



TOWN OF WINCHESTER

Design Review Committee

Town Hall, Winchester, Massachusetts 01890

Juli Riemenschneider, RLA, ASLA, Chair
Ellen Spencer, Vice Chair
Adrian LeBuffe, LEED
Eileen Casciari, RA
Mary Grassi
Tracy Burhans
Jamie Devol, AIA

MEETING MINUTES

Wednesday, February 16, 2022, 7:30 pm - Meeting by Zoom

Present: Riemenschneider, Spencer, Casciari, LeBuffe, Burhans, Devol, Grassi, Recording Secretary Nancy Upper

Guest participant: Ian Gillespie, Owner, Gillespie and Co., Inc.

- 1. Open meeting. Vote to approve February 2, 2022, minutes** - All in favor.
- 2. 10 Converse Place, Winchester MA** - Discussion and Recommendations to the Planning Board for CDBG (Community Development Block Grant) and PUD (Planned Unit Development).

DRC member Ellen Spencer showed a presentation that she and Jamie Devol had prepared, titled: **Size and Massing Study: Proposed Building at 10 Converse Place**

The presentation showed images and used language from the proposal and Winchester's Zoning Bylaw to:

- Show Winchester's natural setting and Town character.
- Compare the existing Mill Pond building to the proposed building in footprint, height, and massing.
- Compare the proposed building massing to Elmwood Place, a five-story apartment building with a much smaller footprint
- Show diagrams of suggested footprints for the site in Section 7.3 Regulations 4.4 Mill Pond (PUD 3).
- Question height equivalencies put forth in the development proposal.
- Pose questions using images of the proposed building and language from the Zoning Bylaw to guide meeting discussion, recommendations, and votes.

Please see attached pdf of the full presentation.

DISCUSSION

Zoning, Size, Views

Spencer's presentation and the ensuing DRC discussion focused on Zoning Bylaw Section 7.3.17 Design Review Guidelines, Section 8.8.5 Dimensional Requirements, Section 9.4 Special Permits, and Section 9.5 Site Plan Review.

After the presentation, Ian Gillespie was admitted to DRC's meeting. He emphasized that the size of the proposed building is a zoning issue. He acknowledged that the building "takes up a lot of the site." But he repeated that this a zoning issue, and as such, is the purview of the Planning Board and not the DRC.

Gillespie also implied that Spencer's presentation was all about "the Regulations," which are... "quite subjective... they are guidelines to the zoning as reference, but legally, they are not zoning."

Jamie Devol rebutted Gillespie by saying that the 7.3 Regulations are indeed part of the Zoning Bylaw [[Zoning Bylaw, 7.3 Center Business District](#)].

- She had studied the Zoning Bylaw and observed that much of the wording in the 7,3 Regulations is the same as that in the Winchester Zoning Bylaw Section 7.3. "It's just the Regulations are illustrated and seem more user-friendly. But a lot of the wording is the same."
- Devol said that both the Regulations and the Bylaws carry the force of law.
- In contrast to Gillespie's statement, "I thought we were talking design review, but if we're talking zoning...", Devol emphasized that Design Review Guidelines *are part of* the Zoning Bylaw (see [Section 7.3.17](#)) and that size and mass *are* design issues.

Spencer informed Gillespie that the Design Review Committee is specifically tasked to vote on Zoning Bylaw CBD Site Plan Review and Special Permit issues.

Discussion followed regarding two of the seven Zoning Bylaw, Center Business District, Purposes:

3. Improve and reinforce the livability and aesthetic qualities of the Town center.
 4. Promote and protect Winchester center's historic resources and small town character while encouraging selective development to promote "smart growth."
- Devol said she believed that we can get growth and build housing, and at the same time, promote and protect Winchester's small-town character.
 - She said it is hard for a big building like this to achieve what some of the Zoning asks for — building shapes that are "increasingly slender and broken down in scale toward their top," "slanted roofs," "animated silhouettes," etc — because the floor plate is so big.
 - Spencer agreed that the building is too big and massive.

