

Notes of the January 10, 2011 Berklee IMP Task Force Meeting

6:00 – 8:00 PM

Boston Public Library, Conference Room CO6

Attendance

Members Present: Susan Ashbrook, Co-Chair; Karla Rideout, Co-Chair; Kelly Brilliant, Tim Horn, Valerie Hunt, Gail Korn, Randy Kreie, Meg Mainzer-Cohen, Richard Pendleton, Ellen Shortell, Barbara Brooks Simons

Elected Officials Present: Rep. Byron Rushing, Rep. Marty Walz

Other Attendees: Gerald Autler, BRA; Clifford Gayley, William Rawn Associates; David Grissino, Goody Clancy Associates; James McCoy, Berklee; William Whitney, Berklee

Observers: Ken Amano, Shirley Kressel, Walter Hunt, Samuel Lasky, Susan Prindle

Minutes

The meeting was called to order at approximately 6:10 p.m. Karla Rideout welcomed everyone to the meeting and asked the Task Force members to introduce themselves.

Saint Germain Representation Bill Whitney opened the meeting by reminding everyone that the Task Force had previously encouraged Berklee to reach out to residents of Saint Germain in an effort to get that street represented on the Task Force. Two prospects were discussed, both of whom have been involved with the First Church of Christ, Scientist Community Advisory Committee.

Draft of Institutional Master Plan Mr. Whitney informed the group that Berklee intends to provide Task Force members with a draft of most chapters of the Institutional Master Plan by the end of the week in order to be able to review and discuss them at the next meeting on January 24. For the chapters that still require information, discussion will be moved to a later date so that the Task Force has adequate time to review. The college still intends to submit the Institutional Master Plan at the end of the month, but while the original plan was to submit the Expanded Project Notification Form concurrently, the different lengths of the comment periods for each submission will allow Berklee to submit the EPNF several weeks later so that the ends of the two comment periods will be contemporaneous.

Area Perspective Views Cliff Gayley and David Grissino presented area perspective views including the proposed Berklee projects. These perspectives included the other proposed development projects in the area, as the Task Force had previously requested. The views featured four major areas: side streets perpendicular to Mass Ave, Commonwealth Ave; the Boylston Street corridor; and Huntington Ave.

Karla Rideout pointed out that it seemed that the building came down far forward on the street. Bill Whitney commented that the existing building goes out a little bit further to the south; the new proposal pulls back a few feet, so in fact it will widen the sidewalk.

Views taken from Belvidere Street looking towards Mass Ave., from Huntington Avenue looking across the Christian Science Plaza, at the intersection of Mass Ave and Huntington Ave in front of Horticultural Hall and looking east down Haviland Street just east of Hemenway Street were shown and discussed. Mr. Gayley noted that closer-in views along Mass Ave will be shown at the next meeting with more developed architectural characteristics.

David Grissino then showed a view looking east down Boylston Street, demonstrating how the height of the Crossroads podium is in scale with its contextual buildings from this angle and how the tower component appears narrower. The same is true looking west down Boylston Street. The generous setbacks and slenderness of the tower help to decrease the apparent mass of the building and will be further defined in Large Project Review.

On Commonwealth Ave looking north on Mass Ave, Mr. Grissino pointed out a natural stepping down from Parcel 15 that helps to frame the Crossroads as a transitional building from points east to west. The perception of the Commonwealth Ave buildings with the Crossroads from this point is that they are in a family of like scales. Further east on Commonwealth Ave looking south, one can see several upper floors of the Crossroads.

Mr. Grissino informed the task force that the next meeting will feature a series of localized points more focused on the architectural character of 168 Mass Ave. He reminded the task force of the changes in the height and massing of the Crossroads since the original proposal and the IMPNF submission.

