

## MEMORANDUM

Date: October 1, 2020  
From: Diab Jerius (djerius@winchester.us)  
To: Winchester Select Board  
Subject: Musings on the Waterfield Lot Proposals  
Cc: Lisa Wong, Brian Szekely  
File: LetterToSB-2020-09-27.lyx  
Version: 1.3

---

I've had the pleasure of following this process from the beginning RFQ, then the RFP, and, most recently, the interviews of the lucky finalists. While I am a member of the Winchester Planning Board, the opinions and any mistakes below (that hopefully provide you some benefit or amusement during your deliberations) are solely my own.

Knowing that these are 6 of about a thousand pieces of paper you're going to review, I've tried to keep things short.<sup>1</sup>

### Summary

For those who need it *really short*, my preferred proposal is Civico's, followed by a toss up between those of NOAH and Pennrose.

Civico has presented a clear, vibrant, compelling vision of the site's potential. Its design incorporates the context of the surrounding Town Center and Commons, and illustrates a systemic approach to sustainability. They should be pushed to provide more affordable housing, in particular workforce units. I believe they have the flexibility and expertise to work with the Town to further improve their project.

NOAH is my preferred management partner because they are a local non-profit whose sole mission is affordable housing. I appreciate the public space that they provide in their design, and the vehicle access to the lot. However, they would have to provide significantly more affordable units for them to be competitive, and their design requires significant refinement. I was impressed during the interview by the openness of their architectural team, PCA, to consider changes.

Pennrose propose one of the highest percentages of affordable units and have the same number of affordable units as does Civico. They include approachable open space in their proposal. Their building design is interesting. It is definitely not just a box, and I think their design team has the talent to work with the Town to improve their project.

---

<sup>1</sup>Hah!

## Overview

The Town's RFP to develop the Waterfield lot enumerated three objectives:

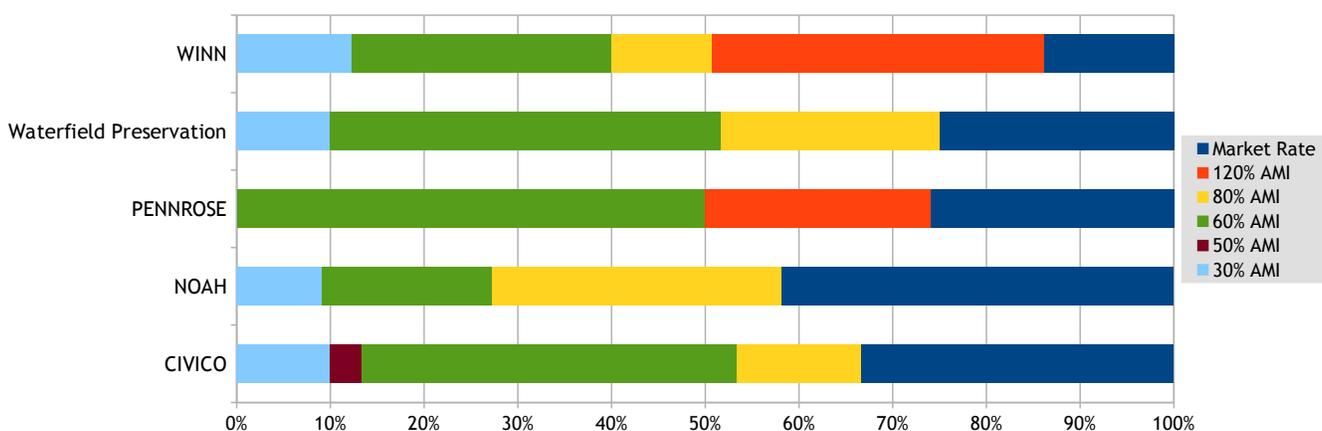
- Mixed-income Housing
- Sustainability and Mitigation
- Design Considerations

The five qualified proposals scored similarly enough on the selection criteria<sup>2</sup>, that their scores were essentially statistically equivalent. The decision then lies in a careful reading and weighing of the detailed differences between the proposals.