Juli Riemenschneider mentioned that she, Devol, Spencer, and other DRC members went through the zoning process [to which Gillespie referred] and spoke out at some of the Planning Board meetings. Riemenschneider said:

- We talked about whether we would allow four-story or five-story buildings in the Town center. DRC members thought that four or five stories were too tall, but those got included in the zoning.

See [Zoning Bylaw, Section 8.8.5 Dimensional Requirements](#), #2. “*Height*: No building shall exceed 80 feet in height nor more than five (5) stories.”

- “As designers, we are sensitive to these kinds of things, but other people were involved in that process. Business people in Winchester wanted more residential in the downtown. Housing advocates wanted more housing. The Town’s overall goal is to have more transit-oriented development.”
- We are not voting on whether the proposed building meets the zoning.
- We are recommending favorable or unfavorable action on [the proposed building] and giving conditions or reasons, so the Planning Board can make the decision.

Discussion followed regarding the building’s height and mass.

Eileen Casciari: If I had a choice, I would choose a smaller footprint that would maximize views, rather than trying to reduce an overall building height.

- Even though this [proposed building] might be taller than the existing building, it won’t be perceived as the same height because of the setbacks on this design.
- I think this type and size of building is not something that is foreign to small towns in New England — hotels have this kind of feel.
- I think the overall height is appropriate. The three-story read is pretty prominent on the side facing Town Hall.

Spencer noted that the proposed building is the first test of this whole new [CBD PUD] procedure, so there are a lot of different, sometimes competing, things that it’s trying to embody. “I understand that. But it is only one building.”

- This won’t be the only new building in the CBD to have housing. It’s just the first one, and it can’t solve all those problems. I think it’s done a decent job of addressing many, but it’s too big.
- At the very least, it needs to come down a story. And hopefully have a narrower footprint.

Devol agreed, and addressed questions in Site Plan Review, such as whether the proposed building will have an adverse effect on historic resources.

- She argued that it will both overwhelm nearby historic structures and block views to them.
- Affected buildings include the Locatelli Block, Northmark Bank, the Public Safety Building, Town Hall, the Library, and churches.

In regards to whether the proposed building minimizes obstruction of scenic views from publicly accessible locations, Devol said that due to its height and size, of course it will obstruct scenic views of both nature and iconic architectural forms that lend the town its character.

- If it were narrower, the site would have more breathing room for bike paths and a

dining piazza.

- At the oval, you could have glass garage doors that open up and have a Parisian café, a bike coffee shop, or a restaurant / beer garden — make it really lively.
- If you take off a floor and make it narrower, about 15 feet, the building could settle into Town more easily.

Casciari: I like your idea of making the first-floor retail more transparent, and really connecting it to the Town. When you look at these [architectural] views, it looks more formal and very separate. It offers a nice opportunity.

Consistency

Gillespie raised the issue of DRC consistency. Four months ago [October 5, 2021], we were before the Committee with a fairly refined block — not as refined as this one — and the Committee’s comments for the Planning Board were:

- a. Impressed by the design and the thoughtful design process.
- b. Appreciate the project team’s attention to quality and look forward to seeing further development of the design, especially the site and landscape.

Gillespie expressed surprise at DRC’s change of thoughts about the building.

Spencer: I believe also in those minutes from four months ago, there was mention that one person saying — and that person was me — that the building was too large and too massive.

- You may have been working on it for two years, but that was the first time we were shown anything. So the comments were a bit free-form and general, and trying to be encouraging. And we weren’t voting on anything.
- I’ve attended most of the Planning Board meetings in the last few months and all of the hearings. At all of them, person after person spoke up about the size, and were ignored.
- So I am sorry you are perplexed, but a lot of people, not just one or two of us on Design Review, are concerned about the size of this building.

NOTE: Gillespie chose to read only the top two of seven DRC comments recorded in the October 5, 2021, minutes. The third comment in those minutes reads:

- c. Need to understand better how the project will conform to the Aberjona Initiative. One member commented that the design is proceeding, but the building feels big and out of scale with downtown Winchester. This member would favor a reduction in the height or footprint of the building.

Gillespie: This was presented by the Planning Board to Town Meeting, and it included the idea that the permit-granting authority would move from the ZBA to the Planning Board, which it did.

