

May 14, 2019



DAVIS
SQUARE
ARCHITECTS

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

Marie Rodgers, Administrative Assistant
IPSWICH ZONING BOARD OF APPEALS
Ipswich Town Hall
25 Green Street
Ipswich, MA 01938

Re: Preliminary Architectural Review
Essex Pastures, Essex Road, Ipswich MA

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

Dear Maria:

In anticipation of the ZBA hearing for the proposed development on Essex Road that is scheduled for Thursday, May 16 (which I am unable to attend), I am providing you with a preliminary review of the project's most recent documentation that was provided to me on Thursday, May 9. I am also including a few comments on the email from the Design Review Board dated April 9, 2019. Prior to receipt of those materials, I believe that I reviewed all previous iterations of documents, presentations, etc. that have been produced for public review for this project.

As is the case with most developments at this point in the 40B process, the project's design is schematic. Accordingly, my comments are limited in detail. My focus to date, pending further project development, has been on broader issues, mainly looking at how the proposed project fits into the existing context, impact to immediate abutters, scale mitigation strategies, perception from the public realm, the quality of the development for the future residents, building code issues, etc. Most of these issues have already been discussed with the development team, and some brought up at my presentation to the ZBA. Once the project "fundamentals" of circulation, parking, massing, setbacks, step-backs, buffers, on-site amenities, etc. are settled on, it will make sense to look more closely at architectural language, materials, and so on.

But before I provide specific comments on the documents provided to me, I'd like to offer the following over-arching comments on the design. Because this scale of development and building type does not currently exist in Ipswich, the design strategy has been to minimize the visual impact from the public realm by placing smaller buildings toward the front of the site and providing landscape buffering. This is a reasonable strategy and is not uncommon for 40B projects, given that they are virtually always denser than surrounding context. However, the next step for a dense housing scheme is to create a pleasant and humane experience for the residents of, and visitors to the development. This has been a focal point of my prior review comments and the working sessions we have conducted with the applicant as well as many of the comments by the Ipswich Design Review Board (see comments below). To this point, I am disappointed by the continued insensitivity of the design team in addressing the following points:

- The overarching impression of the development is buildings surrounded by a sea of unbroken parking.
- Walkways through the development have negligible setbacks to first floor windows, creating both an uncomfortable pedestrian environment and a privacy issue for first floor residents.
- First floor apartments at the rear of all buildings look out onto headlights.
- The longest segments of unbroken parking with no tree planting are on the order of 500 feet long.

In previous discussions I have supported the notion....and still do....of using the large buildings to define a central open space for a more campus-like experience. For many 40B projects in suburban settings, a successful design creates a park-like landscape with a beautifully landscaped circulation loop for vehicles and pedestrians that is well separated from building living space using plantings, building articulation and setbacks. In more urban conditions that may have relatively small setbacks from unit windows, first floor living spaces are raised up from the ground plane along landscaped streets to create separation of living space to public walking space and parked vehicles.

If the applicant is unable to rework the design to address these comments, then it would be my conclusion that the proposed unit and parking count is simply too high to be effectively integrated into the site area available.

Following are my comments on the materials I have reviewed:

- **Essex Pastures Site Layout dated 5/9/19, Bayside Engineering (Civil Engineer).** Comments: Most of this reviewer's discussions to date with the development team has been related to the site plan. And the plan has been significantly improved to address issues of this reviewer and others (many of the changes have been described in the civil engineer's memo noted below). Some concerns remain, including:
 - Primary double-loaded parking fields (and the single-loaded area along the green) are very large, with none of the area dedicated to tree planting (the largest of these parking lots is 500 feet long!). Can some visitor designated spaces be located on the connector drive at the west end of the green in order to add trees that break up long runs of parking in the lots?
 - Parking plan appears to show only 6 electric vehicle charging locations (which seems significantly fewer than what trends would indicate are advisable).
 - Stone Dust Path through primary green space must meet all accessibility requirements (as all walkways do).
 - The two townhouse units located closest to the mixed use building are very poorly sited, and should probably be eliminated. They are surrounded on two sides by parking and loading areas, including a dumpster, and are further hemmed in with snow storage on both sides.
 - The loading/dumpster area for the clubhouse should probably be located on the other side of the building where it is less visible from the main entry, Essex Road, and the neighbor at 44 Essex Road.
 - There do not appear to be bike racks indicated at any of the buildings.
 - While the single-loaded parking has been flipped along the two 33-unit buildings on the northeast side of the green (which has helped to make pedestrian circulation more pleasant), the green space that immediately abuts the structure is not large enough to create any sense of privacy for the first floor residents (see screen shots from SketchUp model that show difference between that walkway experience and what is provided at the other two 33-unit buildings). More comments on this situation are in the landscape plan comments below.
 - Are there use limitations on the area of the green labeled "bio-filtration basin." Is there a fence on the western edge of it where the slope is the steepest?