## Housing

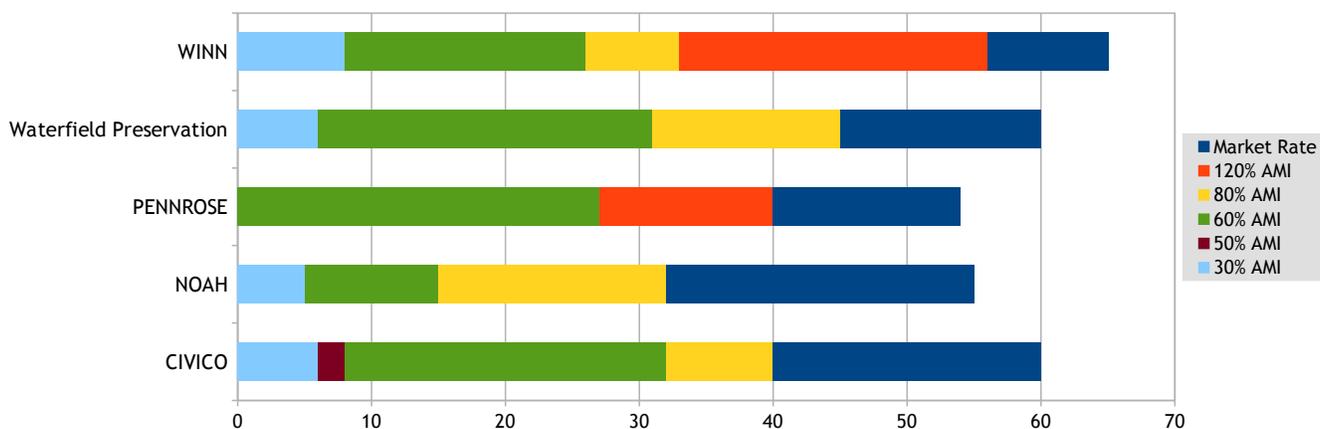
**Demographics.** The proposals provide quite the mix of types of affordable units, with some prioritizing “Missing Middle” workforce (80%-120% AMI) units and others more traditional affordable units (<80% AMI). Notably, Winchester doesn't have a “Missing Middle” problem, it has a “Missing Any” problem; Winchester requires more affordable housing at every level, so determining which mix is best for the Town is not straightforward. One could argue that more workforce units would enable more people who work in Winchester to be able to reside here. An argument for more <80% AMI units is that it would redress greater societal inequities.

The following charts<sup>3</sup> provides a summary of the distribution of units for each proposal, structured so as to more easily compare the number of units below a given level of affordability. The first shows distribution of units as a percentage of the total. The second shows distribution as number of units.



<sup>2</sup>As scored by Lisa Wong, Town Manager; Brian Szekely, Town Planner, and Beth Rudolph, Town Engineer

<sup>3</sup>Data from the comparison spreadsheet provided by Barry Fradkin of J.M. Goldson, LLC.



While the RFP noted 120% AMI as the expected upper range for affordable units, only two of the developers, Winn and Pennrose, propose them. Surprisingly, NOAH, the local, non-profit developer, has the lowest percentage of affordable units.

While Civico is my preferred candidate overall, if one were to select *solely* on the number and distribution of units, Winn would prevail. If Civico were to replace five of its market rate units with workforce units it would better respond to the RFP as well as raise its overall affordable percentage from 66% (the second lowest, after NAOH) to 75%, which would bring it in line with Waterfield Preservation and Pennrose.

**Management.** Housing is more than just the number and type of units; it also includes management sensitive to residents' needs. All of the proposals include management by organizations with significant experience with affordable units.<sup>4</sup> All of the proponents have extolled the excellence of the benefits they provide to residents of their affordable units. Given the wide range of communities and demographics served, it is difficult to directly compare their efforts. NOAH, however, is a local non-profit, which makes it the most compelling choice, as it works solely within Massachusetts and is focused on the needs of its tenants.

