



DAVIS
SQUARE
ARCHITECTS

240A Elm Street
Somerville, MA 02144
617.628.5700, tel
davissquarearchitects.com

Clifford J. Boehmer, AIA
Ross A. Speer, AIA
Iric L. Rex, AIA

May 5, 2021

Ara Yogurtian
TOWN OF BELMONT
Office of Community Development
ayogurtian@belmontma.gov

Re: 91 Beatrice Circle 40B, Belmont MA
Preliminary Architectural Peer Review

Dear Ara:

In anticipation of this Thursday's Belmont ZBA hearing, I'm writing to provide you with a preliminary Peer Review Report for the proposed development at 91 Beatrice Circle. As you know, I have already provided some feedback on the project at the Planning Board hearing that was held on April 8, 2021. This letter will mostly summarize those comments, as I believe they are still valid.

This report will follow the format of the fee proposal that I provided you on February 8, 2021. I'm anticipating that there may be changes made to the proposed plan after the developer has heard issues that the ZBA may have, as well as mine and the engineering peer reviewer. Following receipt of any revised plan, I will likely revise my comments.

1. ***Review the developer's application, plans and drawings, reports from other peer reviewers and Town officials, letters from neighboring residents, etc.*** For the proposed project at 91 Beatrice Circle, I have reviewed the following materials:
 - Drawing set "91 Beatrice Circle Comprehensive Permit Submission" prepared by Embarc dated November 4, 2020.
 - Drawing set "Proposed Site Plan 91 Beatrice Circle" prepared by Decelle-Burke-Sala & Associates dated November 4, 2020.
 - 91 Beatrice Circle Apartments Tabulation of Site Use(s)/Buildings(s) (not dated).
 - Landscape Plan, Planting Plan, and Plant List prepared by Verdant dated November 2020.
 - Traffic Impact Memo prepared by MDM Transportation Consultants, Inc. dated September 23, 2020.
 - Project Eligibility Letter to Joseph Tamposi from MassHousing dated November 3, 2020.
 - Engineering Report for a Multi-Unit Residential Development 91 Beatrice Circle" prepared by DeCelle-Burke-Sala & Associates dated November 4, 2020.
 - Revised Engineering Report for a Multi-Unit Residential Development 91 Beatrice Circle" prepared by DeCelle-Burke-Sala & Associates dated April 22, 2021.
 - Peer Review Response letter prepared by DeCelle-Burke-Sala & Associates dated April 23, 2021.

Town, Peer Review, and other Reports:

- Town Select Board Comments to MassHousing dated July 14, 2020.
- Town Select Board Comments to MassHousing dated September 1, 2020.
- Stormwater Peer Review Report prepared by Weston & Sampson dated March 29, 2021.
- Traffic Impact Peer Review prepared by BSC Group dated March 25, 2021.
- Letter to the ZBA from the Belmont Fire Department dated April 6, 2021.

Communications from citizenry:

- No letters/emails have been provided to this reviewer.

(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. ***If requested, participate in an initial meeting at the site with the developer's design team and a representative of the Town*** No meeting at site with the developer or Town representative(s) has occurred at this point. Content of this letter is based solely on two unaccompanied site visits, one on March 31, 2021 and another to review staked out building footprints on May 4, 2021, as well as review of posted materials.
 3. ***Concurrent with #2 above or by Google Earth, conduct site visit and reconnaissance assessment of surrounding residential and nonresidential areas within 1/2 mile of the project site.*** Letter is based on site visits and drive through of nearby neighborhoods, as well as Google Earth review.

Comments on site reconnaissance: The front yard (north bound) of the site immediately abuts an eastbound entry ramp (Frontage Road) to Route 2. Off of the frontage road are minor streets that feed low density residential areas with moderate sized homes, generally on vegetated lots of reasonable scale given the size of the homes. The architectural style of the nearby existing housing stock is generally "traditional", one to 2.5 stories, wood clad with pitched roofs.

The narrow sidewalk along Frontage Road is not particularly pedestrian friendly, as the traffic moves quickly (between 40 and 45MPH), nor is the road itself inviting for bicycles. Some areas of the sidewalk are partially overgrown with landscaping that belongs to the abutting homes.

The closest immediate abutter is a 1 to 1.5 story single family home to the west. It is very close to the property line, and it appears that the neighbor owns the existing retaining wall that makes the transition in elevation between the two sites. To the east, the grade drops significantly. Another single-family home is located there, much further from the property line than the neighbor to the west.

Within a half mile of the site (including across the pedestrian bridge that crosses Route 2), the texture of residential development is of similar type and density. In addition, within a similar distance, there are significant public outdoor spaces, as well as some private significant outdoor spaces. This includes the area surrounding the Arlington Heights water tower, the Brackett Elementary School, Menotomy Rocks Park and Playground, and the Belmont Hill School.

