



TOWN OF NEEDHAM

TOWN HALL
1471 Highland Avenue
Needham, MA 02492-2669

Design Review Board

Memo: Project review, 557 Highland Avenue

May 16, 2022

The Board reviewed the design drawings for the development at 557 Highland Avenue, the former Muzi Motors site.

The DRB reviewed the project from the perspectives of overall site organization, general landscape concepts and amenities; building massing, materials, fenestration; Parking garage design, and site and building lighting.

The Board approved of the general site organization and building locations. The organization allowed for landscaping amenities at various locations that will be accessible to the public. The Board discussed the main entrance location off of Gould Street. There was some question about the closeness of the site entrance to Highland Ave intersection. The applicant noted the proposed installation of turning lanes, signalization of the entrance intersection and the alignment with the Wingate entrance as key reasons for that entry location. The Board agreed with the decision.

The DRB believed the paved plaza related to the proposed retail area was a good design element. The Board expressed some concern with the required setbacks on Gould and Highland not being utilized well, and the development of the plaza adjacent to the proposed retail area will be a good use of the setback area. The applicant proposes a walking path with fitness stops around the entire site. The path material is not yet determined but is expected to be some sort of pervious surface. Other amenities include using a retention pond in the rear of the site to create a water feature. They also propose a small water feature at the corner of Highland and Gould, a remake of a feature the previous site had at that location. The buffer zone area next to the surface parking area is also planned to have an area for use by the public. The applicant is having discussions with the neighborhood about what exactly it may be. The DRB considers all these elements helpful to integrate the development into the town.

The DRB reviewed the general landscaping concepts illustrated in the presentation. While they did review the plant list with the applicant, there was not a lot of detail shown on the plan. The applicant explained that they are working with the neighborhood on landscaping issues and will have more detail once that work is complete. The development will strive to have plant varieties that will provide seasonal color, not just summer vegetation. The Board asked that they return to the DRB once a more detailed plan is developed. The DRB asked that native species be used as much as possible.

The applicant stated the trees will be 3.5-4" caliper. The Board agrees this will provide more of an impact right from the beginning rather than planting saplings. The exact species and locations are being discussed with the neighborhood at this time.

The plan at this time illustrates large areas of lawn, and the Board recommends more of a mix of different grasses and planting beds rather than simply grass lawn areas.

The Board suggested that plant screening on areas along the walking path would be beneficial. Especially along Highland Avenue where the walk is close to the street. It is a very busy street, and some screening would make pedestrians more comfortable. Screening could also be useful along the plaza space.

Site lighting will be a mix of pedestrian and parking area lighting. Fixtures will be dark sky compliant. The Board asked that information on the final fixture selection be submitted to the DRB. The applicant did not expect much lighting on the building itself. The Board did not review any information on lighting on the building.

The building design and massing was approved by the Board. The design has a mix of precast GFRC finish, which can be colored and textured in a variety of ways, and metal / glass curtain wall. The applicant will supply a sample of the material to the Community Development office and DRB members can see the sample there.

The design does well breaking up long facades with changes in materials and with the insertion of small outdoor spaces on the upper floors. One suggestion was to consider using a lighter colored mechanical screen. A lighter color could help moderate the mass of the building as a transition to the lighter sky.

There was a discussion of the garage doors on the ground level walls each side of the main entrance. They appear to be a large single panel. The Board suggested the applicant could consider something with more detail to break it up.

The Parking Garage is a precast concrete structure. The design proposes a finish look with similar colors to those on the buildings. The columns will not be flush with the panels to break up the horizontal lines. Decorative fabric panels will be added to create visual interest and screen the garage. The elevator/stair tower would be finished in a different color, with a perforated metal panel accent.

The DRB discussed some of the issues they had with a similar structure in the N2 district. They suggested that the screens not simply be rectangles on frames attached to the façade. The frame could be designed as more of an architectural feature, possibly extending beyond the banners, or above the height of the garage. Screening could be more than one layer, of different heights, or of varied shapes. The applicant should pay special attention to the Gould Street side of the building and consider where the banners are placed, not simply the centers of each side of the garage structure.

Garage lighting needs to be carefully considered. The installation should be done in a way that minimizes the lighting being viewed from outside the site. The applicant stated the lights will be installed in the recessed portions of the precast structure, limiting their visibility. The fixtures themselves will have stages of brightness related to the activity level; low for pedestrian, medium for few cars, brightest for the most activity. The Board believes the proposed lighting and installation should help mitigate the amount of visibility the garage lighting will have off the site.

Overall the Board approved of the project design. They asked the applicant to provide an update on the landscape plan at some point during the Planning Board review process, to provide information on site lighting fixtures, and to provide a sample of the exterior finishes.

End of comments