- Again, Town Meeting overwhelmingly approved this. I hear your objections to the building, but that’s a Town Meeting issue.
- The Committee [DRC] speaks as an advisory group to the Town*, but from the

outside in, we assume a certain consistency of thought process. We assume that Design Review is going to do Design Review.

***NOTE:** The Design Review Committee is an advisory group to the Planning Board.

- We had design issues with the color of the paint on 40 Elmwood, which we were very happy to work with and correct. Those were design issues. To say that this building is too big, or it's too wide, or it's too fat, or it's too skinny is really, forgive me, water under the bridge.

Casciari: My memory is that we said it has beautiful detailing, and that we appreciated the attention to detail in this building.

- But Ellen made that comment about size, and she wasn't the only one who had issue with it.
- We basically said, it would be great if you could work on the size and the massing, but the overall aesthetic we appreciated.
- Frankly, we haven't been part of the conversation on building size and what the focus is for this site. We weren't involved in those earlier iterations and studies.

Design Comments - General Standards for Site Plan Review

Riemenschneider said that, before making decisions on Site Plan Review and Special Permit, DRC should go through relevant sections of the Zoning Bylaw so members know exactly what we are voting on.

- One of the items is 7.3.15.5 General Standards for Site Plan Review.
- Riemenschneider asked members to note how the proposed building could be changed for the better, and note things they liked about it or did not like about it.

Riemenschneider read from Section 7.3.15.5:

In the review of any site plan conducted under this Section, the SPGA [Special Permit Granting Authority] shall determine that reasonably adequate provisions have been made by the applicant for the following.

She read subsections that apply to design and landscaping:

6. Screening, including the use of natural land features, plantings and erosion control.

Riemenschneider: We are used to having more detailed drawings before we make recommendations. But we could have conditions, then review when we see the final documents.

A condition could be:

Whatever decision is made, we get the opportunity to review that [before decisions are finalized].

Riemenschneider read the next subsection:

7. Protection and preservation of existing historic structures, vistas and natural features.

We know that Ellen and Jamie think that [the building] does not meet this criterion. What do other members feel about that?

LeBuffe: I think that it does meet that criterion.

Grassi: I don't think it protects vistas. I think it blocks them.

Riemenschneider: The architecture in general is the same materials, and the same articulation as other buildings in the downtown. So I would say it meets that [criterion].

Casciari noted out that the headline of this section says, "reasonably adequate provisions" are made.

- Directives from the Planning Board — such as bringing the building to the street to form the street edge — make it block some vistas.
- I think the primary vista from the center of Town, looking back from the bridge toward Town Hall and the Library, is preserved.

Burhans voiced concern about the building's size blocking vistas from different angles. And about shadows cast by the building.

Grassi objected to how the building blocks views of the Congregational Church steeple and the Town Common.

Spencer said it likewise blocks vistas as one comes down Mystic Valley Parkway between the Library and Lincoln School.

Riemenschneider summarized and asked members to state concisely:

How could the building change in order for it to meet the criteria of "reasonably adequate provisions have been made by the applicant" to protect and preserve "existing historic structures, vistas, and natural features."

Spencer: Lose a story.

Grassi: Shorter and narrower.

Devol: Shorter and narrower.

Riemenschneider specified: Narrower in that the side of the building facing the river is closer in.

She read from Section 1.3.17.5, subsection 8:

8. Signage and exterior lighting.

She said a condition could be that we look at something [on signage and exterior lighting] later on.

She read from Section 1.3.17.5, subsection 9:

9. Avoidance or mitigation of visual impact of parking, storage and other outside service areas.

I think the project has done a good job of that with the parking underground. And storage is hidden. There aren't [visible] dumpsters or anything. It's all inside.

Riemenschneider read from Section 1.3.17.5, subsection 10:

10. Consistency with character and scale of surrounding buildings, CBD areas and neighborhoods.

Spencer said that the building should lose a story. "That will not solve the problem [of massing], but it will improve it."

Burhans and Devol commented that it's "huge." Devol contrasted it to the nearby Locatelli Block.

Casciari: Unless you make a significant change to the footprint, shortening the building by a story is not necessarily going open views to the steeple and all that.

