



WalkBoston

March 28, 2008

Secretary Ian A. Bowles
Executive Office of Environmental Affairs
Attn: Holly Johnson
100 Cambridge Street, Suite 900
Boston, MA 02114

Jay Rourke
Boston Redevelopment Authority
One City Hall Square
Boston, MA 02201

RE: Charlesview Redevelopment Environmental Notification Form/Project Notification Form

EOEA # 14188

Dear Msrs. Bowles and Rourke:

WalkBoston appreciates the opportunity to provide comments on the Environmental Notification Form for the Charlesview Redevelopment in the Allston-Brighton neighborhood of Boston. We are pleased that the period allotted for review was been extended to April 1, 2008, which allowed more of our members to add their thoughts to the review process.

The proposal calls for the 4.5-acre site of the existing Charlesview Apartments to be swapped for two sites totalling approximately 6.9 acres on Western Avenue, ½ mile west of the existing Charlesview Apartments. The 6.2-acre Brighton Mills site is currently occupied by a partially abandoned shopping center. The existing Shaw's Supermarket, McDonald's, and Petco at the east edge of the shopping center will remain. The smaller 0.72-acre Telford Street site across Western Ave. now has several small business structures, all of which will be replaced.

The Brighton Mills site will include ten buildings and house 282 affordable rental units, inclusive of the 213 existing Charlesview affordable units. The Telford St. site will contain two buildings with up to 118 affordable and market rate homeownership units. Two buildings adjacent to Western Ave. will have approximately 11,500 square feet of commercial uses at the street level and 10,500 square feet of ground floor community space. New open space of 3.66 acres will be divided into courtyards, parks and children's play areas to be maintained by the proponent. A total of 454 parking spaces are proposed for the project - 76 spaces on surface streets, 44 underground at the Telford St. site, and 334 underground at the Brighton Mills site.

At this early stage of development we are concerned about how well pedestrians will be served both on-site and in adjacent properties and streets and the community at large.

Summary of comments

- Replacement of an obsolete mall and parking lot by residences is a positive development.
- The project is located where it can help knit the community back together.
- Sidewalks along Western Ave. and Telford St. should follow an overall plan.
- Telford St. should be treated as a major pedestrian corridor to riverside recreation.
- Telford St. should be extended directly into the Brighton Mills site to remove an offset from its intersection with Western Ave.
- The Telford St. pedestrian bridge to the riverside parks should be upgraded.

- Communal open space must be designed to encourage strolling and destination walking in a safe pedestrian environment.
- Parallel parking on local streets would help to slow traffic and protect pedestrians.
- Special screening is required where residential areas meet the large shopping center.
- Safety provisions at site intersections should be rigorously and visibly integrated into street designs that closely follow state pedestrian facility recommendations.
- Curb extensions at intersections should be placed to shorten crossing distances and increase safety. All crossings should meet ADA requirements.
- A mid-block walk along proposed New St. past the Shaw's Market and connecting to Everett St. would provide direct access to the elementary school on Brentwood St. and the church on Holton Street.

Overall reactions

We applaud the replacement of an obsolete mall and its accompanying large parking lot with residences and related pedestrian facilities. While we wish the remainder of the parking lot could be eliminated, we know that retention of the grocery store is a benefit to the neighborhood and that some parking must be retained to serve it.

Eliminating a portion of the mall helps knit the community back together. The project is located within a three-block wide north-south swath of non-residential land between Everett and Antwerp Streets that now separates the two halves of the neighborhood. This project reduces the distance between the residential segments - a positive result.

The proponent estimates that about 50% of the daily trips to and from this site will be made solely on foot or by walking to bus stops. With such a high pedestrian volume, the proponent and the City should assure that walking considerations are paramount in providing good access.

One of the goals of the Allston Strategic Framework Plan is to make Western Ave. more hospitable for pedestrians. A design for all sidewalks along Western Ave. should be outlined with dimensions for sidewalks, planting strips, street furniture, and standards for paving surfaces to guide the design for the pedestrian environment for this development and subsequent proposals along both sides of Western Ave. This plan should be designed to mesh with the evolving plans for sidewalks along Western Ave. east of North Harvard St. Similar design guidelines would be appropriate for sidewalks along Soldiers Field Road and Telford St. to guide the design for this project and subsequent proposals in the area.

