

City of Newton



Design Review Committee
PUBLIC BUILDINGS DEPARTMENT
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Ruthanne Fuller
Mayor

MINUTES

August 26, 2020

Newton Center for Active Living (NewCAL) Project Update
Online Zoom Meeting

Present:

Ellen Light – DRC	Andrea Kelley – DRC *	Doug Cornelius – NHC
Ambrose Donovan - DRC	Josh Morse	Norm Meltz – COA/NewCAL WG
David Gillespie - DRC	Alex Valcarce	Bea Goldsmith – NewCAL WG
Tom Gloria - DRC	Jayne Colino	Richard Rasala – NewCAL WG
Robert Hnasko – DRC	Jini Fairley	Joan Belle Isle – Resident
Jonathan Kantar - DRC	Joel Bargmann – BH+A	Fred Lewis – Resident
Amy Mackrell - DRC	James Bruneau – BH+A	
Carol Schein – DRC	Melissa Gagnon – NV5	

Absent:

Peter Barrer - DRC	Steve Siegel – DRC	Barney Heath
Mark Resnick - DRC	Emily Prenner – DRC *	

* denotes non-voting members of DRC

Alex Valcarce opened up the meeting at 6:01PM. Introductions were made of the DRC, Working Group, consultants and user group.

The intent of this meeting was to provide an update to the DRC including understanding site challenges and program as well as progress made to date, goals and objectives. There will also be an opportunity for questions and answers.

Project Update

Josh Morse explained that throughout the site selection progress, sites were narrowed down to Newton Centre and Newtonville with the Newtonville site ultimately recommended as the preferred site. On August 12, 2020, the Mayor agreed with the recommendation by the Working Group that the existing site at 345 Walnut Street in Newtonville is the preferred site.

Jayne Colino provided an explanation of the NewCAL Vision Statement and Guiding Principles and stated the goal is to provide a facility that supports the City of Newton being recognized in 2016 as an age friendly community by the World Health Organization and AARP. Similar to students, older seniors do not fall into one demographic category with regard to interests, abilities, mobility, skills and needs. It was explained that the senior center has programs that address people's interests and services that addresses people's needs. Although the design of the program is focused on older residents in the community, a project goal is to make sure the facility meets the needs of other demographics in the community.

The gymnasium component being proposed in the new facility caters to the changing demographic. With an ability to subdivide, multiple programs can be accommodated in a large space. It was also noted that although the existing senior center building is currently closed to the public, services are still being provided and many program options have been converted to be virtual.

Joel Bargmann of BH+A gave a presentation to the DRC with an overview of the NewCAL project including how the project has progressed since the last update and where the process is going. An overview was provided of the diversity and flexibility of the proposed programming space at NewCAL. The gym component is an element that caters to the changing demographic as the large space can be subdivided into four spaces which not only adds activity space but also adds programming space. In addition, when the gym is not being used by senior residents, the space can be made available to the broader community.

With regard to site selection, the City looked at close to 150 sites which were initially deemed to be feasible. Although the six (6) finalist sites were all on public parkland with no building obstacles to work around, the community was generally opposed to reducing parkland space in Newton for a new building. Albemarle was of more interest to the Parks & Recreation Department, although this site faced strong opposition from the community and was ultimately disregarded for consideration.

The second phase of the site search focused on the Newton Centre Triangle and the current Senior Center site at 345 Walnut Street in Newtonville. The same criteria and evaluation was used consistently across both sites.

Newton Centre Triangle

The Newton Centre Triangle site is centrally located in Newton Centre and currently accommodates 152 parking spaces. After hearing from the community, it became apparent that the parking spaces are very much needed as the life blood for local businesses. Three conceptual design options were evaluated with two, three and four story options, each with varying massing impacts to the central parking. Two, three and four story massing diagrams were presented for each of the design configurations. The 2-story option has the largest footprint which reduces parking from 152 to 92 spaces. Although a 3-story option is able to absorb some parking beneath the building, the total overall parking is reduced to 127 spaces. A 4-story

option was also studied, which also accommodates 127 spaces, with no spaces beneath building making for more efficient construction. Even with four stories, the building was in scale with nearby structures.

Ultimately, the driving factors which dismissed the Newton Centre Triangle site were parking challenges as well the timeline. It was determined that to solve the parking issue, a village master plan would need to be developed for Newton Centre which would greatly increase the timeline and cost more than what is allocated in the NewCAL budget.

Newtonville

Early program and massing studies were done to determine the feasibility of accommodating program, including green space and parking at the existing site. An overview of the existing building was provided explaining the complexity of various levels within the building. The main entrance at the existing building is 4' above grade with another 2' to the main level. Making the front entrance accessible would be challenging. A section through the building shows varying heights with the first floor at 6' above grade and the lower level at 7' below grade. The short distance between floor levels would create many elevator stops and smaller program areas with less flexibility and challenging circulation.

The three (3) design options evaluated are as follows:

Retain Existing Building – addition/renovation

Appendages at the back would be removed and the focus would be on retaining and renovating the core library portion of the building, which yields only 2400SF of program space on the first floor level (with windows above eye level). The large gym would be at the back of the building, allowing some buffer space from abutters. The entry is envisioned to be on the corner of Highland Ave and Walnut Street, as a connection to the neighborhood fabric as well as the urban village. Massing idea is to have a new entry which honors the existing two story volume.