## Sustainability and Mitigation

All of the developers have made strong cases for their ability to construct energy efficient structures, with significant efforts towards meeting passive house<sup>5</sup> requirements.<sup>6</sup> Some have provided more details about their building strategy, notably indicating their understanding of the use of materials with low embodied energy.<sup>7</sup> Civico's is the sole proposal which elects to retain and reuse the Chamber of Commerce building, significantly reducing their construction waste.

<sup>4</sup>Which, unfortunately, was not always evident in the submitted proposals but did come out in the interviews.

<sup>5</sup><https://www.phius.org/>

<sup>6</sup>At the very least, they were all properly buzzword compliant.

<sup>7</sup>"Embodied energy is an accounting method which aims to find the sum total of the energy necessary for an entire product life-cycle". See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Embodied\\_energy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Embodied_energy)

In any case, given the calibre of the respondents, one can safely assume they will all pursue similar building strategies. What is of interest then, is how the various proposals intend to manage their operational energy, waste, and storm water systems.

One proposal, Civico's, stands out from the rest because of the superb integration of all of the components. Their mechanical systems are completely electric and they commit to a full solar array on the rooftop. They have removed surface parking, thereby reducing groundwater infiltration of chemicals from surface de-icing treatments and leaked liquids from vehicles. They have integrated green stormwater infrastructure, landscaping, roof gardens, and permeable pavement into their storm-water management system. They will provide on-site composting for the residents' organic wastes, significantly reducing their waste stream. The other proposals do provide some or most of these features, but the integration of the components is at a less sophisticated level than is Civico's.

## Design Considerations

**Building siting and mass.** All of the proposals keep the main structure away from Waterfield Road (NOAH and Winn significantly more so than the others), providing visual relief from that vantage point. Waterfield Preservation and Civico utilize gateway structures which mask the bulk of the larger sections of the building. The taller sections of the buildings do rise above the roof lines of the neighboring buildings as seen from Church St.

There are significant differences between the proposals as to how efficiently they manage the site, which is a function of the number of units and their sizes; the number of surface parking spaces; the area devoted to landscaping; and the necessity of providing access to the MBTA station. Unfortunately, there is no easy means of normalizing the constraints given the different mixes and total number of units. So, this is all subjective.

So, I think it comes down to a balance between a taller building with a smaller footprint which can be set back from Waterfield Rd but looms over Church St, or a shorter building with a broader footprint whose impact must be shielded from Waterfield Rd.

Civico's proposal is the shortest, at 48'. It does away with surface parking and therefore has more liberty to expand the footprint of the building. It employs a gatehouse bordering on Waterfield Rd to move some of the mass away from the main building, but at a scale comparable to other buildings along that street. The other proposals are significantly taller, with the largest being Winn's, at 65'. One other proposal, Waterfield Preservation, also makes use of a gatehouse, but its main structure still rises considerably above Civico's.

In summary, Civico, presents an overall smaller visible massing. Should Civico not be able to build its structured parking, and be required to accommodate a similar total number of parking spaces on site, this would undoubtedly affect the building massing. Given the sophistication of their overall design, I believe

that they would be able to provide a solution which would maintain the integrity of their concept and retain contextual relationship to the surrounding area.

**Presentation to Town Commons, Public open space, and Acknowledgment of the MBTA Station** Two concepts are proposed: gatehouses which front on Waterfield Rd, and open frontage.

A compelling argument for keeping the frontage open is that it celebrates the station, provides a visual invitation and cue for pedestrian access to it and provides the opportunity for easily accessible areas for public use (such as seating, art installations, pigeon appreciation, etc). Structures which impede the view may mask the presence of the station. NOAH provides a small park distinctly set away from the building, Pennrose provides a small plaza which is directly adjacent to the building and may be shared space with the public and commercial establishments within the building, while Winn does not provide any significant area for public use. Winn's proposal is the least attractive, as it provides no buffering between the surface parking and Waterfield Rd.

