MEMORANDUM

To: Zoning Board of Appeals
From: Division of Public Space & Urban Forestry (PSUF)
CC: Sarah Lewis, Director of Planning and Zoning
Date: June 25th, 2020
RE: Clarendon Hill 40B Comprehensive Permit #2020-0001

Overview

This memo outlines comments from the Division of Public Space & Urban Forestry (PSUF) following a review of the applicant’s project narrative, proposed site plan, sitewide schematic design drawings, sustainability narrative, and draft LEED credit narrative. Revisions to these documents were submitted to the city in May and June of 2020. PSUF is satisfied with the overall schematic-level approach to the site and civic space design, the applicant’s responsiveness to feedback through the waiver request process, and generally supports the project. PSUF is committed to ensuring the applicant delivers high-quality landscape and civic spaces that are compliant with the City’s zoning requirements as the permitting process proceeds.

Waiver Requests

PSUF was previously asked to review the Comprehensive Permit waiver requests for the project with respect to compliance with the City’s zoning ordinance requirements for civic spaces and urban forestry. These waiver review comments were returned to the development team in May 2020 and the development team responded to those comments in a spreadsheet entitled “Clarendon_Waivers_Master” dated 2020-06-02. A 2020-06-12 memorandum addressed the development team’s responses to the initial review comments and sought to clarify or seek further information about waiver requests. The applicant should refer to the comments in the 2020-06-12 memorandum as this memorandum will not specifically address waiver requests.

It is PSUF’s understanding that upon successfully obtaining a Comprehensive Permit, the development team will be required to submit a Civic Space Permit for the project during which PSUF will review the design in greater detail.
Comments

PSUF is generally supportive of the development team’s commitment to deliver a new civic space that better serves the community and is compliant with the civic space and urban forestry requirements in the Somerville Zoning Ordinance. The PSUF team looks forward to further developing the design and programming with the Clarendon Hill development team as they prepare their Comprehensive Permit submission.

The following comments address PSUF’s general review of the site and civic space design:

1. PSUF supports the redevelopment of a walkable, urban site for mixed-income affordable housing. The site is well connected to existing transit connections, commercial activity, and nearby playground and park space.
2. PSUF supports the inclusion of structured parking to reduce the heat island effect and maximize the provision of useful civic space.
3. PSUF agrees that extending the surrounding orthogonal grid into the site is an improvement over the existing development circulation and improves the overall vehicular and pedestrian circulation and connectivity to the surrounding community.
4. The variety in typology, scale, massing, and orientation of the proposed buildings is an improvement over the existing development.
5. Considering the topographical variation across the site, PSUF will be paying close attention to how the applicant proposes grading the central civic space so as to maximize useful area for play and recreation while ensuring the site remains universally accessible. PSUF will also be paying close attention to the tree protections and regrading around existing trees that are to be protected.
6. The applicant and design team have carefully considered vehicular and pedestrian circulation and, where possible, connected to existing sidewalk and street connections. The use of bump-outs and placement of crosswalks follows best practices for slowing traffic and ensuring pedestrian safety.
7. PSUF agrees that the use of parallel parking spaces along streets best balances the need for parking while maximizing useful civic space.
8. The courtyard pedestrian plaza terminating in an overlook terrace area (Block C1) between buildings A and B is human-scale and well detailed, but the design team should add a direct pedestrian connection (stairs/sloped walkway) down to the sidewalk on Alewife Brook Parkway to make this space feel more civic in nature.
9. The central civic space provides a good balance between passive and playground uses. Because the play area (intended primarily for younger age children) directly abuts two streets, PSUF will pay close attention to how the design team defines the edge of the play area to ensure the safety of playground users. Given the southern exposure of the proposed playground, the design team should plan to provide appropriate shading.
10. As the design develops, PSUF will pay close attention to the detailed design of the streetscape to ensure the applicant’s commitment to providing generous sidewalks, site furnishings, and street trees.
11. PSUF expects that the material quality and landscape character captured in the applicant’s site plans and renderings will closely resemble the actual hardscape and landscape materials and site furnishings specified during the design development and construction document phases of the project.

12. PSUF supports the applicant’s inclusion of a “woonerf” style street (New Street 1) that prioritizes the needs of pedestrians over vehicles and accommodates LID/green infrastructure best practices.

13. PSUF is concerned the proposed long garden beds (Block B2) will not get adequate southern exposure for crop production due to shading from mature trees on the adjacent Veteran’s Memorial site.

14. PSUF supports the proposed 100% native planting palette. While it is an aspirational goal to eliminate the need for permanent irrigation, PSUF recommends the use of irrigation to support plant materials through summers that will be increasingly hot and dry due to climate change.

15. PSUF supports the use of full cut-off, energy efficient outdoor luminaires that reduce light pollution and lower energy consumption.

16. PSUF supports the applicants request to use sand-based structural soil instead of silva cells in both the civic space and the thoroughfares.

17. It is expected that the applicant with work with PSUF at the time of Construction Documents to review and approve the planting plans for tree wells that have open soil areas that are smaller than the minimum open soil requirements in the zoning code. Only certain species will be able to thrive in these smaller open soil areas.

18. It is expected that the applicant with work with PSUF at the time of Construction Documents to review and approve the planting plans for trees that do not meet the minimum tree spacing requirements in the zoning code. Selected species must be small enough to thrive in the tighter spacing.

19. The applicant is aware that a Tree Hearing must be completed prior to the removal of any Public Shade Trees. PSUF will work with the applicant and the Tree Warden to schedule a tree hearing.

20. PSUF is in support of the applicant forgoing the standard permit process for removing trees on private property. However, PSUF expects all requirements for removing private trees per the Tree Preservation Ordinance to be met. This includes replanting the same number of combined caliper inches of tree(s) as the significant tree(s) that are being removed. The current plans show that this standard is being met.

Sincerely,

Luisa Oliveira, ASLA
Director, Public Space & Urban Forestry