

**MELROSE BOARD OF APPEALS
MEETING MINUTES
Public Hearing
Wednesday, May 15, 2024
7:30 p.m.
Remote Meeting**

Present:

Daniel Gelormini
Benjamin Rosenberg
Megan Carriere
Chris Coughlin
David Roache
Bryan Thorp

Absent:

Curtis B. Dooling, II

Staff Present: Lori Massa, Senior Planner & Maya Noviski, Assistant Planner

The meeting was called to order at 7:35 pm.

Pursuant to Chapter 2 of the Acts of 2023, this meeting will be conducted via remote participation. Specific information and the general guidelines for remote participation by members of the public and/or parties with a right and/or requirement to attend this meeting were found on the City of Melrose's website, at www.cityofmelrose.org/remote-meetings. No in-person attendance of members of the public was permitted, but every effort was made to ensure that the public could adequately access the proceedings in real time, or in the event that we are unable to do so, on the mmtv3.org website an audio or video recording, transcript, or other comprehensive record of proceedings was posted as soon as possible after the meeting. A link was also available on www.cityofmelrose.org.

Application materials were posted to the City's website: www.cityofmelrose.org/board-appeals.

CASES BEFORE THE BOARD

24 009 – 164 Essex Street

The application of Cedar Park Development LLC for a Comprehensive Permit pursuant to M.G.L. c.40B, s. 21 to construct an approximately 23,309 sq. ft., 5-story building with 76 residential units and 54 parking spaces at 164 Essex Street in Melrose on a lot containing 32,148 sf and shown on Assessor's Map C8 0 4. Nineteen of the project's units will be affordable as is required and regulated under the law.

Jesse Schomer, Attorney, Sean and Laura Szekely, Applicants, James Emmanuel, Landscape Architect, Donnie Garrity, Architect, Dan Mills, Traffic Engineer, and Rich Williams, Engineer, appeared before the Board to present the case.

Attorney Schomer provided an overview of the project explaining that the proposed site is an off-site parking lot for employees of the Melrose-Wakefield Hospital. He noted that in more recent weeks it has been used more frequently because a hospital building and parking lot is undergoing construction, which is expected to be completed in the coming weeks. He presented information on the number of proposed units, parking spaces, the surrounding uses, and the overall design of the proposed project. He added that the Applicant is proposing to modify the on-street parking in front of the building by striping one of the seven spaces and creating a delivery/short-term parking zone for the neighborhood where the entrance to the parking lot is currently.

Attorney Schomer informed the Board that the Applicant has held neighborhood meetings with residents across the street and next door, and has spoken with several City Councilors prior to the hearing. Mr. Szekely added that the intention of the meetings was to understand how best to minimize disruptions to direct abutters, but he is open to speaking with anyone else that might be affected.

Mr. Garrity provided the Board with an explanation of the architectural plans. The building's main entrance is proposed to be off Essex St. adjacent to the resident amenity area and exterior patio space. The current opening for the parking lot will be closed and the on-street loading zone will replace it, in line with the main entryway. The ground floor of the building consists of a bicycle room and a pet care room, which will have transparent, storefront windows along the frontage facing the street. The front yard will have landscaping and two public benches. There will be a roof deck and an amenity space on the top floor. HVAC equipment will be placed on the roof and the Applicant will install a solar array although the locations of the panels have not yet been finalized.

The entrance to the garage is also off Essex St. on the opposite wing of the building from the pedestrian entrance and supports two-way traffic. Cars will be screened from the street along the front of the building, but the garage will be open along the back of the building. The trash room is located to the left of the garage entrance, which is recessed and tall enough to allow a trash truck to drive onsite and collect the receptacles in an efficient manner.

Mr. Garrity explained that the design consists of bay and balcony elements, changes in window pattern, and different façade textures, colors, and materials to break up the massing of the building. The fifth floor of the building is stepped back and the roof lines are broken up to minimize the building's scale. He added that the shadow study shows minimal impact to abutters including those across the tracks.

Mr. Emmanuel explained that the landscaping plan was designed to complement the rhythm of the building. The bulk of the landscaping is in the front yard, there are pockets of greenery around the entire building. He noted that trees in front will be long and slender, and shrubbery will be planted in between to not obscure the windows. The proposed plant varieties are native to the area.

Mr. Williams explained that the site is currently entirely paved and there is a subsurface drainage system with overflow valves out to Essex St. In the proposed plans, roof runoff will be collected

and stored in a subsurface system. Runoff from the garage will go through an oil and grit separator and out to a sewer on Essex St. Areas outside of the building will either be pervious pavement or pavers. The building will tie into existing water and sewer pipes. The proposed plan reduces the existing peak rates of runoff.

Mr. Mills explained that traffic counts were collected at the Essex St. and West Emerson St., and Essex St. and Myrtle St. intersections to understand existing traffic patterns and volume and predict future ones. Based on the models, the project is expected to result in a minimal increase in traffic and there will not be a decrease in level of service when comparing build and no build scenarios. Mr. Mills noted that the Applicant is preparing a transportation demand management plan to encourage alternative modes of transportation and given the building's location on the Mystic Highlands Greenway Bicycle Route and the site's proximity to public transportation and amenities, residents are expected to be less dependent on automobiles. He added that striping the on-street parking space closest to the garage entrance will ensure clear visibility for cars entering and exiting the garage. Additionally, a stop sign is proposed at the intersection of Essex St. and Vine St. to increase safety.