Gatehouse buildings along Waterfield Rd provide a continuation of the existing building frontage and thus complete the frame of the Commons. There are notable differences in design between the two proposals. Civico's presents a high, inviting arch, as it serves as a portal into a large public plaza, while the Waterfield Preservation proposal presents a more traditional, less ornamental, appearance, and serves as a vehicle access point as well as helping somewhat mask the surface parking beyond.

By their nature, the gatehouses cannot provide significant public space along Waterfield. Civico makes up for this with an expansive public space beyond the gatehouse between the building and the MBTA Station. Waterfield Preservation does not provide any significant area for public use.

While I acknowledge the attractiveness of open frontage, the Town Commons itself is a considerable open space, and I think the completion of the framing of the Commons by a gatehouse provides a setting which accentuates its character. The addition of the public plaza in the Civico proposal not only provides for a destination of discovery through its portal, it allows for multiple functions to more easily occur simultaneously on the Commons and in the plaza.

**Pedestrian and Vehicle Access** The proposals use one of two plans for vehicle access to the site, either via a curb cut almost directly in line with Laraway Road (Winn, Waterfield Preservation, Pennrose); or via shared access on an existing delivery drive with the neighboring buildings (Civico, NOAH).

While I am not a traffic engineer,<sup>8</sup> I prefer the latter proposals as they provide more security for pedestrians and reduce traffic confusion.

**Architecture & Materials** The RFP was very clear about the need for the project to be comfortable within the context of Winchester's Town Center. Some of the proposals succeeded more than others.

---

<sup>8</sup>And, alas, I did not stay at a Holiday Inn Express last night.

To be honest, they're all big boxes; it's the exterior refinements which make them fit and pop. Large flat surfaces require elements which break up the monotony, either via adornment or by manipulating the depth of elements in the façade. The human eye delights in small, hidden details which inspire curiosity and discovery. We value open spaces as well as hidden grottoes. This doesn't require a building be a wholesale reproduction of past classics, but it does require evoking or paying tribute to elements present around it.

Selection of materials is an important component. Brick, stone, clapboard and shingles are all found in the Town Center, but brick and stone are the ones which predominate in the most architecturally interesting buildings.

Three of the designs stood out.

Winn presented a clean, modern design, with subtle articulations, interesting angles, and a mostly brick façade. It is an elegant evolution of the simple brick buildings which front Waterfield Road.

Pennrose drew inspiration from beyond the Waterfield block, and proposed a design with a more Victorian sensibility focused on gables, shingles, and a varied roof line.

Civico's design is also an evolution of the brick buildings along Waterfield. It hews more towards the traditional than does Winn's, with more visually present elements to provide detail and interest. Alone of the three, it has used the articulations of the building envelope and the roofs at different building heights to provide outdoor courtyards and active spaces above the ground plane.

Of the three, I find Civico's the most compelling. It is more human scale at every level, is a recognizable transition from the existing architecture, and its use of the different vertical planes to create welcoming outdoor spaces integrated into the building mass evokes a sense of a living building rather than simply a container.

Winn's design is perhaps too clean, and its height gives it more a feel of a separate architectural statement, which is at odds with the Center Business District design criteria. It would work well in a more urban area where it could compete with similarly sized buildings.

Pennrose' design is a bit too far afield from its neighbors in the Town Center. Other than the top floor, which reads quite modern, it would be more suitable in a more residential setting, away from the predominantly brick buildings. I think that it would be easier to modify this design to fit into the Town Center than would be Winn's.

## **You've made it!**

Thanks for reading this far. I appreciate the time you've put into reviewing the proposals, listening to the interviews, and deliberating.