- **Essex Pastures Landscape Plan dated 4/6/18 (typo?), James K. Emmanuel Associates (Landscape Architect).** Comments: As noted above, there is concern that the development team has resisted making changes to the wall-like organization of the three-story (formerly four-story) structures. The less liner treatment of the driveway along the two east-west oriented buildings, combined with a tree planting strip between the walkway and the vehicular drive helps to mitigate the long streetwall of the two buildings. The development team should consider:
 - In addition to increasing the spacing between the buildings and the walkway, which should happen at all four buildings, the same less rigid, pedestrian friendly experience created with the planting strip should be extended along all of the buildings. This will require moving the single-loaded parking further away from the buildings, and taking some space out of the common green on two sides. This reviewer strongly believes this would be a better distribution of green space dedicated to the public realm. If the green is currently sized for infiltration purposes, permeable paving and drainage structures beneath parking areas can be designed to compensate for loss of grass.
 - While increasing the landscape area between the building fronts and the walkways will help with privacy, the walkways at the rear of the buildings would remain very close, the situation is exacerbated by parked cars facing unit windows. Building plans show enough entry level corridor space to allow ramping up on the interior to help get unit windows higher off of the walkways.
 - Landscaped areas along the entire length of the public drive should be designed to create a coherent streetscape (note that street trees are indicated on this plan along the entire drive, although there is no planting area indicated along two of the buildings).

- If the primary pedestrian loop connection is as indicated across the green beside the playground, it probably should not be paved with stone dust. Consideration should be given to providing a concrete sidewalk along the piece of connector drive where it is currently not shown (this would be necessary in any case if some of the parking is relocated to that part of the site). In that case, a secondary, stone dust walkway to the playground makes more sense.
- In general, the Landscape Plan (and SketchUp model) needs to be developed to a finer grained level in order to evaluate the quality of the outdoor space.

- **Essex Pastures Grading Plan dated 5/9/19, Bayside Engineer.** Comments:
 - Developer should confirm that all site amenities and paths to public ways meet all accessibility requirements with regards to slopes.

- **Memo from Bree Sullivan (Civil Engineer) to Bob Gambale (ZBA) dated May 9, 2019.** Comments: The memo was very helpful by recapping many changes that have been made to the site plan. A few remaining concerns include (some of which are related to comments above):
 - It's understood that raised crosswalks can cause problems with careless snowplowing, but their effectiveness at calming traffic is undeniable. If truly deemed infeasible, then consideration should be given to pavement delineations that are more significant than painted lines. Introduction of different paving materials can be effective from a safety perspective at crosswalks, and can also be used to help visually break up large parking fields (for example, restricting typical asphaltic paving to drive lanes, using contrasting permeable paving at parking spots).
 - Agreed that the pedestrian network has been improved, but that system still needs a more coherent design that makes the internal loop between the two site entries to Essex Road. This will help to integrate the development into the Town.
 - Comments on "pedestrian scale" site lighting make good sense, but not supported by some of the site lighting materials provided (more comments below).
 - Agree with recognition that more street furniture that "may be added" will encourage outdoor use and neighborhood gatherings. More detail should be provided.
 - The Estimated Water Supply Demand section of the memo was not reviewed.

- **AUTOTURN FIRETRUCK analytical drawings dated May 9, 2019, Bayside Engineering (7 sheets).** Comments:
 - Not reviewed in detail, however, it does appear that this reviewer's suggestion of moving the single loaded parking further into the common green to create better ground floor unit privacy will not adversely affect a fire truck's ability to turn onto the connector drive.

- **Essex Pastures 2 Lighting Layout Version A, dated 4/17/2019, RAB Lighting (includes 8 pages of technical backup).** Comments:
 - The photometric plan seems to indicate that spillover is not happening at neighbor's property lines, however light levels are indicated in adjacent commercial site directly on Essex Road. Is there a proposal to upgrade that lighting as part of the development?
 - A site lighting fixture plan, with elevations of proposed fixtures, should be provided to assist in evaluation.
 - Catalog cuts of light fixtures and poles do not seem particularly "pedestrian friendly." More information should be provided, and the chosen fixtures and poles should be integrated into SketchUp model.

