



Ruthanne Fuller
Mayor

City of Newton, Massachusetts
Department of Planning and Development
Urban Design Commission

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Barney Heath
Director

DATE: October 14, 2022
TO: Katie Whewell, Chief Planner
FROM: Urban Design Commission
RE: 106 River Street
CC: Barney Heath, Director of Planning and Community Development
Jennifer Caira, Deputy Director
Land Use Committee of the City Council
Petitioner

Section 22-80 of the Newton City Ordinances authorizes the Urban Design Commission to act in an advisory capacity on matters of urban design and beautification. At their regular meeting on March 9, 2022, the Newton Urban Design Commission (UDC) reviewed the proposed project at 106 River Street for design.

This project was also reviewed by UDC in September 2021. Attachment A includes the memo from that meeting. Since the project's last design iteration, the following changes were made:

- The dwelling unit count has increased from 6 to 9 to provide smaller, more attainable unit.
- Unit areas have decreased with the typical unit at approximately 1,550 SF.
- Two larger units at approximately 1,740 SF are provided.
- Parking stalls reduced from 14 to 13 (Including visitor spaces). 1 handicapped accessible space provided.
- Parking stalls designated as EV ready
- Tenant parking will be in an open carport instead of private garages
- The raised courtyard has been removed
- The paseo access to parking from Elm Street has been removed
- The entry access drive has been widened to accommodate two-way traffic
- The FAR has been reduced from 1.17 to 1.0
- The ridge height of the Elm Street facing units has been raised from 134'-6" to 137'-6" in alignment with the ridge height of the River Street facing units.

At the March 9, 2022 meeting, the Urban Design Commission had the following comments and recommendations:

The UDC commented that it is supportive of the overall project as well as the building's massing and orientation but needs additional information regarding landscape and public realm.

Building Massing, Height, and Architecture

- Some members commented that they like the elevation because it articulates individual units and that they like the reference image shown. The UDC commented that there is not much contrast between each unit, it recommended that little more subtlety among the colors would be worth looking at.
- The UDC commented that it was nice to have the second level courtyard space, as shown in the previous plan. The applicant commented that there were some benefits to have the courtyard and they weighed pros and cons and decided to move forward without the courtyard. The number of units have increased from 6 to 9 units. The reason for the change from 6 to 9 units is because of needs of the city. They have heard from the Council the need to have smaller, affordable, accessible units. That's why the applicant modified the plan on this project to achieve the corresponding city goals and align with the comprehensive plan.
- Some members commented that they appreciate the motivation and the need for housing but were troubled by the length of the unbroken townhouses on Elm Street. The building is about 130 feet long on Elm Street. It is nicely executed but makes for a long building wall along Elm Street.

Landscape, Streetscape and Open Space

- The UDC asked for a landscape plan that shows street trees and demonstrates how the design works within a 10 feet setback. The precedent image shows a planting strip, sidewalk, and a setback which appears to be around 18 to 20 feet. The applicant clarified that the design has a 10 feet setback from the parcel line.
- The UDC asked if there was any green space or is it all paved around the building. The applicant responded that there will be green space along the edges and in the setback areas and all the space that surrounds the perimeter along the sidewalk. The applicant mentioned that it will be an urban space and will feel more urban with a little green space in front of each unit. The applicant also commented that there is a large park nearby for residents, that's why it is more of an urban design. The applicant mentioned that Commonwealth Avenue in Boston is a good example, each unit will have its own small green space. The applicant also mentioned that they will come back with a more detailed landscape plan.
- The UDC requested the applicant to come back with a landscape plan. The UDC pointed out that it will be important to see that aspect, Elm Street is not Comm. Ave. The previous design had a break in the building because of the courtyard. On this street, there have been redevelopments of large lots, but they are setback from the street.

Parking

- The UDC asked about the parking spaces and how the layout works behind units C and D, whether the space behind them was an empty space? The applicant responded that it is one space, but they are working to make it more efficient in terms of the space. Unit E is the

accessible unit, accessible space is directly adjacent to it and there is also space carved out for a future lift.

Additional information request

- The UDC commented that this submission and review is incomplete because there is no landscape plan which is key to what people will experience and more context is important.
- The UDC commented that they appreciate the presentation but feel inadequacy in the street scape and public realm. The applicant commented that they will come back with a detailed landscape plan.
- UDC needs more information to understand the public realm, landscape plan, and how the project faces the abutters.



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Barney Heath
Director

DATE: October 22, 2021
TO: Neil Cronin, Chief Planner
FROM: Urban Design Commission
RE: 106 River Street
CC: Land Use Committee of the City Council
Barney Heath, Director of Planning and Community Development
Jennifer Caira, Deputy Director
Petitioner

Section 22-80 of the Newton City Ordinances authorizes the Urban Design Commission to act in an advisory capacity on matters of urban design and beautification. At their regular meeting on September 22, 2021, the Newton Urban Design Commission reviewed the proposed project at 106 River Street for design. The Urban Design Commission had the following comments and recommendations:

The UDC commented that this is an interesting, skillful project on a tough, corner site. It is great seeing a scheme that doesn't have garages/driveways in the front.

