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February 26, 2024

Mr. Tobin Shulman, Chairperson
ZONING BOARD OF APPEALS
Town of Stoneham
35 Central Street
Stoneham, MA 02180

Re: Preliminary Architectural Peer Review of Residences at Spot Pond

Dear Mr. Shulman:

In anticipation of Wednesday night's (2.28.24) hearing, I am writing to provide preliminary architectural peer review comments on the proposed development, The Residences at Spot Pond. This letter follows the format that I outlined in my February 6, 2024 fee proposal. I am looking forward to presenting a summary of these thoughts and answering any questions the Board may have at the hearing.

As is typical at this stage of a development of this type, the architectural and engineering drawings are at a very schematic level (which explains why this letter is "preliminary"). Accordingly, sections of this report include requests for additional documentation that will facilitate a more thorough review of the proposal.

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 on Executive Drive, I have reviewed the following materials:

From the Development Team:

- The Residences at Spot Pond Comprehensive Permit Site Approval Application prepared by Fellsway Development LLC dated June 30 2023.
- Project Eligibility Letter from MassHousing dated November 8, 2023.
- Environmental Impact Assessment for 5 Woodland Road prepared by Goddard Consulting dated November 10, 2023.
- The Residences at Spot Pond drawing set prepared by Cube 3 dated November 16, 2023 (15 sheets).
- The Residences at Spot Pond drawing set prepared by Allen & Major Associates dated November 16, 2023 (20 sheets).
- Comprehensive Permit Application to Town of Stoneham Zoning Board of Appeals (Project Summary and various exhibits) submitted by Fellsway Development LLC dated December 14, 2023.
- Traffic Impact Assessment for The Residences at Spot Pond, prepared by Langan Engineering & Environmental Services dated November, 2023.
- Conceptual SketchUp model of proposed development prepared by Cube 3

Town, Peer Review, and other Consultant Reports:

- Letter to ZBA from McKenzie Engineering Group (engineering peer review letter) dated February 21, 2024.

Communications from citizenry:

- None received or reviewed to date.

(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. *Participate in an initial meeting at the site, potentially with the developer's design team and a representative of the Town.* This reviewer made an unaccompanied visit to the site and neighboring areas on February 7, 2024. There has been no site visit with any member of the development team.
3. *Conduct site visit and reconnaissance assessment of surrounding residential and nonresidential areas within 1/2 mile of the project site.* This letter is based on the site visit of February 7, 2024, as well as Google Earth review.

Brief comments on site reconnaissance: The site is located at 5 Woodland Road, which is part of a larger development parcel on the east side of Woodland Road that is embedded within the Middlesex Fells Reservation to the north, south, and east, and bounded by Woodland Road and Spot Pond to the West. Other development within the large parcel includes two residential developments (one rental, one condominium), an assisted living facility, and a medical office facility. The topography of the site is complex, and all of the existing developments have designed their site plans to adapt to the grade changes, generally by employing terracing to create relatively flat building sites. The site for the proposed project will be created by the demolition of an existing hospital building and other smaller structures located on a high point of the larger parcel.

While the parcel is a relatively isolated "destination" site largely dependent on motor vehicle access, given its immediate access to an MBTA bus line (that connects to the Orange Line), it is a site that's appropriate for dense, multi-family development. At the same time, it has excellent access to outdoor amenities that are within the Fells reservation (although at the moment, there is not an improved pedestrian crossing at Woodland from either ends of Executive Drive that would facilitate access to the walkway on the west side of Woodland. The Traffic Impact Assessment suggests that there may be crosswalks planned in this location.). The application materials state that the project is within 2.1 miles of shopping facilities, 1.4 miles to schools, 2.5 miles to public safety facilities, and 1 mile to houses of worship.

4. *Submit queries from Applicant's design team via staff only, as appropriate.* This reviewer requested (and was granted) access to the architect's SketchUp model for the proposed development.
5. *Provide an initial oral presentation to the ZBA. A written report shall be submitted prior. Said presentation shall include comments and preliminary recommendations on the following. Visuals with annotations may be included to identify issues and convey recommendations.* This initial presentation will occur at the ZBA hearing scheduled for February 28, 2024.