The ground floor of the existing building is composed of (2) 1200SF activity spaces, reception area, circulation and parking. Given the small footprint, there is limited availability for grade level program space. Parking is increased from 13 (existing) to 27 spaces. The gymnasium, kitchen, dining and multipurpose rooms are on the 2nd floor with the track, fitness and a few additional program areas on the 3rd floor. The basement level has two spaces which can be used for program area, although also with high windows.

A question is whether the parking count should be reduced to allow for more program at grade so the entry is more inviting with more activities or alternatively, maximize onsite parking and utilize the lobby as a launching pad to activity areas on the 2nd floor. Although the existing frontage along Walnut Street would be maintained, a fair amount of program would be behind the existing building, facing Walnut Place.

New Construction – three and four stories

Massing studies were created for both three and four story options to evaluate advantages of new vs. renovation relative to parking, density to neighborhood and green space.

A three story option can accommodate 34 parking spaces under a portion of the building, while achieving a 9000SF footprint. In comparison to the renovation option, more program can be achieved at the ground floor including the multipurpose/dining area and administrative spaces with destination spaces on the 2nd and 3rd floors.

A four story building can mitigate need for parking beneath a portion of the building, with completely open parking, also with 34 spaces. The building is much more compact, with a smaller footprint, which creates

more green space and reduces neighborhood density. Overall building height and massing will need to be studied with regard to neighborhood compatibility, including the evaluation of whether there is a way to work with roof decks to step the building down towards the neighborhood and step up towards the commercial end of the site.

The following was noted: "After considering the Newton Centre site, the Working group voted unanimously for the Newtonville site, due to the time it would take to complete the project, the absence of a village plan and impacts to the neighborhood, community support or opposition, cost and other factors."

Challenges and Programming

Josh Morse noted challenges in working with this existing asset include: 1) The inefficient siting of the building, 2) low floor to floor heights which pose configuration challenges in terms of accessibility and mobility for the demographic and program and 3) limited space for onsite parking which will require additional neighborhood parking to achieve the targeted number of 75 spaces. Continue engagement will be needed with Newtonville businesses and Newtonville Area Council. Next steps will include an existing building assessment to determine viability of renovation vs. new construction.

Jayne Colino provided an overview of current programs and services and the ongoing need for the changing demographic. It was noted that 20% of the households in Newton have at least one resident over the age of 60 years old. It is estimated that by the year 2030, seniors will represent 30% of the residents. The NewCAL program should be flexible to address changing needs of the future. Every space in the new building would have the ability to broadcast programming. Health and health education programming is very important to the senior demographic. Need to create an environment that provides residents an opportunity to share interests and skills.

Discussion and Questions

Following the presentation, Committee members asked questions of the design team. A general overview of the Q/A is as follows:

- What level, if any, of historical preservation will be necessary of the existing building?
The building will be evaluated and determination will be made as to what can be salvaged as well as what needs to be done to physically get the building envelope functioning. Vertical challenges will need to be addressed to make the building be fully accessible. An application is being filed with NHC in September.
- In general, what is the cost differential between an add/reno vs. new construction?
From a cost perspective, although it is very early on to determine the differential, based on the fire station and the Cabot School projects, there was approximately a 20% premium for keeping and renovating these existing buildings.
- Has the City of Newton engaged with the direct abutters behind the existing Senior Center?
Conversations have started with abutters. One of the direct abutters attended a community meeting and inquired about massing with regard to what the impact to direct neighbors would be with a shorter structure closer or a taller structure farther. A direct mailing will be going out to abutters for the next Community meeting which is scheduled this Fall. As the project develop, ongoing conversations will continue with abutters.

- Why was the Newtonville option taken off the table as a feasible site early on in the process?

The NewCAL program was established early, through many community meetings to develop the program and identified every SF needed, including green space and onsite parking requirements which ultimately led to SF of site needed. The current site could not accommodate the full breadth of program. Through the site selection process, park sites which could accommodate the full program were evaluated and were met with opposition by Parks & Rec as well as the Community which led to evaluation of the second tier of possible sites, meaning some compromise of program would be needed, including open green space and onsite parking.

- With regard to energy efficiency and sustainability, it is the hope that criteria and how this project fits into the CAP, will be a forefront part of the planning process. All schemes should include some strategies for schemes that will contribute to sustainability.

Sustainability guidelines are included from the onset of the project. In the Guiding Principles the goal is for the building to be net zero carbon neutral. As the project develops there will be discussion opportunities with regard to embodied carbon as well as passive house standards.

- Is there a way to align the floors of the new building with the old, perhaps by dropping the grade for parking underground?

Depressing a floor level to accommodate underground parking would be extremely expensive.

- At what point will engineers be brought in to study the existing building?

Over the next few months BH+A will be working with their consultant team to study existing conditions to determine feasibility of a renovation/addition. General time line is Feasibility Study over the next four months working towards Site Plan Approval likely in Fall 2021.

- The connection between the entrance and parking will become a very important piece.

- Swing space is budgeted to relocate current programs and services to a temporary facility during construction.

Meeting adjourned at 7:23PM

Respectfully submitted,
Melissa Gagnon
NV5, Inc.

[End of 08/26/2020 Meeting Minutes]