Site Plan, Circulation and Connectivity

- There was discussion about the parking underneath the courtyard and its access. Looking at the plans closely, it was clear that it is built as a wall so the only entrance for the parking garage to units A, B, and C is through the small entrance shown as dotted lines on the first-floor plan between units D and E. The Commission commented that functionally, it may create a problem to have a small entrance to private garages. For example, if a resident in unit C wanted to take their car for a short trip, they will need to back out, go all the way across the garages for units A and B, pivot, and then go through that one little opening, then turn and finally get to the street. That will be an annoyance. The applicant responded that it was a recommendation from one of the Ward Councilor that they thought it would be better to have that as an opening and each unit would have their own door for safety. The applicant also commented that they looked at all the turning radii and it works. They had to give a little here so there are no garages facing the street. The Commission commented that they are supportive of the way it looks both on Elm Street and River Street. It's a visual problem when cars come off the street or physical problem when they go through this sort of back entrance.

- The UDC asked if the existing electric poles will stay and if they block any entrances? The applicant responded that they don't believe they will block any entrance but will investigate and confirm that. The applicant also mentioned that the Special Permit process may require under-grounding.

Building Massing, Height and Architecture

- The Commission commented regarding Elm Street elevation, the architecture is good and elevated private space is good, but it is a long building. The covered parking in a way is good but would have preferred to see a landscaped green opening in keeping with the neighborhood. The existing building across the street is quite different, building shape may be similar but the site plan and massing is quite different. Hiding of the parking is skillfully executed but there is limited driveway space and probably not much space to provide landscape screenings for the abutters who will be seeing the driveway and parking. Will there be any fencing or landscaping to deal with it? Is there any additional roof equipment or protrusions through the roof that may be visible? In the massing, there was a linking piece at the second level, what is that? The applicant responded that the idea behind the linking piece is to create a courtyard space. The applicant mentioned that they have been talking to the 3 Ward Councilors and one of the comments that came up early on is that this didn't feel like a courtyard space but felt like an open deck and by enclosing it, it felt more like a bungalow and it gave a scale to this courtyard, it is usable living unit space.
- The Commission asked where the entrance to the corner unit is. The applicant responded that it is under the porch and the entire porch will belong to that unit. The Commission commented that the porch doesn't feel right. The applicant responded that it could be because the porch needs a plinth or a deck, so it ties more with the building than just sitting on the ground in the landscape. Another option will be to make the porch smaller. The applicant also mentioned that the openness of the porch was to improve the visibility at the intersection. The Commission commented that the porch may be too grand for that corner. The applicant responded that they would investigate it and may be tone it down a little.
- The Commission asked if there is an egress from the raised courtyard? The applicant responded that they are from within each unit and are considering providing a stairway from the top to the back or to the garage. The applicant also said that they first thought of providing a staircase in the front (as shown in some of the drawings) but are going to remove it due to safety reasons. The Commission commented that it is probably a good idea since the staircase doesn't fit well with the elevation.

Landscape, Streetscape and Public Open Space

- The Commission also commented that the corner is important, and it is good that safety has been considered. It's going to be very important to look at the landscape plants to make sure there is no growing understory so there's visibility which is a tremendous improvement from the existing condition of the site. The applicant mentioned that the landscape architect is Tom Ryan, from Ryan Associates who did the landscape for the project across the street, they will be putting a lot of time and effort in the landscaping.
- The Commission asked how many bedrooms these units are typically? The applicant responded that they will be a mix of unit sizes, 2, 3, or 4 bedrooms. The Commission commented that some of these units will probably have children because of the unit size. There's no place for them to play. There needs to be some green open space. The applicant responded that there is West

Newton Playground on Elm Street, with a very significant tot lot, it is within a 5-minute walking distance. The Commission responded that is good, but parents won't be able to look out their window and watch while the kids play outside the kitchen. The architecture is great, and the concept is great, but no open space is a major drawback.

- There was discussion about the gravel area in the northeast part of the site. What's happening in that area? The applicant responded that they would investigate about providing a play space in that area. There is also a south facing space that may work as well.
- The Commission commented that it may help to have 1 more curb cut. The applicant responded that the only place to provide it would be at River Street but would defeat the purpose of using that space as a play space. The Commission suggested that a second curb cut could be provided if it were 2 buildings, so the curb cut could be in the middle of both the buildings. The applicant responded that zoning doesn't allow for 2 buildings in this zone, there is no avenue to seek that kind of relief.
- The Commission asked if it is required to provide visitor parking and the applicant responded that they are not required to provide visitor parking. It might help to not provide visitor parking, there are plenty of on-street parking spaces.

The Commission commented that there are two weak points from visual standpoint, first is the connector between the two buildings (the one along Elm St. and the other along River Street) with the door and the stair, it feels funny. The second weakness is the plinth that happens above the drive to four of the six parking garages.

The UDC commented that there may be too many units at this site. One less unit will give a lot more flexibility to the site plan and parking. A plan with five units could be very different, has different qualities and meets the street in a similar way. The applicant responded that as a developer there are financial aspects to consider, six units is the amount that is required to do the type of architecture and quality work.