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

Comments: The proposed development consists of two, four-to-six-story buildings separated by an internal access/parking drive. Building A is on the west side of the drive, and includes 143 units. Building B to the east includes 235 units, as well as an interior parking garage at its lowest level. Both buildings include courtyard spaces that face the central drive, Building A's is at grade, Building B's are at the second level when viewed from the access drive.

The courtyard at Building A includes an at-grade swimming pool, but we do not know what is proposed for the remainder of the open space. Similarly, we do not know what is programmed for the courtyards at Building B.

In addition to the garage parking at Building B, there is surface parking along the central drive, at-grade outdoor parking within the northern courtyard in Building B, single loaded parking along the east side of Building B (along with garage parking on the opposite side of the outdoor parking), three tiers of double loaded parking on the west side of Building A, as well as a remote parking area, primarily consisting of garage spaces to the north of Building B. The reported parking ratio is 1.7, which totals 643 spaces for the 378 units. While outside of this reviewer's purview, this appears to be sufficient parking, with very easy access for the development's residents. This density of outdoor surface parking, combined with significant areas of sloped site has limited the inclusion of on-site, outdoor programmable spaces. While not possible to determine from the drawings, usable outdoor space (other than the elevated courtyard) may be limited to the courtyard at Building A.

None of the parking plans included in the submitted materials include plans for bicycle parking.

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

Comments: The 378 units are broken up as follows: 24 @ Studio, 169 @ 1-BR, 146 @ 2-BR, and 39 @ 3-BR. This mix provides a total of 602 bedrooms, 224 of which could potentially be occupied by children. Given the unit count and mix, this reviewer believes that there needs to be on-site outdoor space for active use, particularly for young children. More definition of the site amenities is important, and should include the typical mix of passive recreation facilities common in this type of development. In addition to space dedicated for children.

The landscape plan indicates some proposed landscape screening, but as noted in the McKenzie peer review, additional screening should be provided around the proposed parking at 11 Executive Drive. Additional tree planting within the parking areas would be an important environmental upgrade, and would also create additional screening. This is particularly the case at the parking on the west side of the site that fronts on Woodland Road.

While the courtyards (both the elevated ones at B and the at-grade at A) can provide valuable programmable outdoor space, given their immediate adjacency to a number of dwelling units, care must be taken to ensure that there are suitable buffers that protect the privacy of the units that surround the courtyard. Presumably a landscape plan will be submitted that details how this is accomplished.

c. Use and treatment of natural resources.

Comments: The Applicant submitted an Environmental Impact Assessment prepared by Goddard Consulting that concluded that "the proposed development does not impact any important habitat features or water resources on-site." It goes on to point out that this site has been previously developed. While not strictly a natural resource issue, this reviewer would like to see the landscape plan provide more detail about plantings to remain on the western border of the site (there are no new plantings indicated). It is along this edge of the site where the development will be viewed by the public from Woodland, and a robust planting plan would help tie the development into the Fells reservation.

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

Comments: As noted above, the nearby built context is very limited, and there is generous space between the existing residential developments and the subject property. The scale of the proposed buildings is very similar to the larger of the two existing developments, and height-wise, is lower than the existing hospital scheduled for demolition (according to the submitted materials, the existing building's maximum height is 97 feet, the proposed building's is 65 feet). While the proposed front and side setbacks are less than the existing structure, this impact is mitigated by the building scale and design, as well as potentially by proposed landscaping.

The presence of the proposed structures is further mitigated by the fact that both of them are to the north of the two existing residential developments. This ensures that there will be minimal shadow impact from the new buildings (although it is important to confirm this through the submission of shadow studies). The medical office building to the north of Building A will see shadow impact.

The exterior design of the buildings is compatible with the two nearby existing developments. The complex massing of the structures, combined with the variety of materials, patterning, placement of tower elements and overhangs, as well as balconies serve to break down the scale of the structures. One area of concern, although largely limited to the view experience by the development's own residents, is the west elevation of Building B. This long elevation features ground level views into the parking areas. The building elevations do not indicate what façade materials, if any, would provide screening from parked cars.

Given the large areas of fiber cement that is noted on the elevations, this reviewer believes that a high-quality type of this material should be utilized (specifically, high density, integral color type). Basically, these buildings are too large and prominent to be clad in materials that will need regular maintenance. If that is not economically feasible, the Board should consider a condition that requires an operating budget that includes sufficient funds for a 15-year exterior repainting cycle (or alternatively, requires building envelope materials that do not require regular maintenance...like the high-density cementitious type or metal panels).