- On top of that, losing a story loses additional housing.
- People need to understand what they're asking for and what other impacts those [building modifications] will have on the Town.

Spencer pointed out that by losing a floor:

- The building still provides a lot of housing.
- A shorter building will minimize its dominance.
- Any building here is going to obscure some views. I hesitate to use the word "psychological," but seeing this in context [in the digital model], I think losing a story would absolutely minimize its dominance, its impact. So I think losing a floor *would* made a difference.

Burhans: And it would fit better into this space.

Devol and **Grassi** agreed and also thought that the top floor should be set back.

LeBuffe felt that the building meets the criterion of "consistency with character and scale" within the PUD.

Casciari agreed, specifying features that mitigate the building's size: setbacks, articulations, detailing of materials, window proportions, etc.

Riemenschneider: The architecture and articulation don't match the historic context, but they blend well with it.

Riemenschneider advanced discussion to [7.3.17 Design Review Guidelines](#):

The goal of the CBD zoning plan is to create a functionally diverse and active downtown development, consisting of attractive background buildings that focus on and enrich the streetscape and public open space.

LeBuffe agreed with **Riemenschneider** that the building meets this goal.

Riemenschneider read the second paragraph of the Guidelines:

New structures must be compatible with Winchester's historic architecture and sense of place. The Town seeks new buildings that are timeless and subtle. This will be achieved in part through the design of properly scaled windows, masonry articulation, setbacks, animated silhouettes, and use of materials that are warm, inviting, and supportive of other proposed buildings.

Discussion ensued. DRC members offered contrasting opinions on whether or not the proposed building:

- Is compatible with the CBD's historical architecture, sense of place, and small-town character.
- Is timeless and subtle.
- Is properly scaled for its site.

Casciari and Riemenschneider said it it meets all of those things.

Spencer said it is not timeless or subtle, particularly its size.

Devol: added that not only is the size not subtle, but the top is not either.

Casciari: I do feel that the top is the part that needs the most work of the whole building.

Devol also said that its "sense of place" is lacking. Earlier she had said it looks like it belongs in a newer development on Tremont or Washington [in Boston]. But instead it's pond-side in the Civic center of Winchester. If this were smaller, it would settle in better.

Burhans said she had been in favor of 654 Main Street and supported the Waterfield project, because "I felt they sat within the community and the surrounding buildings. They worked within the areas they were seated in.

- Granted this [the proposed building] might be where Winchester is going, but this feels like it stands out. It feels really large and monolithic.
- If it were smaller, to me, it would fit more in with the town. And that's what many people have said.
- I do like the building, but it seems more suited to an area like Waltham. It seems large for that parcel of land."

Riemenschneider read the third Guidelines paragraph:

The objectives of the CBD do not support isolated, individual architectural statements that relate only to themselves. They do support projects that are positive additions to Winchester's town center. General guidelines are discussed below, while detailed guidelines for historic properties are located in the Rules for this Section 7.3.17 and entitled Guidelines for Existing Historically Significant Buildings.

Riemenschneider repeated, "do not support architectural statements that relate only to themselves."

She said, "I think that this does *not* relate only to itself. It relates to the river, it relates to Converse Place, it has the curved façade towards the river.

Casciari: It also has the three-story read with the setbacks and the articulation in the bricks that makes it fit into the three-story context of the surrounding buildings.

Devol noted that it's an architectural statement by virtue of its mass and size.

Casciari asked, "Will that change over time, when other buildings are built in the area?"

Riemenschneider agreed, saying that the growth plan for downtown is to build more three- and four-story buildings in this PUD, and to add stories to the one-story buildings there now.

She continued to read the Guidelines:

The Town promotes an active setting along its main downtown streets both during and after customary business hours. Additionally, the Town supports new residential development throughout the downtown that will maximize hours of activity and improve public security.

Development in the public and private realms should be integrated in as positive, secure and elegant a manner as possible. Any part of the perimeter of new development that fronts on an existing street or public open space should be designed to complement and harmonize with adjacent land uses (planned or existing) with respect to use, scale, density, set-back, bulk, height, landscaping, and screening. Finally, each individual project should be carefully conceived and executed to the mutual benefit of its immediate neighbors. New development projects will inevitably affect the existing downtown community. Therefore, attractive and inviting connections to and from adjacent neighborhoods are essential.

