

NEEDHAM PLANNING BOARD MINUTES

December 6, 2023

The Needham Planning Board and Needham Housing Authority joint meeting, held in the Performance Center of the Broadmeadow School and virtually using Zoom, was called to order by Adam Block, Planning Board Chairman, and Reg Foster, Housing Authority Chairman, on Wednesday, December 6, 2023, at 7:00 p.m. with Messrs. Crocker, Alpert and Scheideler, Mmes. McKnight, Espada and Penny Kirk, as well as Planner, Ms. Newman and Assistant Planner, Ms. Clee.

Mr. Block noted this is an open meeting that is being held in a hybrid manner per state guidelines. He reviewed the rules of conduct for all meetings. This is a special joint meeting to discuss the redevelopment of the Linden/Chambers site. It does not include any public hearings but public comment will be allowed. If any votes are taken at the meeting, the vote will be conducted by roll call. All supporting materials, including the agenda, are posted on the town's website.

Welcome and Introduction (Adam Block, Chair, Needham Planning Board and Reg Foster, Chair, Needham Housing Authority).

Mr. Block stated the Housing Authority is looking to redevelop the Linden/Chambers site. This would require a zoning amendment. The meeting tonight is to provide an overview of the existing conditions and the framework for the zoning. Dan Chen, of BH+A, will discuss the specific project. Then it will be opened for public comment.

Linden/Chambers – Review of existing conditions (Reg Foster, Chair, Needham Housing Authority).

Mr. Foster stated he has been on the Housing Authority Board since 2009. The Board was formed in 1948. The Housing Authority added 360 units from the 1960s to the 1980s on 43 acres of land. There is a 50/50 split between family housing units and elderly housing units. This is deeply affordable housing, and the Authority also administers 123 Section 8 vouchers. The Needham Housing Authority provides almost 50% of affordable housing in Needham but they are falling short of their mission. He noted 50% of the buildings are in need of rehabilitation.

Mr. Foster reviewed the existing conditions. It is a difficult site with only one half of the land area buildable. The original project included 18 buildings on the north side each with 4 units, then there are 80 units in 5 2-story buildings. The buildings are 60 years old, worn out and in need of complete reconstruction. The studio units are cramped with 420 square feet. He noted the other major problem is the buildings are not energy efficient and are non-compliant with ADA requirements. The laundry is on the 2nd floor of the buildings. This housing was the top town priority in the 2004, the 2007 and the current housing plans. The Needham Housing Authority is proposing the redevelopment of the Linden/Chambers site, starting construction within 2 years.

Mr. Foster stated the project will replace 152 existing units with 152 larger, one-bedroom units and will create 100 new units of deeply affordable housing. The building setbacks have been moved back from lot lines as much as possible. More green space is being created for more recreational use from Spring to Fall. The critical objectives are attractive landscaping, a design that fits in the neighborhood while preventing encroachment to the existing wetlands on all 3 sides and to fix tenant accessibility problems with elevators and designs while preserving and improving amenities now. They want aging in place as much as possible and want to ensure fundability from state and federal resources. The Needham Housing Authority has come up with a building design, but it does not comply with current zoning, which is Single Residence and General Residence.

Proposed zoning (Adam Block, Chair, Needham Planning Board).

Mr. Block stated the Planning Board is considering a Zoning By-Law amendment provided by the Counsel for the Housing Authority. This would enable multi-family by right with a site plan review process. He explained the process. He noted financing sources require stability in the permitting process. By-right is more stable. He

discussed the dimensional requirements, current and proposed. He noted the proposed required frontage is going from 80 feet to 250 feet, front yard setback from 20 feet to 40 feet, side yard setback from 14 feet to 25 feet and rear setback from 20 feet to 25 feet. The heights have different elements. He noted a sloped roof is going from 35 feet to 58 feet, a flat roof from 35 feet to 43 feet, mechanicals currently have no requirements, but the height will be 15 feet and mechanical coverage will be 33%. The maximum stories will go from 2½ stories to 4 stories and FAR will go from 0.36 to 0.5. Currently there are no requirements for units per acre but that will be limited to 25 and lot coverage will go from 25-35% to 20%. There are no regulations now for number of units and it will be set at 247. He noted the spreadsheet is available online at the Planning Board or Housing Authority websites.

Linden/Chambers – Proposed project design (Dan Chen, BH+A).

