced that to 18 ft which is the zoning minimum so we can't go lower than that but it had a significant change to how we treated the storefront.

Development Review Application update: The ground floor level floor-to-floor proposed dimension has been refined to 18'-10"

Q – My comment on the height was not only what the storefronts look like but also the height of the spaces – these are still pretty tall spaces compared to the rest once you're inside. On the Elm Street side, you've expressed it as a thick brick mass of a wall, but on the Grove Street side, by peeling back the brick to expose that glass corner, the brick here looks very thin. Architecturally, these are problematic expressions of brick. If this were in my office, I'd be saying how can we make this side of the building continue that character. The brick walkway systems – I just want to direct you to our website, it would be useful for all of you working on the design to look at that, because it makes the case we can put brick down where we would put concrete, and it would continue the character that is a consistent part of the square.

Development Review Application update: The rendering shown did not accurately represent wall depth and the brick wall. The typical depth of brick to glass will be deeper than was shown and approximately 1'-6" at the location mentioned. The ground floor retail spaces cannot be designed at a shorter floor to floor and still meet zoning requirements and height requirements for the loading bay that will serve both the retail spaces and tenants above.

Q – Joe – How long do you think from the initial demo to finish of construction and tenancy?

A – at the moment we are hoping it would be approx. 18-20 months. That remains subject to refinement.

Q – Lee – I'd like you to talk a little bit about the lab tenants. The word lab covers a wide range of activities. Currently, Somerville does not have regulatory protection against the high risk pathogens in labs. The city has done a lot of good work in expediting a new ordinance that would cover this, but Level 3 labs which are dealing with highly infectious or toxic materials really don't have a place in an urban infill setting. So I wonder what selectively you might be exercising over your lab tenants.

A – at this point, there are not tenants, we are not actively leasing at this time, I think we're mindful of the concerns you outline and we know some of the higher levels. We're not in a position at the moment to know what some of those levels may or may not be. As we get more into the leasing process we'll come to determine that a bit further.

Q – Kendra – at the August meeting, multiple people expressed concerned at the term lab and lab workers. I'm really concerned about the answer that was given – there's no assurance to the residents that this will not be a lab that will be doing sensitive and high level hazardous work. I'm shocked that the answer is so not helpful to the residents. Is there any assurance that there is certain levels that would not be allowed in the most densely populated urban area in the US? When is this supposed to start? Today we saw major drilling going on with very loud trucks – was that connected to this project? When do you anticipate this 18-20 month period actually starting?

A – with regards to the lab specifics, I'm going to have Jenn Schultz touch on that. At the moment we are engaged in this process and it will continue for some time, so we are not sure when this project will commence. It will likely be toward the end of 2022. I think there was just some regular subsurface investigations taking place today but it is not indicative of any start.

A – the one thing that I can say is that this building is not a building designed for the highest level of lab. Those are very rare across the country – fewer than 100 and require federal funding and regulations. No BSL 4 in this building. With regards to the other bio safety levels – 1 and 2 are the most common. The entire Longwood Medical Area is BSL 2 and BSL 3. The majority of Kendall Square is BSL 2, with the remaining BSL3. As you go through the safety levels, as the numbers get higher, that means that there are more safeguards in place and means that there are more regulations for a tenant company to be allowed to operate at that level. So anything above BSL 2, requires general zoning controls but also reviews and approvals and annual reviews and approvals from multiple departments. This is by no means the final word on that subject. BSL4 indicates a concern for the community. When you talk about a BSL3 lab, you're talking about COVID 19 and the flu. So the vaccines were all created in BSL3 labs, in and around this area, and the annual flu vaccine. Which is not to discount any concerns and the need for regulation and safety, but it is to explain the significant and real work that is coming out of these labs.

Q – Lee – just a quick response to Jenn, there a dozen level 4 in the US, they are banned in Cambridge and Somerville and will continue to be banned. On the issue of level 3 labs, the question is not just bio safety, a level 3 lab has to have signage that warns that there is a biohazard in the building. This has a chilling effect on real estate values, and certainly on restaurants and the like. I would like to hear someone say that level 3 labs are not appropriate in a place like Davis Square and I must say the response that I've heard suggests a very glib but uninformed view of the nature of regulation in this area.