For a suburban site, the project is well served by public transportation, specifically bus routes that stop virtually in front of the site that take passengers to the Alewife Red Line station.

4. ***Consult with the Applicant's design team, as appropriate.*** No consultation has occurred at this point.
5. ***Provide an initial oral presentation to the ZBA. Said presentation typically includes comments and preliminary recommendations on the following.*** This peer reviewer attended a virtual Planning Board meeting on April 8, 2021 and provided some preliminary feedback on the project. The contents of this letter will be presented at a Zoning Board of Appeals hearing on Thursday, May 6.

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

Comments: The proposed project includes a four-story, 8-unit townhouse structure along Frontage Road, as well as four, two-story single-family homes along the rear of the site (total of 12 rental units). All of the units include 4-bedrooms, with one of the bedrooms on the entry level. The townhouse structure is a "contemporary" style, while the single-family structures are more traditional in appearance. All of the structures have sloped roofs. The top floors of the townhouse units include a balcony that faces north towards Route 2, as well as a balcony on the second level that faces the parking court.

The homes are organized around a parking courtyard that feeds individual interior garage spaces (one per dwelling unit). In addition to the 12 interior parking spaces, there are 8 additional outdoor parking spaces, single-loaded, accessed off of the entry drive. None of the parking spaces appear to be accessible. There is a walkway along the entry drive, steeply sloped for part of its run, that connects the parking court to the sidewalk along the Frontage Road.

A new crosswalk and accessible ramp are proposed to get across the Frontage Road and on to the pedestrian bridge that crossed Route 2. It is not clear where school children will be picked up on Frontage Road.

There does not appear to be any programmable outdoor space indicated on the landscape or civil engineering plans (other than the parking court).

It is not clear from the plans how trash and re-cycling will be handled on the site (there are no dumpster location(s). There is a proposed transformer location indicated on the north end of the outdoor parking spaces.

In this reviewer's opinion, there are several important issues with the proposed site plan, as outlined below:

- Given the likelihood that the site will be virtually clear cut to allow the development (with the exception of the sloped area to the east), combined with the significant built footprint (including paved areas) and minimal area available for landscaping, there is little space for providing any meaningful landscape buffering between the proposed development and the existing neighbors. This is particularly important given the scale of the proposed buildings, most importantly, the four-story townhouse structure.
- The slope of the driveway, with the absence of a significant "flat" area at the bottom of the slope, appears as though it could be hazardous for cars entering the Frontage Road in slippery conditions.
- Singleloaded parking is an inefficient use of the travel lane.
- It is not clear that the project is exempt from the provision of accessible parking. An accessibility code analysis should be submitted that addresses this concern (as well as any other applicable aspects of the code(s)).
- Landscape plan does not include any proposed method of mitigating headlight impact to the neighbor at the head of the driveway to the south.
- There is an existing retaining wall that separates the proposed development from the neighbor to the west. Has the condition of this wall been assessed, and will the proposed construction impact the integrity of that wall?
- Massachusetts Architectural Access Board requires an accessible path from the development to the public way. It appears that the walkway that connects the public walk to the development may be too steeply sloped.
- The unit mix (12 @ 4-bedroom) will result in a significant number of children in the development. The absence of any usable outdoor space, for children in particular, is a serious deficiency. Similarly, there is no space for family gatherings of any scale, no area for grilling, picnic table(s), etc.
- There is some open space that could potentially be privatized for the use of the western-most single-family homes, but nothing is indicated on the civil or landscape plans.
- The 5-foot separation between the single-family homes is problematic, if not for privacy, the space is not adequate for plantings or other types of programming.
- The Belmont Fire Department has expressed concern that the single-family homes do not appear to include fire protection systems. Given the close proximity of the structures, this would be a prudent addition to the scope. They also recommend central station fire alarm system monitoring for all of the buildings.
- The landscape plan does not appear to be fully coordinated with the civil plans.
- No outdoor bike racks for visitors are indicated on the site plans.
- The roof plan does not include mechanical equipment (which would be difficult in any case, given that the roofs are sloped). Is all of it proposed to be ground-mounted, and if so, where will all of the units be? If ground mounted, they should be shown on a site plan.

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

Comments: As noted above, this reviewer believes that the overall site plan needs to be modified to include usable outdoor spaces for the use of the residents and their visitors.

c. Use and treatment of natural resources.

Comments: Beyond the necessary clear-cutting noted above, it does not appear that any natural resources will be impacted by construction of this development. There are some issues expressed in the stormwater peer review regarding the feasibility of some of the proposed infiltration structures. Other site issues are included in the civil engineering peer review.