Mr. Grissino then showed the group an elevation view from the Cambridge side of the Charles River to put Berklee in a broader urban context. He stressed that Berklee has tried to think about the impacts and benefits of its planned projects on a local level, but also about the role the college will play on a larger scale. He stated that the Berklee team feels that the proposal as it stands now helps the college achieve the housing goals previously discussed, creates opportunity for a lively and comfortable pedestrian realm in the immediate area, and fits into the urban fabric of the whole corridor.

Crossroads Discussion Ms. Rideout pointed that the college had no plans to develop 168 Mass Ave into a dormitory when the IMP process began, and that the additional housing at that site is “extra” to what the college had expected to get. She stated that not everyone on the task force was in favor of 24 stories, and that one way to lower the height would be to lower the number of beds, despite the resulting delay in achieving the college’s goal.

Ms. Hunt and Rep. Rushing recalled that the original goal stated by the college was to house 50% of its students by creating a total inventory of 2000 beds, or 1,200 additional beds. The Crossroads project was part of that goal, but at the time Berklee even said they were looking at other locations for development.

Mr. Horn reminded the group that the task force had in fact pushed Berklee to build dormitories and get students out of neighborhood housing, and that the process is one of give-and-take. The goal of getting students into dormitories is shared by the college and the community.

Ms. Mainzer-Cohen agreed and mentioned the legislation sponsored by Councilor Michael Ross limiting the number of students who can live in an apartment. She asked Ms. Rideout if there would be a particular height that she thought people would be happy with for the Crossroads. Ms. Rideout responded that the height in question would probably be 11 stories, since that is how tall the Parcel 13 proposal is. She acknowledged that many building heights get negotiated down.

Mr. Kreie commented that the elevation shown by Mr. Grissino emphasizes the width of the building, and that the two solutions to this perception are 1) to keep it taller and narrower and make a better building, or 2) to lessen the restriction on the setback. He is not as worried about height at this site and likes the tall Christian Science proposal nearby. Ms. Mainzer-Cohen commented that building too many buildings ultimately creates less interesting skyline.

Mr. Whitney turned to the current Berklee proposal and pointed out the proposed wind shelf on the building that was encouraged by the BRA. The site is confined on the south by 150 Mass Ave. The building appears wide from Cambridge, but narrow from either direction on Boylston Street. By making the building more square, the proposal loses the wind mitigation of the shelf. He agreed with Ms. Rideout that the program of beds at the Crossroads was not reduced with the height, but pointed out that further reductions in height after this point would indeed mean fewer beds overall. At this point, further reductions mean reduction in program.

Rep. Walz asked how many beds would be lost per floor removed from the Crossroads. Mr. Grissino responded that the current plan contains 25 beds per floor on average. He also emphasized that up to this point the task force has been at are massing envelopes, the effect of which can be improved by architectural details, such as with the glass corners at the W. To this, Rep. Walz reminded the task force that the Crossroads will not be a glass building, so it will need a different mitigating design feature.

Mr. Grissino reminded the task force that while the conversation has focused on the height of the building, the base of the building represents a great opportunity to relocate a world-class performance venue, the BPC, and create a vibrant presence on the street. Ms. Shortell agreed and said that she didn't think most people had a problem with the base of the building, but as she is a resident near one of the perspective views, she still finds the building looks too tall. She also pointed out that while the Parcel 15 proposal makes the Crossroads appear less dramatic, she believes that such a proposal would encounter fierce opposition.

Ms. Kressel asked for a review of enrollment trends at Berklee over the past decade and projections for the future. Mr. Whitney stated that the enrollment has grown from slightly under 4,000 FTE to about 4,000 FTE, and that the college intends to remain at approximately that range.

Mr. Horn reflected on his experience with Morville House, which also requested zoning relief for its 13 stories, and stated that the outcome had been good for the neighborhood. He compared the location to the Crossroads, pointing out that Boylston and Mass Ave is an even more appropriate location for height and movement.

Ms. Mainzer-Cohen recommended that the group actually visit certain of the perspective views and not focus purely on the height impacts, but on other impacts as well.