A – At this time this evening at this early stage, we're not in a position to have that detailed discussion regarding level 3 this evening. We understand the concern and it's something we can take under advisement.

Q – Ulysses – Andrew mentioned it's not possible to say what the likely rents are for the tenants, one of the biggest things for us who live in this area, but what about all these existing tenants? What is going to happen to the other tenants? The answer is some may not want to stay. This is the concern we want to know – what are concrete steps both physically and financially you're taking for all the other tenants?

A – I think we've made it clear that this is something that has been a very high priority of ours over the past several years. It is a multi variable dynamic, where the physical space and dimensions just got shifted overnight as that amendment was adopted, and that has completely changed the type of paradigm that can come into the space and may or may not be financially viable in the space. Those large block spaces can no longer exist on this site. For a variety of reasons, tenants could decide not to come back. For those that do want to come back, we are actively meeting with those tenants as recently as this week. So those discussions are ongoing. The smaller space will allow certain tenants to participate on this retail ground floor space, but it will also prevent a spectrum of tenants from coming into this space. Those dynamics are something that we are processing and incorporating in real time, both into the design and the tenant discussions, and that is something that will remain ongoing. I think those are the categories – tenants who do not want to come back, those who do want to come back and we are engaging with, and those that cannot return due to the recent changes.

Q – Chris – I just wanted to clarify – the large glass space on the ground floor, could you tell me what that is for?

A – the large space on the right hand side is the multi-purpose conference space. We are really inspired at what happens at Greentown labs as a way to engage the street scape with the intellectual type of things that are happening within the building.

Q – but I also thought I heard the public isn't going to really be allowed in there?

A – Folks do not want that space overly activated. Accordingly, it will be a space for some of the onsite tenants or other affiliates of theirs. Our number one priority was to listen to the feedback from residents. I think the actual use of that space is going to be very versatile and dynamic, but I want to be clear, that we heard the concerns not to over activate that area of Grove Street.

Q – Ulysses – Just two simple questions – Andrew mentioned the small business district ordinances changes the allowable dimensions, what is the actual width minimum that the new ordinance requires? The loading bay on Grove St, that looks pretty tight. I find it hard to believe that a full sized semi could actually fit into that loading dock could pull into that loading dock. How detailed an analysis have you done on how easy it would be to get a full sized truck into that loading bay?

A – 16 feet is the minimum. I believe the actual zoning amendment calculates it for every 100 ft of frontage, you need 6 storefront bays, which is averaged out to 16ft. I think the max width is 35 in that neighborhood. You can make some larger, but then you'll make some smaller. We do have a traffic consultant working for us, we will be submitting a traffic study. We feel very comfortable that the loading dock and the street is sufficient for it. We'll be including that as part of our submission to the city in the coming weeks.

Development Review Application update: The Development Review Application includes truck turning radii diagrams to demonstrate the right sizing of the curb cut and driveway provided for the loading area.

Q – Chris – when I was asking the question before it was to make a point – directly across the street from you, there is a ground floor space that is used by the tech company on the upper levels that always has its blinds drawn. If this incubator space is really for internal use, I could imagine those people don't want to live in a fishbowl and they would find a way to screen themselves from the street. So I don't think it's an appropriate use if it's not public, and it would be more appropriate to make that retail space, and maybe do an incubator space on the second level. I would be mindful of how these spaces play out in real time. The intention that you have here is idealized, but could be as it is in the other building.

A – I think it's an important piece of guidance for us. We agree, we don't want it to be a blank façade or a sterile unactivated façade, we're trying to strike that balance between having it have a certain presence and certain level of activation without it being over activated. There were concerns that a retail space could over activate. We can use the other building as a precedent for lessons learned.

Development Review Application update: The ground floor space will not be full time work space, but is conceived as a large lecture hall, which can be used for presentations, forums and gatherings. The blinds or curtains may sometimes be drawn depending on the nature of activities within the room and we could consider using the blinds in an artful way, so there is still visual interest when they are closed. There has been strong desire voiced by abutters to not have retail uses in that space.

Q – Susan – I want to second what Chris said, I was thinking very similar thoughts. Having worked in a scientific industrial situation in the past, I know that a wide open thing where people are walking back and forth is disconcerting and I've been in places, and they drew the curtains all the time. I'm retired from the Harvard Chem dept, and there are other situations that I would not want to live next door as far as chemical labs are concerned. Do you see these as being wet labs, where physical chemical experimentation may happen? Or is going to be more theoretical?