Dan Chen, Architect with BH+A, stated he has been working on this for 11 months. They have come up with a general design that fits in the proposed zoning. He showed the site plan. There will be 247 units in 2 buildings. There will be 3 phases to minimize the disruption and cost. There will be 130 parking spaces with about half in Phase 1A and 1B and 60 in Phase 2. There will be 136 units built in Phase 1A and 1B. The setbacks will be 87 to 88 feet in Phase 1A and varies from 133 feet to 87 feet in Phase 1B. The project is 91 feet to 33 feet from Maple Street. A lot of thought went into the phasing. The side setback is 158 feet. In Phase 2 the front setback is 118 feet, and it is 32 feet to the side yard. Fire lanes are required. The core of the building has an elevator, stairs, and amenity spaces.

Mr. Chen noted his firm specializes in elderly development and housing. Green space has been proposed and is programmed with recreation. There will be outdoor seating, walking trails and a community garden. Drop off will be in front. He noted with the other option in Phase 1B the building is pushed forward, and there is an additional setback and parking in back. The 136 units in Phase 1A will have 578 square feet compared to the current 420 square feet. There will be 4 2-bedroom units in Phase 1A and 4 2-bedroom units in Phase 1B. Mr. Chen spoke of the elevations. There will be 4 stories, 53 feet in height with 10 feet between floors and 8 foot ceilings. He showed aerial views of the area.

Comments and Questions (Adam Block, Chair, Needham Planning Board, and Reg Foster, Chair, Needham Housing Authority).

Mr. Block gave the projected timelines. The draft By-Law will be voted in mid-January, there will be a public hearing in February, there will be final changes, a vote for the final draft in March and the By-Law will go to Town Meeting in May for a vote. He reviewed the ground rules for public comments and the process. He noted the following correspondence for the record: an email from Ross Donald, dated 11/22/23, regarding questions about public hearing code of conduct and an email from Scott Schwartz, dated 12/2/23, with questions regarding Housing Authority Board meetings.

Bruce Eisenhut, of Marked Tree Road, feels this is a fantastic project and he is in support. He noted there are 2 proposals -- A and B with parking in the back in B. He asked if the zoning proposal would accommodate both plans and if the final decision could wait until site plan review. Mr. Block stated it would not be both but either plan. The final decision could wait until site plan review.

Nancy Potts, of 135 Linden Street, is concerned with a 4½ story redevelopment project 53 feet high. She feels it will ruin the appearance of the neighborhood and will be like living across from the projects. It will tower over her one-story home. The significant increase in the number of units in Plan 1A and 1B will bring more problems. She lives in a low spot on Linden Street and her yard floods. The water runs down from both ends of Linden Street, the High Rock School and Blake Street. She takes pride in her property and works hard to keep it nice. It is frustrating to see her plants and mulch float away. She showed pictures of the flooding. In the last rainstorm water surrounded her foundation. She is concerned that when trees are removed it will increase the water. Another concern is traffic. Linden Street already has speeding cars and is a pass-through street. There are constant issues with people parking across her driveway. There is an issue for emergency vehicles. Traffic is hazardous. She is concerned with density and the size of the building. This will be built on a high water table. She requests the Planning Board not allow the change of zoning.

Laura stated she is a long-time resident of Linden Street. She has questions and concerns. She looked at the plans and noted they are saving \$10 million by adding one more floor and one more staircase. The rooms will be smaller and shorter. They talked about storage, but she has heard nothing about that. The handicapped people on the ends will have an issue getting to the community/laundry rooms and back. Now the rooms are scattered around. She asked if the community room would be bigger as there will be more people and will there be twice as much laundry because there are more people? She heard the windows only open 4 inches which is a concern. Mr. Block noted those relate to the program of the building. This meeting is for focusing on the zoning but her comments and questions will be noted and the Housing Authority will respond. Mr. Foster stated there will be a Frequently Asked Question website. He will note all the questions and will respond. He can attest that he went to Ms. Potts house on the rainy day and it was not a happy day.

Helen Giragosian, of Chambers Street, is the former president of the Linden/Chambers Residents Association. One concern she has is the distance walking from the vehicles to the building. There is only one main entrance. She asked if there will be optional doors. She commented that she appreciates the roof over her head. This is very much needed. She stated housing is a crisis everywhere. She liked seeing the other building. It would be nice to have public housing in one area and affordable rents for grandparents and kids in the other with Mixed-Use in the Chambers area. That would be a win/win for both sides. Crisis to her means emergency.