There are a number of elevations missing from the submitted materials, as well as upper-level floor plans and roof plans. The limited elevations that were provided do not indicate rooftop equipment, elevator overruns, stair penthouses, etc. All of this documentation should be submitted to facilitate review. While the SketchUp model is very

useful, particularly for understanding the relationship between the two buildings' massing, it is missing some facades, as well as a sufficient depiction of site conditions surrounding the buildings.

It is beyond the purview of this letter to analyze the impact of increased traffic created by the new residents, delivery, waste disposal, etc. The Applicant has provided a Traffic Impact Assessment that concludes that proposed use on the site will generate fewer vehicle trips than the existing hospital and other approved uses. However, it does not appear that the Applicant has submitted a Transportation Demand Management Plan that would describe strategies that would diminish resident's dependence on motor vehicles.

e. *Impact on streetscapes (major thoroughfares and abutting residential neighborhood).*

Comments: The project will have a prominent visual presence from all directions, however, there is sufficient space all around Executive Drive to provide mitigating landscape buffering. The massing, facade design, and proposed use of the proposed buildings would be an upgrade relative to the existing hospital structure, more compatible with the nearby residential uses and aesthetics.

Some consideration should be given to improving the streetscape and pedestrian environment along the drive/parking area that separates the two structures. At a minimum, increasing the walkway widths and creating more planted areas within the head-in parking spaces would improve the situation. Additional planting area between the walkway and the building facades would also be a significant upgrade.

As noted in several places in this letter, there are some materials missing that will help to understand the impact of the development. As mentioned above, it appears that shadow studies have not been included in the submitted materials. While shadows may not be impactful off-site, seeing shadow studies will help to understand the environment within the two courtyards and the separating drive/parking area, as well as the impact on the medical office building.

f. ***Sensitivity to character defining features on nearby streets, residential multifamily neighborhoods, and other developments.*** This has been addressed above.

g. ***Views of the project visible from the public street, public areas and from the vantage point of nearby residential neighborhoods.*** Of greatest concern is the view from Woodland Road. A more detailed Landscape Plan and updated SketchUp model will facilitate review of this aspect of the project.

h. ***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 visitor, loading, drop-off/pick-up facilities; how lack of parking might serve or not serve the program.*** While perhaps more in the purview of the engineering peer reviewer(s), this reviewer has several concerns:

- The drop-off/delivery area indicated at the south side of Building A may be insufficient (particularly if it is meant to service both buildings)
- Areas designated for move-ins, tradespeople parking, etc. do not appear to be indicated on site plans (presumably these operations would not happen at the development's "front door")
- Confirm that number of proposed accessible parking spaces meet code requirements
- Do some accessible spaces need to be placed in the detached garage locations?
- There do not appear to be any designated interior bicycle parking areas. Given that location of this development, one would expect a bike parking ratio similar to that expected in nearby communities.
- Where are exterior bike racks for visitors?
- Is there a proposal for a school bus/MBTA bus waiting area/shelter?
- A significant number of EV parking stations should be provided. In addition to what may be proposed for the initial occupation of the building, infrastructure for expansion of the number of spaces should be built into the project, including the capacity of the project's transformer(s).
- Car sharing spaces (ZIP Car, etc.) should be considered.

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

The existing site is currently developed with significant areas of paving and roofscape (all impervious surfaces). There are limited areas of mature tree growth, as well as large lawns that surround two sides of the existing hospital

structure. The proposed development appears to increase impervious areas on the site, including the remote parking area north of the two buildings.

The landscape plan designates some locations where existing trees will remain, however, it does not detail the sizes of those trees. More information on the plan would help to assess how effective the existing tree cover can be integrated into the development.

As far as integration of the buildings into the site, as noted above, both of the buildings adapt to the grade changes that rise from west to east. The western (downhill) elevation of Building A is a full 5 stories that includes dwelling units that are on grade, presumably with the option of direct access to the outdoors from the units. The western elevation of Building B is fully six stories, with first level parking open to the internal drive (this is discussed above). The habitable deck within the southern courtyard of the building is on the second level (which is the at-grade level on the eastern five-story elevation).

