

## Memorandum

To: Chris Claussen

From: Steven Cecil AIA ASLA, The Cecil Group/Harriman

Date: August 4, 2016

RE: Responses to Peer Review, Sudbury Commons, Site Planning and Site Design Topics

This memorandum has been prepared as requested to respond to the observations prepared by the Peer Review Consultant retained by the Town of Sudbury as part of the Sudbury Commons proposal review process. This process is being conducted by the Town's Zoning Board of Appeals because the project has been submitted under the auspices of Massachusetts' Chapter 40B legislation. The site planning, site design and architecture review was undertaken by Davis Square Architects and was submitted by Clifford Boehmer AIA on June 18, 2016.

We have reviewed the letter from Mr. Boehmer and have focused our comments on the items that address the site planning and site design. We assume that the bulk of his comments address the submitted plan that was a refinement of the original application, with the last dated version being March 18, 2016 as noted in the reference list in the letter.

Many of the comments correctly interpret the design intentions and implications. However, some of the comments are incorrect or do not appear to be relevant to the purpose of the review, as we understand it. We have listed these items below, in the same order that they are described in the Peer Review letter.

### **Orientation of principal buildings in relation to each other, and to streets, parking areas, open space, and on- site amenities, and to solar access**

1. Building siting - The letter provides a simplified interpretation of the building siting, correctly recognizing that the site topography plays a primary role. Having established this as a principal rationale, the letter does not acknowledge other important, contributing siting principles. The letter then includes a contradictory and incorrect statement that the building relationships are "incidental".

*Many of the buildings are sited to respond to the steeply sloped portion of the site. However, the building siting and relationships serve several other important considerations to reduce off-site impacts and create a high quality residential environment meeting the developer's goals.*

*- The townhouses and row of buildings along the upper tier of the site do not strictly follow the existing contours, but have been arranged in parallel fashion to frame the circulation and orient the front doors of all of the buildings along it, similar to a street.*

*- The building at the northern end of the site has been turned 90 degrees relative to the predominant slope to frame the common open space and afford unit views towards the common "green" and towards the reserved land towards the north.*

*- The arrangement of the buildings intentionally avoids repetitive or simple geometries to create a more varied experience moving through the site and varied views from the units. It deliberately avoids the symmetrical arrangements typical of modern style or neo-classically inspired arrangements often associated with multi-family housing, multi-building projects.*

*- The clubhouse has been placed on a pronounced promontory as a visible centerpoint for the residential community, so that it marks the arrival sequence and is at a high point. This point and the facility would also be visible and accessible by foot paths from the common "green".*

*- The buildings have been organized by massing and height in a tiered fashion, keeping the lowest buildings near highest site elevations, and the taller buildings at the lower site elevations.*

**2. The purpose of siting that is based on contours and observations on the building footprints**

- The review letter proceeds from an over-simplified interpretation that the siting is based on contours and then incorrectly concludes that the purpose of such siting is to enhance the "sense of connection to and appreciation of the site topography". The letter then states that articulated footprints would allow the project to better achieve this purpose.

*We are not aware of any theoretical or practice-based standard that states that siting which respects predominant topography is based on a purpose to "enhance a sense of connection to and appreciation of the site topography". We do not intend to induce this sense or appreciation as a goal. The adaptation to the site topography has many other purposes and direct benefits. For example, it allows the design to cost-effectively conceal about half of the parking, providing considerably more open space as a result. It allows the distribution of units and building masses to make them less visible from the adjacent cemetery and other sensitive areas.*

*We are also unaware of any theoretical or practice principles which state that articulated building footprints allow a better sense of connection, appreciation or otherwise enhance building siting on steep slopes. The letter employs the term "big-box" in relation to the larger building footprints. This is generally a pejorative term associated with retail establishments that have characteristics that are fundamentally different from the housing being provided in this site plan. The review then notes that articulated building footprints reduce long interior corridors; we understand that the purpose of this review is to address public interests in the site design, and this does not include the configuration of interior hallways. Based on the comments, we understand that the reviewer may prefer articulated building footprints and massing, but this view is not substantiated in terms of a logical relationship to the site design parameters as they apply to the Town's interests as we understand them.*

3. Orientation of the townhouses and parking - The review letter states that the only relationship among townhouse buildings will be on the patio side, and that driveways will continuously interrupt the sidewalk.

*The townhouse front doors and "front" building elevations will face the "street" along which they would be placed, creating a direct and similar relationship to the buildings on the other side of the street, which will also have their main entrances and "front" facades facing them. The sidewalk would be designed to be continuous, with ramped curb cuts to diminish the interruption from the occasional car moving to and from a garage.*

4. Siting and building relationship of the clubhouse - The letter suggests that there is no siting principle or intentional building relationship for the clubhouse.