Jeremy Chao, of 96 Maple Street, stated the Maple Street residents are concerned with drainage issues and the design. It should be made clear that there is water between Maple Street and the Linden Street project. He asked if there was going to be an access path to the rail trail and if there is common land to develop a path. Mr. Block stated he spoke with the Planning Director, Town Engineer and Director of Public Works about drainage. He understands there is still flooding on a regular basis. There is a lot of impervious space at this site and it drains onto the street. The site was developed prior to the Storm Water By-Law. He noted any new development would be required to meet the requirements of the Storm Water By-Law. Regulations will reduce the impact on the storm water system. This development reduces the amount of impervious surface and increases the amount of pervious surface. Even without the Storm Water Management By-Law it would reduce the impact on the storm water management system. The Town is also embarking on examining some bottlenecks of this site and Town staff have met with a number of residents to discuss this. The Town will be going through the approval process. It is illegal to adversely impact the neighbor's property. The Board can impose a condition that would mitigate these types of impacts if the zoning is passed.

Mr. Chen noted the current roof area is 133,000 square feet on a 480,000 square foot site. The proposed will be 124,000 to 126,000 square feet. That is a 6,000 to 8,000 square foot reduction of impervious surface. Jim Burke, of 188 C Linden Street, has been there since 2007. He has 3 major concerns. He asked why a catch basin? How many gallons does a catch basin hold and where does the water go? This is built on sand. With the weight of the building can the land support this? Is there an alternate site in Needham or could Linden/Chambers be restored? What will be done with all the bricks? There are many trees that will be knocked down. How will it affect the environment and water flow? Mr. Block stated, as part of development, engineering studies will be done, and storm water management will be required. The concept is to modernize the facilities. This meeting will focus on those elements. Other concerns will be addressed in a subsequent process if the zoning is approved. Mr. Burke stated environmental impacts should be a major consideration.

Joe Leghorn, of 40 Linden Street and a Town Meeting member, thinks about the common good. Nothing is perfect. He has visited Linden/Chambers and those units need to be replaced. He worked with former Building Inspector David Roche on the existing storm water management plan. The town needs to provide habitable modern spaces. There will be an elevator. A lot of careful thought has gone into this. The Planning Board has come up with a reasonable solution. The storm water is the critical issue, and the current storm water plan should deal with that. There is a Town traffic committee for traffic issues. He stated the town needs to see how this can be achieved and what is the best for everybody. This needs to be done.

Ross Donald, of 25 H Chambers Street, noted he has been here 13 years. There is a hydrology study scheduled in 2025. He is not sure if that would be incorporated. He thinks there were no notices provided to residents in Chinese or Russian. He expressed gratitude to have a roof over his head. The Executive Director obtained a new router and a new WIFI system was installed. He hopes to make this part of the community space now as people still live there.

Maintenance is lacking. He stated the Town of Needham is separate from the Housing Authority. The Housing Authority is not a public Town body and not operating within the Town government except when Needham wants to fund housing. The density numbers need to be looked at. With all the wetlands the density numbers should be lower. There should be an information clearing house where information should be available such as the zoning study and the building condition reports. There is already a clear path through zoning. He feels keeping the cluster housing is worth it and the Town should retrofit the brick buildings.

Kalpana Shah, of 168 Linden Street, is confused with people's comments. She does not understand the zoning amendment. She feels it is appropriate to give a brief explanation as it would be helpful. Mr. Block noted the zoning is online. Ms. Shah commented on the traffic on Linden Street in the morning with 12 wheelers and 16 wheelers. She asked how that will be managed with construction. She noted 90% of the children are in the playground morning to night, walking and biking, there are school buses and disabled adults picked up and dropped off. How will these be managed? Mr. Block stated such issues will be managed by the project itself. If approved at Town Meeting, this project will include a traffic study with a study of existing and future conditions. Then the Planning Board will discuss and may engage a Peer Traffic Reviewer if needed. Safety is a priority for everyone and will be factored in. Mr. Foster stated a traffic study has been completed and there is a whole report already. That report will be made available to the Planning Board and any consultants.