Jamie and Ellen, you are definitely a No on "scale, set-back, and bulk"?

Spencer, Devol, and Grassi agreed that:

- The building size and bulk should be reduced.
- A smaller footprint would open more space between the building and the waterway.
- Would allow more room for public access, walking on the path, bike riding, and leisure.
- Would help to maintain views of Winchester's "small-town" roof-scape.

Riemenschneider concluded her reading of the Design Guidelines and called for a vote and recommendations on Site Plan Review criteria.

LeBuffe advised that, since our recommendations for Site Plan Review and Special Permit both go to the Planning Board, DRC holds just one vote

Riemenschneider read to the end of Special Permit Criteria [[9.4.2.](#)] to get members' opinions on the items therein.

She read the Zoning Bylaw Section 9.4.2 Criteria, opening paragraph:

Unless otherwise specified in Section 3.5 or elsewhere in this bylaw, a special permit may be granted by the Special Permit Granting Authority (SPGA) only if it finds that the beneficial impacts of the proposed use or structure will outweigh its adverse effects on the town or the neighborhood in view of the particular characteristics of the site and of the proposal in relation to that site. In addition to any specific factors that may be set forth in this bylaw, the SPGA shall consider, and its written decision shall address, each of the following, as well as any recommendations by other Town agencies and officials:

She read the Zoning Bylaw Section 9.4.2 Criteria that apply to design:

4. Impacts on neighborhood character, including the extent to which:
 - a. Building forms and materials are compatible with the prevailing scale and character of buildings in the neighborhood;
 - b. Architectural features add visual character to the neighborhood (for example, dormers, lintels, bay windows, open porches, chimneys); and
 - c. Patterns and proportions of windows are consistent;
5. Adequacy of proposed screening and buffering.
6. Impacts on natural environment, including. But not limited to, changes in topography, installation of retaining walls, or the removal of mature trees.
8. Impacts on historic resources, as defined in Section [Section 10](#).

Riemenschneider suggested a condition for DRC's Special Permit vote: That we get to look at landscape and exterior lighting plans.

LeBuffe made a motion for the Committee to vote on.

MOTION made by Adrian LeBuffe,

We vote for favorable action with one condition:

That DRC is involved in reviewing architectural and landscape design as it progresses.

VOTE COUNT on LeBuffe's motion:

3 in favor (LeBuffe, Casciari, Riemenschneider)

4 against (Spencer, Devol, Grassi, Burhans)

MOTION made by Jamie Devol,

We vote favorable action with the condition that we take off a story and make the building narrower.

VOTE COUNT on Devol's motion:

4 in favor (Spencer, Devol, Grassi, Burhans)

3 against (LeBuffe, Casciari, Riemenschneider)

Riemenschneider: We are recommending to the Planning Board favorable action, with the condition of removing a floor and making the building narrower.

3. Adjourn.**SUMMARY of Design Review Committee VOTES — February 16, 2022****Please see:**

Zoning Bylaw [7.3.15.5 General Standards for Site Plan Review](#)

Zoning Bylaw [9.4.2 Special Permit Criteria](#)

Zoning Bylaw [9.5 Site Plan Review](#)

Minutes #	Item	Motion	Vote
2.	10 Converse Place Proposed Building Design	Motion by Adrian LeBuffe — Favorable action with one condition: DRC is involved in architecture and landscape design as it progresses.	3 in favor (LeBuffe, Casciari, Riemenschneider) 4 against (Spencer, Devol, Grassi, Burhans)
2.	10 Converse Place Proposed Building Design	Motion by Jamie Devol — Favorable action with one condition: Remove a floor and make the building narrower.	4 in favor (Spencer, Devol, Grassi, Burhans) 3 against (LeBuffe, Casciari, Riemenschneider)

Next meeting: Wednesday, March 9, 2022, 7:30 PM. Location to be announced.

Respectfully submitted by Recording Secretary Nancy Upper.