Mr. Kreie asked what the proposed program and layout is for the residential floors. Mr. Whitney responded that 168 will contain primarily doubles, with bathrooms on the corridors. At the Crossroads, since this dormitory is anticipated to house slightly older students, the layout may be a mix of singles and small suites, perhaps with kitchenettes.

Ms. Hunt stated that she would be willing to compromise on height in order to get students out of neighborhood housing.

Mr. Autler reminded the group that the city ratio estimates that every four beds of dormitory housing are treated as the equivalent of one apartment, so the proposed 1,200 beds in the proposed IMP projects would free up approximately 200 neighborhood apartments.

Ms. Rideout noted that, in her opinion, the addition of tall buildings will change the historic feel of the neighborhood, even though removing height from the Crossroads would create a need for more sites. Mr. Grissino responded by noting that the base provides exactly the opportunity to maintain the historic element of the pedestrian experience by aligning the scale of the performance center with the surrounding neighborhood, and investigating the possibility of preserving the existing facades. Mr. Gayley also noted that Boylston Street has gradually become much more pedestrian-friendly over the years.

Rep. Walz suggested that, going forward, task force members take this discussion back to their respective neighborhood groups to solicit feedback on the various tradeoffs, since at this time the task force does not seem to be approaching consensus.

Rep. Walz also wondered if the question of façade retention at the Crossroads needs to be resolved for the IMP submission, or if Berklee may instead include general discussion of both options, preserving the more involved decision-making process for Large Project Review.

Ms. Mainzer-Cohen asked how entries to the building would be coordinated if the facades were retained. Mr. Whitney responded that the new performance center would likely have entrances on Boylston Street, and the student housing component entrance would probably be through the Fenway Theater façade.

Ms. Mainzer-Cohen also asked who would ultimately be responsible for making the decision about façade retention. Mr. Grissino responded that since the feasibility of incorporating the façades depends on technical conditions such as structural integrity, it may not be possible to make an informed decision until Berklee is more engaged in the design process for this project.

Ms. Kressel inquired as to why the existing zoning on the parcels in question is set aside in the IMP process when the original zoning was also determined by committee. Mr. Horn responded that he sees the collaborative process as a necessary and helpful way to evaluate projects that are positive and important for the neighborhood. Mr. Autler pointed out that the process of obtaining zoning relief is written in Article 80, and that any outcome to the process will solve certain impacts while creating other impacts. This is about tradeoffs.

The task force generally agreed that a brief “executive summary,” along with a clear write-up of the tradeoffs in question, would be helpful to distribute so that members may easily share the important information from the process with their respective organizations.

Ms. Mainzer-Cohen noted that even if Berklee were to complete all three proposed projects, it would still have an expressed need, and she asked what the college's plan would be at that point. Mr. Whitney replied that the likely order of the three projects would be 168 Mass Ave followed by 161-171 Mass Ave, and then the Crossroads at a point that may be far in the future. At that point, Berklee may search for another site for an approximately 400-bed dormitory and/or the remaining 50,000 sf of expressed need for academic space.

Ms. Prindle encouraged the task force not to think about proposals such as Parcel 15 given that they are not yet approved. She also queried whether it makes sense to look at the addition of height to the 168 Mass Ave proposal in order to remove some height from the Crossroads while maintaining the overall program. Rep. Walz agreed that such an option may not be a bad idea. Mr. Horn expressed concern about making the heights of the two buildings too similar. Mr. Grissino also pointed out that the intersection of Mass Ave and Boylston would be the more logical location for height and density, since 168 Mass Ave is in some ways a mid-block building.

Rep. Walz commented that the Crossroads could be a signature building without the proposed height with the appropriate marketing and design.

Mr. Whitney concluded the discussion by reminding the task force that the purpose of the IMP is to improve the quality of the educational experience at Berklee, and that the college truly needs the space it has requested. He acknowledged that the height is a difficult question, and asked task force members to think about the effects on Mass Ave and Boylston Street and how the building will be experienced from the ground.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned.

Submitted by Rebecca Blum