Danielle Rodriguez, of 160 Maple Street, noted water management and flooding should be tied to zoning. She is not sure anything should have been constructed there to begin with. She asked if alternate sites have been considered. She wants to mitigate flooding as flooding does happen. Mr. Block stated the previous speaker had photographic evidence of flooding on the street. Lionel Desrosiers, of 117 Linden Street, is an 11-year resident. This development needed upgrading when he moved here. He asked if this zoning is also tying into the MBTA Communities law. Mr. Block stated they are talking about zoning for the Linden/Chambers redevelopment. This is a separate path for zoning. Zoning is still being considered for the MBTA Communities law. That will go through next year and be presented in October 2024. Mr. Desrosiers commented on the proposed 20% coverage of the lot. He asked if that is just structure or does it include the parking lot. Mr. Block noted all of it. Mr. Desrosiers asked if the rest would be green space and was informed it would be. Mr. Desrosiers stated at a previous meeting Mr. Foster mentioned adding more deeply affordable housing for elderly and disabled. The MBTA law does not count age-restricted housing. When the town complies with the MBTA Communities law, will Linden-Chambers be for all ages and not just elderly and disabled. Mr. Block stated one question before the Planning Board is whether to remove the current deed restriction to limit to seniors and disabled. The Town is looking into that. There is a way to do base zoning without age restrictions. The HONE Advisory Group is working on that. Ms. Espada stated there are community meetings for HONE and she encouraged all to attend. They are looking for ways to create contiguous pieces of land near the commuter rail stations. This piece is being looked at separately to not be a part of the contiguous area for MBTA Communities law compliance right now. It needs to be left open to see what the HONE consultant is finding and see how each station area is working. She cannot answer the question at this moment. This will stay separate for the time being.

Mr. Block stated he was wrong in his response to Mr. Desrosiers as to the lot coverage question. The proposed development does not increase the impervious space. The lot coverage, however, is for the building only. Mr. Desrosiers stated he spent thousands of dollars on drainage for his yard and sloping his driveway differently. Mr. Block noted this project will maintain its own stormwater. Mr. Desrosiers feels for this amount of money, they should be fixing the problem in the neighborhood and not just keeping it status quo. Joni Schokett stated with all the rezoning going on here since 1978 she has seen a lot of rezoning. She asked if these rezonings apply only to the one property. Mr. Block stated this will create a new affordable housing district for this parcel. It is a benefit to the community and is not considered spot zoning as it is in the public interest. Ms. Schokett asked if this sets a precedent for other projects. Mr. Block stated that was an important question. This is a unique situation. They are talking about supporting community housing. This is being looked at as a benefit and is not precedent setting. Ms. Schokett completely supports this. She hopes however this is built they are sensitive to the neighbors and keep the trees. She knows how much it needs to be repaired and upgraded.

Cynthia Conturie, of 96 Robinwood Avenue, has been there since 1982. She spoke of the history of the area. She noted the school was built for the low-income veteran housing. Then housing for the elderly, facing the playground so they could see the children playing, was built. Amazing trees were put in. Since then, quite a few trees have

been cut down. High Rock was a wonderful school, then they closed it and put all the kids in the Newman School. That is a long walking distance. She worked hard on the committee to not make people pay for busing. She fought with the Town to not close the school. The Town rented the school but did not get enough rent so discontinued the rental. Then it was a 6th grade school and there are buses all the time. The safety of the children in the neighborhood has been ignored. High Rock should have been made back into an elementary school for the area. This area is very politically charged in Town. The town ignores the needs of the people who live there. This area cannot accommodate a 4-story city building and cannot accommodate the number of buses that come down the streets. Normally 4 story buildings are put on main roads. She will never let the Town forget about the boy who walked out of Newman and was hit by a car and the Town kept it quiet and did not put it in the police log. She feels this is spot districting.

Janice Bennett, Tenant Commissioner for the Housing Authority, noted the drainage problem. She feels the Town may want to intervene. Rain barrels could be used for community gardens. Mr. Block noted there will be landscape plans and that is project specific. The focus is on zoning right now, but he will note her comments. Marianne Cooley, of 95 High Street, is pleased to see Option B. It moves a portion of the building forward and puts parking behind. It softens the project. She has no issue with the height and all the zoning, for taking restrictions off and letting the Housing Authority clear the back log. Jeanne Strassburger, of 175 Maple Street, is concerned with flooding issues and increase in occupancy. How will that be managed and how will cut-throughs from Linden Street to Maple Street be managed. She has a steady stream of people now and has a path through her yard. Has any thought been given to managing foot traffic?