*As noted previously, the clubhouse was purposefully sited as a distinctive building that will serve the residential community of Sudbury Common. It is not a residential structure like the other project components. It is intended to have a distinctive and prominent site and architectural presence. The site for the clubhouse in this site plan was deliberately chosen because of its prominence on a natural knoll, at the end of the main entry sequence and with a clear view to and from the green "common", which is a feature of the site plan.*

5. Streetscape and village-like experience - The review letter requests further design development and specific techniques for traffic calming.

*The imagery of a village center is used in several places in the letter and is employed to suggest that a village-like streetscaping and traffic calming would be appropriate. We acknowledge the importance of having an attractive landscape along the pedestrian paths and vehicular circulation drives and provisions for safety. However, the experience is not intended to be "village-like" as may be conceived and appropriate for mixed-use town centers and large mixed-use sites, but will be tailored to this site and its uses.*

6. Programmable open space and the green "common" - The review letter notes that a large green common area is framed by buildings, suggests that it may not be programmable for resident use, and is separated from the potential garden space.

*We are not aware of Town criteria associated with "programmability" for private residential sites that will be owned and operated by non-public entities. The common space is not a public space; it is private open space provided for those within the residential community and visitors. Although the review letter refers elsewhere to an intent to provide for public access and use, it is not the intent of the site design to provide public paths, parks, open space or other such uses on site.*

*There is ample space to create one or more play areas for small children as may be appropriate, if they are needed. In the planning for the site, the common open space is programmed for passive enjoyment and for walking paths. About 1/2 acre, nearly one-half of this space, will be relatively flat and could be used by residents and guests for informal recreation such as ball games, frisbee, or more organized recreation such as volleyball and lawn games if the residents and project management wish to support such*

activities. However, they would not be under any obligation to do so as a consequence of the proposed site plan.

The review letter uses the pejorative term "boxes" to describe the buildings that frame the central common area; they are not boxes. The review has previously indicated a preference for articulated building footprints and masses, but does not indicate why the building massing effects the use of the open space, which is the subject of the comments in this section of the letter.

There are no functional requirements, regulatory requirements or benefits associated with direct visual connection between the common open space and community gardens. Such spaces exist independently without detriment in many communities. A pedestrian path would link them. Removing a building that has been purposefully sited to frame the common space and accomplish other important site and development purposes is not justified by the suggestion of an unnecessary link between these spaces.

The review letter suggests that there is a direct connection between the density of the project and the capacity to have programmable open space. The opposite is the case. The higher density allows the absorption of a significant amount of parking below building footprints, creating more open space than would otherwise occur and is typical of suburban, surface-parked housing developments. Replacing open space with surface parking associated with a lower density composition can have the opposite effect suggested in the review letter. Some of the most vital, programmable open spaces in the region are located in downtown Boston, for example.

7. Common space orientation and proportions - The review letter suggests that the orientation and shadow implications for the proposed central common space is inappropriate and would negatively impact its use. The review letter suggests that the height of the buildings is spatially inappropriate.

The review letter suggests that the buildings negatively impact the internal open space. The term "impact" in reviews of project is normally applied to public interests and off-site conditions. A project does not impact itself. The review letter likens the interior common to public open spaces or parks, which it is not.

However, as a matter of site design, the sunlight conditions have been purposefully planned to provide a positive asset to the site and its residents. The central site open space is generally oriented north-south, which optimizes mid-day sunlight conditions. Environmental evaluations of sunlight and shadow conditions typically emphasize spring and fall conditions; in the mid-summer, shade is often a benefit, and in the winter the combination of temperatures, wind and snow conditions in New England are stronger factors in open space use than shadows. Because of the north-south orientation, only one side of the space will be shadowed as the sun moves across the sky. The building heights, in relation to the open space width, ensure that a substantial portion of open space will be in sun during hours of typical outdoor activity in the spring and fall.

The proportions of the buildings to the common open space are at the lower limits of typical relationships that are used by urban designers to help define an appropriate balance between structures that occupy a site and the space between them, and still

*create a sense of identity, community and enclosure. They are well below typical urban proportions, or proportions associated with town center environments.*

**Compatibility of building design with surrounding areas, including but not limited to design elements to mitigate the visual impact of higher density and taller buildings on nearby residential neighborhoods.**

8. Relationship between building form and visual impact - The review letter indicates that the building forms are not compatible with the surrounding building designs.

*In the comments on visual impacts, the review letter acknowledges that the siting and building massing significantly limit visual impacts on the surrounding neighborhoods, which is composed of other building types. The review letter then suggests use of details and design characteristics of other buildings in town. It is not clear how these design features will reduce visual impacts from the nearby residential neighborhoods if they cannot be seen from those neighborhoods.*