Public transportation, concentrated along Western Ave., is provided by Route #70 between Central Sq. and Waltham, #70A between Central Sq. and N. Waltham, and #86 between Sullivan Sq. (Orange Line) and Reservoir/Cleveland Circle (Green Line). North Harvard St. bus routes are about a 15-minute walk from the site. Bus stop designs should be incorporated into the renovation of Western Ave. with bus stops provided near all major pedestrian corridors and crossings of Western Avenue, such as Telford Street. Curb extensions should be used to ease boarding at bus stops, provide space for bus shelters and make it easier for buses to stop, as is proposed for MBTA Bus Route #39 in Jamaica Plain.

Development of the Telford St. site

The Telford St. site is an L-shaped piece of land with the short part of the L facing the river. The proposal includes a row of town houses along Telford St. and an 8-10 story building at Telford St. and Soldiers Field Road. The site lies within the residential area proposed by the North Allston Strategic Framework Plan for the long strip of land sandwiched between Soldiers Field Road and Western Ave. The proposed buildings help implement this proposal for a new residential area - perhaps the first housing to be located along the riverside of Allston-Brighton. Because of its height, the taller building will become a visual landmark.

Sidewalks will line Telford St. to connect these residences with the shopping and social opportunities at the Brighton Mills site. These sidewalks should be generous in width and accessible, as it appears that this corridor will play a significant role for pedestrian connections between the entire neighborhood and the Charles River. The Telford St. corridor should also have signs posted to show residents and visitors the best way to reach the riverside. The entrance to the underground garage should be moved away from Soldiers Field Road to avoid queuing onto the parkway.

A significant facility next to this site is the existing pedestrian bridge from the end of Telford St. over Soldiers Field Road into the riverside parks. Currently in disrepair, this bridge gives immediate access to the large Artesani Children's Playground and the Publick Theatre on the opposite side of the highway. This bridge is important to the neighborhood, as it provides the only totally safe pedestrian crossing of about a 1½-mile stretch of the highway. (There is a grade crossing at the signals where Everett St. meets the roadway.) Since this bridge crossing is so important in serving the proponent's sites, it may be appropriate to assure its continued use by reassessing who will maintain it. Perhaps the proponents of this project could take on weekly maintenance chores, and Harvard or other entities take on structural tasks. It would be a pity to see it deteriorate over time because of a lack of funding, good management and constant maintenance.

Only a small amount of open space is provided on-site for the Telford St. buildings, concentrated at the parcel's riverside corner. A playground on this site is likely to be unnecessary, because the Artesani Playground is so near. Connected to the building's common areas, the open space may serve social and educational events. Perhaps it could be used for residences to reduce the building's height.

Development of the Brighton Mills site

The Brighton Mills site occupies roughly 4 city blocks between Litchfield St. and the current entrance to the mall opposite the end of Telford St. It is bounded by Western Ave. along the north side of the site, Litchfield St. residential buildings on the west, industrial buildings on the south, and commercial buildings for Shaw's Supermarket, McDonald's, and Petco (and their parking lots) along the east edge. The four city blocks within the site are formed by the extension of Antwerp St. north-south and construction of New St. east-west through the site. These blocks have sidewalks on both sides of the street as is typical throughout the city, with the addition of curb extensions into the street at most of the major crosswalks within the site, an essential safety measure for pedestrians.

Town houses are located along the south and west portions of the site, designed to be of similar scale to the existing housing areas lining Litchfield St. Two six-story buildings are proposed for the Western Ave. frontage, with retail facilities and common meeting areas for residents at ground level. Between the town houses and the 6-story buildings are several 4 to 5-story buildings facing both Antwerp St. and the commercial parking areas serving Shaw's, Petco and McDonald's.