Doug Fox, of 43 Marked Tree Road, attended High Rock School and was born and raised on High Rock Street. This is a great complex, and he fully supports adding 95 units. He stated there is a loneliness issue particularly with seniors. He would love if balconies could be added on these units, but there may be a money issue. He fully supports this zoning and the complex. Emily Cooper, of 56 Lee Road, is in support of this. She was a member of the Housing Plan Working Group. They kept hearing there was not enough housing, particularly elderly and disabled. She has been in the Housing Authority building and heard from residents. Once there were a lot of walkers and wheelchairs at the bottom of the stairs. We owe it to the current residents to make it better. She thinks the plan is trying to balance a variety of things such as the need for more housing, what can be built on this space including the wetlands and the ability to keep the neighborhood feel. She heard a real attempt to not make this a skyscraper. She supports this. It is a great balance of trying to meet a variety of people's needs and is a good compromise. It addresses the needs people have communicated.

Morris Singer, of 60 Sylvan Road, stated he is one of the closest homes to the development and the closest on the south side. He supports having affordable housing and the redevelopment of Linden/Chambers. He is concerned, however, that the development as currently planned may change the character of the neighborhood. The density going from 152 to 247 units is a 163% change in density. This much cannot be added without changes to the neighborhood. There are 35 houses on Maple Street. This is the same as adding 3 streets. There will be another 47 cars that will cover the stretch of street in front of the development. He noted the height compared to High Rock School. The 2 are similar in size. He lives across from High Rock and can barely see it from his house. There is a 100-foot setback from Sylvan Road and a 200 foot setback from Linden Street. The school is basically one story even though it is 3 stories because it was built on a hill. He wanted to call that out. He mentioned residency restrictions and how to pave the way for this development. The restrictive covenants need to be modified for disabled for funding. Currently they only say elderly. The restrictions for elderly and disabled should not be removed. He would like to see the Planning Board press the Housing Authority for a stronger statement on how they would build and fund this project. Imposing frugality usually creates a better result and a more optimal result. He would encourage the Housing Authority to be a little frugal.

Beth Bandes, of 158 Marked Tree Road, has been here for 24 years. She walks all over the neighborhood and Linden Street. It looks from the outside like the buildings need to be redone. She thinks the design looks nice and would offer more dignity, including green space. She likes some parking in back. She supports this and feels a lot of thought has gone into it. Jim Flanagan, of 863 Webster Street and a Town Meeting member, is on the Needham Housing Coalition. He is in support of this amendment. Funding has been talked about. He commends the Housing Authority for bringing in the Cambridge Housing Authority to partner with them. He feels shrinking one element

could cause the whole thing to collapse. His fear is this will be delayed and miss state and federal guidelines. He fears there will be no change when he drives down Linden Street in 2027 and the waiting list continues to grow.

Oscar Mertz, of 67 Rybury Hillway, is in support of the project. There is a good balance between financially feasible and being a good neighbor. He would love to see this High Rock neighborhood remain for the people of this community and would like to see the High Rock School go back to a neighborhood walking school. There is a tremendous need for this. He commented he appreciated the history of the High Rock School. Georgina A. Ruetenik, of 236 Greendale Avenue and a Town Meeting member, wanted to thank the Planning Board and Housing Authority for having this forum. She feels strongly that the housing issue is important and she supports this. She asked if access to transportation could be incorporated in and noted this was a very informative meeting. Ms. Giragosian stated they should not be afraid of cars. There are people who no longer use their cars. She noted there are raised garden beds that can be moved and concerning the drainage issue, there are no bathtubs, only walk-in showers. She wants to keep their community a community.

Mr. Block recapped the comments made tonight. He noted the process will continue. They are not minimizing the history or public safety. He is mindful of public safety and the impacts of the infrastructure. He takes comments seriously and finds them helpful. He would like to hear from the neighbors also. Mr. Foster thanked all for coming. He wants to do this on a transparent basis. He stated he will get all the comments addressed.

Upon a motion made by Mr. Crocker, and seconded by Mr. Alpert, it was by a vote of the five members present unanimously:

VOTED: to adjourn the Planning Board meeting at 9:20 p.m.

Upon a motion made by Ms. Kirk and seconded by Mr. Scheideler, it was by a vote of the three members present unanimously:

VOTED: to adjourn the Housing Authority meeting at 9:20 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Donna J. Kalinowski, Notetaker

Natasha Espada, Vice-Chairman and Clerk