A – From our standpoint, it may or may not be a mix of wet lab or dry lab space, research space, we certainly intend to comply with all regulations. There are many of those in place. Nothing will be done on a haphazard basis.

A – the building is now being designed to be ready to be a lab building, including potentially for wet labs and dry labs. What that means is that it is being designed for a layout that works for lab tenants and with the core and mechanicals that can support the requirements of a laboratory building, most importantly in terms of air exchange. And that's what makes labs so different from an office building. At this stage, the building is being designed to match a laboratory life science building and any further tenant fit out will be subject to many additional layers of licensure, discretionary approval and regulation.

Q – Kendra – One comment – on the August meeting, we asked for details about the lab and were assured that it wouldn't be a wet lab. Could you address that please – in August did you say it was not going to a wet lab and if that has changed? I wanted to make sure I didn't mishear – were you saying that all the deliveries by trucks and other things for all the retail businesses on Elm Street will be done now on Grove Street? If so, how many people on your team have spent a lot of time on Elm and Grove? If you hung out here, you'd see a parade of trucks for hours and hours making deliveries, there really is not enough space in your rendering for the kind of truck traffic that goes on on these two streets. I want to reiterate that the residents do not want over activation on Grove Street.

A – I do not recall saying that would not be a wet lab. With regards to the truck traffic, I think we whole heartedly agree and we have spent a lot of time there, members of our team live in the Davis Sq neighborhood, and we are acutely aware of the neighborhood and the shortcomings of the existing conditions. That's really the main reason we are embedding the loading internal to the building. There are alternatives that would not be favorable. This is intended to be a dedicated loading dock where all loading will be required to take place. We really hope that this can have a positive impact given some of the negative conditions that currently occur when it comes to loading.

Q – George – How big is the proposed conference space? You talked about for the retail spaces having movable walls – does that mean that someone could rent two or three bays and move the walls and make them large? Regarding mechanicals, you said during the presentation that mechanicals can be between 10 and 20 feet, but you know there is a limit on the height of mechanicals. I do know that between wet and dry labs there is a difference in mechanicals. In the current zoning, there is a set back with labs and mechanicals from residential districts. What has the city said to you since your zoning compliant? It would be nice if you put some ventilation stacks into the rendering of the mechanicals, rather than just having four trees.

A – Both the retail and mechanicals, as many are aware, there have been two amendments in the past ten days have been passed and approved, one concerns retail space and the other mechanical penthouses. We intent to be zoning compliant with both of those. We are continuing to understand how to incorporate those into the detail and the design. They will be resolved in the weeks to come. With regard to combining bays – we have not considered it to date. Our understanding is there needs to be 6 fronts with every 100 ft, we are not aware of a hybrid interpretation. I think what was referenced theoretically one of those spaces could become larger, but you'd need to recapture that space in one of the other areas. We are working to understand all of those details.

Development Review Application update: The moveable walls at retail spaces would be exterior walls. These could be accordian glass doors or overhead glass doors and the intention is to match the quality of other retail spaces in Davis square, such as Painted Burro or Diesel Café, which open up to the sidewalk.

A – I did want to clarify that this building is located in the CC4 district, not MR4. So by right, the mechanicals on the rooftop can be up to 20 ft in height. For this building because it is not adjacent to applicable subdistricts, there is no set back. As you can see from the design, the proponent is making a considerable set back from the frontages to the building of these mechanicals as a gesture to make it less or not visible from the ground scape.

A – the square footage is 1700 square feet. In terms of the lab use, the height of the penthouse is regulated at 20 feet with setbacks from the building.

Q – Lee – I sympathize with Andrew's remarks on the frontage regulations. I wonder if Andrew could tell us which kinds of businesses would now be excluded as Tenants under this new regulation? Are there any categories that would be excluded?