The open space allotted to walking between these buildings varies. Town houses appear to have both back and front yard spaces that will be under private control. All other buildings share significant communal green spaces that abut the higher density buildings. Two small playgrounds and one basketball court are provided in the communal areas. Careful planning, and clear responsibility for management and stewardship is essential to keep these communal open spaces from deteriorating and becoming hazards for walkers.

Communal open space that is internal to a housing site has inherent issues for walking:

- Open and highly visible open space is a plus for safety, while enclosed, narrow spaces and their walkways may lead to locations or niches where walkers feel or actually become vulnerable to violence. A pedestrian safety review would be appropriate for all options for proposed open spaces and walkways.
- Maintenance can be difficult and costly for so much open space and thus is frequently deferred in other such projects. Bad maintenance deters and discourages walking. Provision should be made for snow and ice removal.
- Refuse disposal and collection locations within the open space must be clearly and attractively designed, stringently contained physically, and constantly maintained. They should not be allowed along outdoor paths where they detract from walking.
- Pedestrian paths across open areas should be purposefully designed to encourage walking, strolling and for access to playgrounds or other destinations. Pergolas can make walking serene and inviting.
- In some cases, elimination of paths can lead to swaths of grassy open spaces that are very attractive for running and playing. Grassy areas also work effectively above underground garages where trees are difficult to grow.
- A single large open space may be preferable to the two suggested here. More grassy space for playing would be available – perhaps for field games and running. It should be made visible from the street. A single large playground might be preferable to two playgrounds. The area should include modest facilities for adults accompanying children to promote socializing and neighborhood care/monitoring of children.

Relationship of the project to the neighborhood

The proposed development and the adjacent shopping center are near the geographic center of the neighborhood. Changing uses in the center of the neighborhood offers many opportunities for linking and strengthening the community and its walking opportunities.

Street extensions will help open up the site for pedestrians. The extension of Antwerp St. and New St. connect to streets and sidewalks of the surrounding neighborhood. All new crosswalks should be clearly marked and have sidewalk extensions for safety.

Parking along interior streets is a recommended way to protect pedestrians on the immediately adjacent sidewalks from moving vehicles and to make walking feel safer. It should also be considered along Western Avenue, which has higher traffic volumes.

Most sidewalks will be related to streets or internal play spaces. In some cases, new sidewalk links may be desirable even if they are not connected with a street right-of-way. A good example is a potential link beyond the New St. sidewalk that connects from the site to the Shaw's Market. If extended by a new mid-block walk between the supermarket and nearby Everett St. this pedestrian facility could provide access from the Brighton Mills project to the local elementary school on Brentwood St. and to St. Anthony's church. Without this connection, school children and churchgoers must use indirect routes via Western Ave. or Holton St. to get to the school and church.

Telford St. north of Western Ave. is at present slightly misaligned from the street pattern of the Brighton Mills site at the entrance to the former, larger shopping center. Realigning the proposed eastern boundary drive along this site to meet the present Telford St. at Western Ave. would provide a clear, uncomplicated signalized intersection at Western Ave. It would be a location where a major pedestrian spine is a feature of the design of this project. If this extension adds some land to the proposed site, it could be used for more housing, improved pedestrian access, a bus shelter or landscaping.

Special treatment for pedestrian facilities is warranted for the eastern boundary of the site where residential uses are immediately adjacent to the shopping center. The unnamed roadway on this site boundary (Telford St. Extended?) should have sidewalks and street designs to mitigate the stark contrast between a green building site and shopping center parking lots. A single row of trees is shown separating the site from the Shaw's Market. More should be done with innovative landscaping designs.

Some drivers will "cut through" the development from Holton St. and Litchfield St. to reach the Shaw's Supermarket. These movements should be discouraged through careful design, signage and speed bumps. The safety of existing intersections should also be explored. It is important to know if pedestrians can be adequately protected from motorists at crosswalks at Western Ave. intersections with Litchfield, Antwerp and Telford Streets both with and without signals.

Thank you for the opportunity to pose questions for further study and comment on this document, which is part of major development in the Allston-Brighton neighborhood. Please feel free to contact us for clarification or additional comments.

Sincerely,

Wendy Landman
Executive Director

Robert Sloane
Senior Planner