Board Members wondered about the design for the garage. Mr. Garrity explained that the proposal includes podium parking with steel columns. The garage will be open along the rear of the building and will be mostly screened along the front. It will not be ventilated. Board Members requested that the architect explore ways to screen the parking spaces along the back of the building. One Member commented that the structural columns were not properly sized on the plans, and they should be revised. Members questioned why the parking spaces at the southern end of the building were unscreened and outside the footprint of the building and felt that they would be difficult to navigate. One Board Member added that the hammerhead spaces at the back of the lot were awkward, would only add one additional parking space and would require snow removal during the winter. Members requested turning radii diagrams for those spaces. They also requested more detail on the bicycle parking spaces to ensure that they were functional.

Attorney Schomer noted that the land behind the site is owned by the MBTA and the Applicant is in the final stages of obtaining an easement to use the land for additional parking so the parking plan is subject to change. One Board Member commented that grading in the MBTA lot appears to require a retaining wall. It was also noted that pervious pavement requires maintenance, and the Applicant should consider other materials for the areas outside of the building's footprint.

It was noted that the parking spaces would be unbundled from the rent and would be reserved for tenants unless there was a lower demand at which point visitor spaces could be incorporated. Attorney Schomer added that one parking space will be reserved for each affordable unit. One Board Member asked if the traffic study considered the residents at the Residence at Melrose Station whose schedules may not follow traditional peak hours of travel. Mr. Mills explained that the surveys just considered the peak hours, which is standard practice. One Member commented that the proposed hours of construction are during peak traffic and the Applicant may want to consider ways to mitigate congestion from the project.

Board Members wondered if a study was conducted to assess potential echo effects from the project to the houses across the tracks and suggested adding vegetation to block the sound. Attorney Schomer responded that the team will explore different options for mitigating possible impacts. Some Members were concerned with the design of the rear of the building and the lack of detail compared to the front, although a member pointed out that quality materials are proposed for all sides of the building. Mr. Garrity responded that he will explore adding different textures and colors to plans. Members also commented that the southern portion of the building looks flat and requested that the architect add more articulation.

Board Members wondered if the affordable units would be dispersed throughout the building and requested plans showing their proposed locations. One Board Member asked about sustainability measures. It was confirmed that plans include solar panels, EV chargers, and efficient appliances, and that the building will also abide by the new state energy code. Members commented that the Applicant should discuss the location of the EV chargers with the Fire Department. One Board Member asked if the Applicant had conducted a soil analysis and it was confirmed that results from the tests show that some of the soil will need to be replaced for structural quality. Board Members requested the data collected from the borings. One Member pointed out that the landscape plan shows a tree in the location of a catch basin.

Board Members wondered if the transformer could be screened. Mr. Garrity explained that it must be accessible, but more landscaping could be added. Board Members raised concerns about the distance between the transformer and the building and requested that the Applicant confirm the plan with National Grid to ensure that the proposal is feasible. One Member pointed that the plans indicate that the sidewalk on Essex St. is on the property and suggested that the Applicant may want to grant an easement to the City to reduce their liability. Members also questioned if striping the on-street parking space was necessary and commented that move-ins will have to be coordinated to not block Essex St.

Members raised concerns about fire access. Attorney Schomer explained that the development team spoke with the Fire Prevention Captain to start the discussion about access. An easement can be negotiated with the properties on either side to allow for life-safety access if needed. Discussions regarding access for emergency egress from the MBTA commuter rail platform through the property is also underway. One Member commented that an easement may also be needed for the crane during construction.

The Board received six letters and two people from the public appeared to speak during the hearing including Bruce Carmichael at 121 Essex St. and Houghton Yonge at 220 Essex St. Those in support noted:

- The location of the project, specifically that it is a transit-oriented development and close to many amenities
- The provision of additional housing units
- The project's boost to the City's economy
- The number of bicycle parking spaces and the location of the bike parking room on the ground floor with a repair station
- The striping of the on-street parking space to enhance visibility

Concerns included:

- The design including the rear of the building and the lack of screening for the garage
- Lack of green space
- The impact of the project on public utilities and traffic
- The size and scale of the building
- The location of the roof deck
- The building's shadow
- Construction worker parking
- The number of parking spaces

A site walk was scheduled for June 2, 2024 at 10 AM. The Board requested that the Applicant demarcate the building corners and the property lines of the MBTA lot.

By roll call the Board voted 5-0, to grant a continuance to June 5, 2024. Voting Members included David Roache, Bryan Thorp, Benjamin Rosenberg, Chris Coughlin, and Megan Carriere.

OTHER BUSINESS

Next Meeting

The next meeting is scheduled for June 5, 2024.

The meeting adjourned at 10:15 pm.