

City of Newton



Design Review Committee
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Ruthanne Fuller
Mayor

MINUTES

December 16, 2020
Newton Center for Active Living (NewCAL) Project Update
Online Zoom Meeting

Present:

Ellen Light – DRC	Steve Siegel – DRC	Joan Belle Isle - COA
Peter Barrer - DRC	Singning Kuo - DRC	Fred Lewis – Resident
David Gillespie - DRC	Alex Valcarce	Norine
Tom Gloria - DRC	Jayne Colino	Joel Bargmann – BH+A
Robert Hnasko – DRC	Norm Meltz – COA/NewCAL WG	Deborah Robinson – BH+A
Jonathan Kantar - DRC	Richard Rasala – NewCAL WG	Dan Chen – BH+A
Amy Mackrell - DRC	Ambrose Donavan - DRC	Melissa Gagnon – NV5
Carol Schein – DRC		

Absent:

Mark Resnick - DRC	Emily Prenner – DRC *	Jini Fairley
Andrea Kelley – DRC *	Josh Morse	Barney Heath

* denotes non-voting members of DRC

Ellen Light opened up the meeting at 6:05PM. Singning Kuo was introduced as a new member. The following members of the DRC introduced themselves: Ellen Light, Peter Barrer, David Gillespie, Tom Gloria, Robert Hnasko, Jonathan Kantar, Amy Mackrell, Carol Schein, Steve Siegel and Singning Kuo.

The intent of this meeting was to provide a Feasibility Study update to the DRC with regard to progress made since feedback was received at the last meeting on 11/18/20. An opportunity for questions and answers was provided following the presentation.

Project Update

BH+A provided an update on design progress since the last meeting with the DRC. Since that meeting, the Working Group decided it would be appropriate to study an additional adaptive reuse option. Highlights of existing conditions assessments and findings were reviewed. The front door on Walnut Street is at 4' above grade plus another 2' to the main level, which totals approximately 5' - 6' above entry grade depending on location of measured grade. The raised entry creates an accessibility obstacle. Tall windows fronting Walnut Street are above eye level limiting connection to the outside. Per geotechnical report, the site consists of 3'-8' of fill on top of sandy soil which would need to be removed, as new footings would require structural fill. Given that the soil would need to be stabilized with soil reinforcement such as geo piers or the non-structural fill would need to be removed and replaced with structural fill, led to consideration of the newest alternative design option. Additional points extracted from detailed reports are listed in DRC meeting presentation which is posted on the project website here: [NewCAL 12/16/20 DRC presentation](#).

Up to this point in the Feasibility Study phase, 17 schemes have been created and studied, for adaptive reuse and new construction, including massing drawings. As part of this phase, the project team needs to determine whether one option is more viable, to be further developed in the subsequent Schematic Design phase.

BH+A presented further developments of the following two (2) alternative design approaches: Reuse Existing Building with Addition and New Construction. The full presentation can be found on the project website: [NewCAL 12/16/20 DRC presentation](#). Highlights of the presentation are as noted below.

Option F – Reuse Existing Building with Addition:

BH+A presented the newest adaptive reuse option and explained that non-structural fill would be removed which would allow space below the addition for parking 3'-4' below grade. Lowering parking would allow the first floor of the addition to be contiguous with the main level of the existing building, creating close to 15,000SF of usable programming area on the first floor level. Whereas the first 3'-8' of fill would need to be compacted, creating parking below the first floor is a practical solution, allowing for 24 onsite parking spaces. In addition to parking, the parking level would house mechanical and storage spaces.

In this scheme, options are being studied for the current entry, facing Walnut Street, to be adapted to be made usable as the primary entrance. Various ramp configurations were presented and discussed.

Option E1 - New Building L-Shape (3 story):

BH+A presented further developments of the new construction alternative. The first floor level, main entrance and parking are all at grade, with the main entrance off the corner of Highland Avenue and Walnut Street. There are 32 parking spaces with approximately 1/3 covered, including 4 HCP spaces. The first floor encompasses approximately 13,500SF of contiguous usable program area, in comparison with 15,000SF in the adaptive reuse option. Programming is distributed on the three floors similarly to the adaptive reuse option with primary public programming spaces on the first floor, destination spaces on the second floor including the gymnasium and various activity spaces with the walking track, additional activity spaces and a 2000SF deck on the third floor.

A variation of this scheme was presented with an at grade entry near the corner of Highland Avenue and Walnut Street. By shifting the entry and reception area to be more centralized, allows for an additional 800+ SF of program area for a classroom and a juice bar.

A design goal is for the two (2) options to be as programmatically equivalent as possible.

BH+A noted that the previously presented four story option included approximately 8000SF on each floor. A two-story option is preferred from an administrative and programmatic perspective. Spread out over four floors, the sense of community and belonging is at risk of being lost. Two story facilities designed by BH+A include Needham, Falmouth and Scituate.

Discussion and Questions

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

- Walking to the Walnut Street entrance seems long, for visitors who park and approach the building from the north. It would seem more efficient to access the building from the corner of Highland Ave and Walnut Street. At grade entry could potentially sacrifice 800+ SF of program area.
- An at grade entrance off of Highland Ave with internal ramp and stairs, would redirect focus from using the existing entrance on Walnut St.
- Having both a ramp and a lift are important. A vestibule for the lift would protect from the weather as well as create a more gracious entry area.
- With adaptive reuse, a corner lobby would make a big difference to activate the lawn area.
- By extending the 2nd floor would create more covered parking and the 3rd floor could be smaller.
- Option E1 (new) – Activity room, dining and kitchen/pantry could push back towards parking which would create more green space off Walnut.
- Although it was noted the size of the fitness room (current multipurpose room) feels small. There is also a 1500SF activity room as well as a gymnasium which is sub-dividable and can be used for fitness.
- Space below the walking track is an opportunity for hooks and cubbies.
- Deck would serve as an additional outdoor space.
- Question asked about whether keeping only the façade has been looked at (Mass College of Art) – <http://www.designlabarch.com/massart-art-museum/57/> - appears as a full interior gut, rather than a facadectomy.
- From an environmental impact, embedded carbons was discussed. There were some members who felt that reusing the existing building would reduce the embedded carbon footprint of the project. There was not total agreement with this position. Others stated that the carbon usage of the completed project needed to be evaluated and a new structure will be more energy efficient and thus may have a smaller carbon footprint going forward.
- Breaking down building mass needs to continue to be studied, specifically as it relates to the neighborhood. Massing to the west side of the site, adjacent to abutters, is of concern.

- The existing building feels like a government building and does not feel very welcoming. Still feels like a lot of building is being squeezed into a small lot.
- The question will be asked to the NHC whether the Commission would consider lowering the tall windows fronting Walnut Street to allow for better transparency from outside to inside.
- In a very cursory manner, the two alternative schemes will be put into an outline spec to determine a rough cost estimate. Based on preliminary review, adaptive reuse may cost more than a new building.

The next scheduled meeting is on Wednesday, 2/10/21, at 6:00PM.

Meeting adjourned at 8:05PM

Respectfully submitted,
Melissa Gagnon
NV5, Inc.
[End of 12/16/2020 Meeting Minutes]