- **Essex Pastures Building Sight Lines (Plan View), undated, Bayside Engineering.** Comments:
 - Document highlights fact that the mixed use building on the Essex Road commercial center (combined with existing commercial buildings, the townhouse clusters, and landscaping) provide significant screening of the development from Essex Road.
 - Primary value of diagram is indication of distances of two existing homes from the rear property line and the nearest proposed structures.

- **Essex Pastures Building Sight Lines from Houses at 29 & 31 Heartbreak Road, undated, Bayside Engineering.** Comments:
 - It is clear from the two site sections that the new buildings are of large enough scale that significant landscape screening by tall, non-deciduous trees will be required to block the neighbors view of the structures throughout the year.
 - Site sections confirm that grade changes across the site are subtle given the site's scale.

- **Essex Pastures schematic architectural set dated 5/7/19 (11 sheets), The MZO Group.** Comments: As stated earlier in this report, the documents are at a very early stage of development. Accordingly, comments are limited primarily to basic functional concerns:
 - Clubhouse building extremely simple program. HC bathroom design, as well as entry clearances into all spaces should be checked to confirm accessibility requirements.
 - No entry vestibule is indicated in the clubhouse.
 - Typically, management office would be positioned to be able to observe entry area of building.
 - Is package room also where mail will be delivered and picked up? If so, is it adequately sized?
 - Front elevation of the mixed use building indicates that the residential entry is very understated.
 - End elevation of mixed use building, which is prominent from entry drive, lacks visual interest.
 - Locations and plans for Group 2 accessible units not indicated in any of the residential building plans.
 - All units are of sufficient size that the design can be developed so that they can meet Group 1 dimensional requirements.
 - Third bedroom in townhouse units is indicated as a "loft" (and as a bedroom), with no door indicated. While this could potentially meet code design requirements to be classified as a "bedroom", is it sufficient for families that require 3-bedroom units?
 - As noted above, consideration should be given to raising the residential slabs higher than outside grade to help to maintain privacy in the ground floor units. This could result in an increase in building height, but the small relative change in scale of the structures is justifiable given enhancement of privacy.
 - Elevation of maintenance building that faces neighbor on Essex Road is not shown.

- **SketchUp model of Essex Pastures, The MZO Group.** Comments: While not yet fully detailed, the model is very effective at getting a good sense of the scale and level of detail of the proposed buildings, sight lines across the site, and the pedestrian's experience of the development. Model should be updated as the design advances.

- **Unit Breakdown spreadsheet dated 5/7/2019.** Comments: The development is required to have nine Group 2 units, three units fit out for hearing impaired residents, and all but the Group 2 units must be Group 1. While there are particular exemptions in the code for townhouse units, there is not an exemption from the requirement that the complex include at least one 3-bedroom Group 2 unit. As currently designed, the only 3-bedroom units are in the townhouse buildings. This type of unit cannot be configured to meet Group 2 requirements. If the developer's intention is to exclude three bedroom units from this requirement, a variance from the Architectural Access Board will be required.

- **Design Review Board email dated April 9, 2019.** Comments:
 - I concur that the given the length and height of the residential buildings, and relative to nearby residential pattern and scale of development, the project is “not representative of the vernacular of Ipswich.” In recognition of that, the approach of the developer is to mitigate scale transition by the placement of the clubhouse and townhouse structures closest to the road, and to provide landscaping near the road. The success of this strategy will be determined by careful review of the SketchUp model, particularly after more detail has been added to the current version.
 - Agreed that the entrances to the buildings are not adequately articulated.
 - The DRB is also concerned about the “long unbroken expanse of parking areas.”
 - Traffic calming measures could enhance the safety of driveway crossing to access the play area that is within the common green space.
 - Developer should confirm that the fact that decks crossing into the no-build zone is not an issue.

I hope that you find these preliminary comments useful, and will contact me with any questions you may have about my observations and/or analysis. I'm looking forward to discussing this further discussion of this project with the ZBA and the development team.

Attached to this memo on the following page are two screenshots taken from the SketchUp model that illustrate some comments that were made above about the pedestrian experience of the site and privacy issues for ground floor residents.

Sincerely,
DAVIS SQUARE ARCHITECTS, INC

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'C. Boehmer', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Clifford Boehmer AIA
President + Principal



Walkway without planting strip or adequate buffering from unit windows.



Walkway with planting strip, but still too close to unit windows.