A – I appreciate the comment, and I certainly don't want to be in a position to generalize. From our standpoint we have always respected and endorsed the small scale retail business of the Davis Square area and we will encourage that going forward. The recent amendment imposed certain dimensional requirements that I think there are different typology on tenants that need larger scale locations. The ones most directly impacted are the food and beverage tenants. It's a program use that has a lot of requirements that are not all customer basic, kitchen area, service areas, bathrooms in the space as opposed to shared. By the time you put in the kitchen, point of sale area, cooktops, vents, walk in freezer, etc., you have cannibalized the amount of area for customer seating, bar area, etc. gets meaningfully reduced. There are many artisan tenants that would work well with this space and there are many larger big box tenants like pharmacies that will not and that we never intended to have in this space, and I think the concern is the middle sized tenants that may, for usage, that may not work. We will be diligent and work with tenants on how we can work with the space, sharing bathrooms, storage space, etc. so that we can navigate some of these constraints in a spirit of partnership with these tenants.

Q – Ulysses – Hoping for clarification, that fishbowl space on the corner, I thought in the earlier slides you showed a floor plan and it looked like that corner space was going to be retail. But the fishbowl problem would only be a problem if that would be an office space. Can you clarify what that space will be?

A – That's correct, we expect that space to be retail, it is important to activate that corner and we intend that to be retail space.

Q – Susan – How do I talk to the designers about our concerns, how do I go about contacting you?

A – We would be happy to follow up and schedule a discussion on that topic. Jordan – We have Susan's email and we can get in contact.

Q – Kendra – Someone mentioned at the August meeting that you were going to physically go into the 20 Grove Street building to see the perspective and view point from the tenant's spaces to get an idea of what you could do with the design to minimize the tenant's concerns but I just heard that that has not happened yet. When do you plan on doing that?

A. – We certainly intend to do that, if you could be the contact person perhaps hearily in the new year in January, we want to be mindful of the pandemic conditions and respectful of coming into other people's residences giving the personal distancing conditions we have all been trying to adhere to. We don't want to encroach on people's personal space. Could Brett follow up with you to schedule access to Grove Street?

A (Kendra) – I'm happy to help in other ways but I'm not on the right side of the building, but happy to be a point of contact, but my unit isn't facing the building.

A – we'll be in contact to figure out the best way to access the building sometime in early January.

Q – Larry – Acknowledge the sustainability steps you have taken, they have not gone unnoticed. Thank you and I appreciate that. The city/state have committed to carbon neutrality by 2050, have you considered a pathway to carbon neutrality and possible moving from a fossil fuel structure.

A – We have been actively planning a space in the building for a future where there are no fossil fuels required. Looking at options to get to carbon net 0 from day 1, I think it will be a high hurdle for us, but technology is rapidly moving and we are saving space in the building for the possibilities of being carbon neutral and the elimination of the need for fossil fuels in the future.

Q – Susan – I live on the side of 20 Grove Street that faces the building so I think I would be a better contact for access into the building and my unit.

Q – Lee – On sustainability, I was interested in you plan to reuse water for flushing toilets, things like that. I was told the MWRA for the region prohibits this on the region on the basis that you're calculating your water bill for what comes in and you would be getting a break on the sewerage charges. Has this changed? Are you now able to somehow reuse the water?

A – I don't know the specifics of how it works, I do know that there are buildings under development and I believe completed constructions in Somerville that use these systems. We have been engaged with the city/city engineers on this issue. I do know there are provisions for it now in buildings, but I don't have any specific mechanisms with respect to the MWRA.

Development Review Application update: The design is being developed with space for an on site stormwater cistern and water purification equipment so storm water can be reused within the building for irrigation, toilet flushing and mechanical equipment.

Q – Petrin – Will the Burren stay open during construction?

A – our intention is to keep it open as much as possible during construction. We have use a considerable amount of construction project specifics to keep it open. There are small windows of time that we may need to close the Burren for safety reasons, but the intent is to keep it open as much as possible during the construction phase. With closures for not only safety, but also to improve the Burn space.

Q – Angela – How does the proposal for Elm Street becoming a pedestrian way, how would that affect Elm/Grove?

A – We're certainly aware of many discussions happening in the city with respect to sidewalks, pedestrian ways, etc. all around the city. We are keeping tabs on those discussions and we will follow the lead with the city and the communities, and we will take measures to adhere to any of those decisions. We don't see any impact to our project should Elm become a pedestrian way.

Q – Ulysses – How do we contact you with inquiries, etc.?

A – Reaching out to Raisa from the city who is coordinating. She'll be continuing to be tracking this project as it goes through all the levels

A – you can email planning@somervillema.gov most of our public comments are sent there, I do look through those and respond.