It is unclear from the floor plans what is considered the primary resident entry for Building B, although one of the renderings appears to indicate an entry at the lower level beneath what is designated as amenity space on the second floor. This seems awkward, as to access the elevators to bring a resident up to the second floor, it is necessary to walk through the parking garage.

In summary, while both buildings work with the grades to integrate the buildings and site, Building A does a more convincing job. While it would sacrifice parking spaces, consideration should be given to activating the western elevation of Building B by placing common use spaces that relate to the lane between the two buildings. A good opportunity for this part of the project would be the creation of a woonerflike area (vs. a parking lot).

Improvements to this space should not preclude the consideration of a pronounced entry on the eastern elevation of Building B, both for the convenience of the residents, but also to break up the length of the structure along the roadway (this side of the building is on the order of 480 feet long). As noted above, the project appears to be served by only one location for drop off/pick up/ routine deliveries/and moveins. Perhaps the eastern elevation of Building B could be the place to accommodate the independent needs of the building.

j. Exterior materials.

Comments: With some exceptions, building elevations have been annotated to indicate material selections. But as noted above, all of the elevations have not been included in the submitted materials. Also, see the comments above re: maintainability of cementitious siding materials.

k. **Exterior Lighting.** Lighting plans have been submitted, and this reviewer takes no issue with them.

l. **Proposed landscape elements, planting materials, and planting design; opportunities for open space.** See comments above. While a Landscape Plan has been submitted, more information is necessary. Perhaps most importantly, the program as discernable from the application materials does not include outdoor play space for young children.

m. 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 are more rigorous than the building code minimum, including LEED, Energy Star, Passive House, and Enterprise Green. Stoneham has adopted the Stretch Code, but apparently not the Specialized code. From the application materials, it appears that the only "sustainability" commitment the Applicant has made is to provide Energy Star approved appliances. For a project of this scale, that includes numerous affordable units, this reviewer believes that a far more robust approach to sustainability should be adopted.

n. *Any other design-related comments/questions/considerations identified by this peer reviewer, ZBA, City staff, working group, or the citizenry of Stoneham.*

- Given the scale and intensity of site coverage, provide a Construction Management Plan that ensures constructability and minimizes impact to the community and surrounding sites. This is a recommendation of the engineering peer reviewer, who is concerned about some of the high retaining walls.
- Provide information related to sitewide accessibility, including an idea of where the fully accessible units are proposed, site circulation to all amenities, etc.
- Both buildings appear to include two elevators in the plans, and both of the cabs appear to be the same size. Consideration should be given to providing one larger freight elevator/building.
- Provide more detail related to the programming of the interior common spaces and courtyards.
- Are proposed new walkways asphaltic or cement concrete?
- A new gas service is indicated in the utility plans (at least at Building A). Has the Applicant considered an all-electric building?
- Provide drawings that indicate rooftop mechanical units, elevator and stairway penthouses, safety railings, potential solar arrays, etc. on building elevations (and roof plans). Will rooftop equipment be visible from the public realm?
- It is likely that both structures will require back-up power. Where will emergency generator(s) be located, and how will they be fueled?
- Provide a building/site sectional drawing that indicates the relationship of Building A to the existing medical office building immediately to the north.
- No drawings have been submitted that describe the proposed remote parking garages.
- The demolition plan should be overlaid on the existing condition drawing (it is currently shown on top of the new construction plan).
- There is a narrow "amenity deck" indicated in the north courtyard of Building B. What is the intended program?
- Application materials indicate that "universal design and/or visitability" will not be accommodated in the design. Note that all units must at a minimum meet MAAB Group 1 requirements, which incorporates aspects of both of those attributes.
- Has the fire department reviewed the plans?

o. *Techniques to mitigate visual and other impacts.*

Comments: This is discussed in previous sections of this letter, primarily related to the need for additional information to facilitate review of visual and other impacts.

6. *Participate in 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 occurred at this point.

In the briefest of summaries, this reviewer believes that this site is very well-suited for a residential development, 40B or otherwise. And the overall aesthetics of the buildings make sense given the nearby context of existing residential development. However, at this stage of the design process, some important issues remain. These are outlined above, as well as within the engineering peer review letter. I look forward to seeing how the project design advances!

Sincerely,
DAVIS SQUARE ARCHITECTS, INC



Clifford Boehmer AIA
Principal