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

Comments: It is this reviewer's opinion that the primary "scale issue" is associated with the 8-unit townhouse structure, and its impact is primarily related to its proposed proximity to the abutter to the west. The proposed form of that building does not provide any mitigation, either through decrease in height and/or increase in its distance from the property line. It is clear that the scale of that building falls well outside of the existing pattern of development, and as such, needs to improve its "fit" with existing nearby structures. It is not this reviewer's opinion that the "style" of the building necessarily has to be significantly modified, particularly on the elevation on the north side facing Route 2.

Regarding the four homes in the rear of the site, their footprint and placement has precluded the inclusion of usable outdoor space on the site. And as noted above, there is inadequate space for buffering from the neighbors to the south. While the two-story height of the building makes sense relative to scale of surrounding buildings to the south, the four proposed structures take up too much space on the site to allow important shared amenities to be accommodated. This reviewer takes no issue with the "style" of the four single-families, but the program may have to be modified in order to create appropriately sized building footprints, adequately spaced from the property line (for example, do they need to be 4-bedroom units?).

In order to properly assess the impact of all of the structures, the developer should provide more three-dimensional information that includes nearby context, including views of the project from neighboring properties.

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

Comments: Most importantly, as discussed above, this reviewer believes that the townhouse building must employ meaningful mitigation strategies in order to minimize impact on the immediate abutters, and potentially from the public realm as well. More images that include views from existing context must be provided for the benefit of the ZBA and the public.

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

Comments: This is discussed above. The site is not particularly pedestrian or bike friendly, but there are numerous nearby amenities within a short distance of the site accessible by foot or bike. Floor plans should indicate space for bicycle storage for residents (which does not compromise the garage parking space), as well as bike parking for visitors. Adequacy of vehicular parking is outside of this reviewer's expertise, but it is notable that the site is well serviced by public transportation (which could argue for a lower parking ratio than housing that is not well served).

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

Comments: It appears that the site will have to be totally cleared in order to construct the proposed development (with the possible exception of the eastern end). As such, and given the minimal proposed buffering landscaping (with the exception of the east end of the property), the project is not well integrated into the existing context.

h. Exterior materials.

Comments: Elevations have been annotated to indicate material selections. This reviewer believes that these are reasonable for this type of housing, and similar to materials on nearby residential structures.

i. Energy efficiency.

Comments: Drawings and specifications are not adequately developed at this point to assess efficiency.

j. Exterior lighting.

Comments: Once the site plan has been finalized, a lighting plan should be submitted. As currently designed, given the lack of buffering landscape materials, the development will be very visible at night. Also note comment above about auto headlight intrusion into the neighbors to south (as well as to the east).

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

Comments: See comments above. Landscape plans and planting plans have been submitted, but do not depict a design that integrates the project into the surrounding context or provides adequate buffering.

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

Comments: There are a multitude of third party environmental and energy performance standards that buildings of this type could comply with (LEED, Energy Star, Passive House, Enterprise Green). Additionally, Belmont is a Stretch Code community, which if revised and coordinated with an updated base building code, will require the project to be designed to comply with a high standard for energy performance.

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

Comments: Other issues that have emerged from review of what has been submitted include:

- Not clear how school bus drop-off and pick up works. Is there protection from the weather provided?
- Are any AAB Group 2 units proposed, and where are they in the building? Are any other accessibility requirements applicable to the development?
- Where do residents store their bicycles?
- Are there EV spaces proposed within the garages and/or outdoors?
- The Fire Department recommends an outdoor smoking area, along with other modifications to the site design.
- Are the proposed crosswalk improvements adequate to ensure safe crossing of the Frontage Road to access the pedestrian bridge across Route 2?

n. Techniques to mitigate visual and other impacts.

Comments: Potential mitigation strategies for minimizing the impact of project from the immediate neighbors are discussed above.

6. *Participate in Zoom meeting(s) with municipal staff and the developer team ("working sessions"), to address to the ZBA's charge(s) to the developer.* No working session has been scheduled at this point)
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 hearings that addresses, at a minimum, the aspects of the development identified in number 5 above. Said report(s) 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.* Final report not yet drafted.

In brief summary, this reviewer believes that this site may suitable for a 40B development, however, as currently proposed, the site plan is inadequately resolved with regards to critical program necessities, including outdoor elements suited to the population of the development. There are also serious issues associated with lack of mitigation of scale, exacerbated by proximity to abutters.

I look forward to attending the ZBA hearing this coming Thursday, as well as reviewing revisions to this project that address concerns expressed by this reviewer and others who have considered the project.

Sincerely,
DAVIS SQUARE ARCHITECTS, INC



Clifford Boehmer AIA
President + Principal