



# Design Review

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**March 9, 2021**

**Raul Duverge, Project Manager**  
**Boston Planning and Development Agency**  
**One City Hall, Ninth Floor**  
**Boston, MA 02119**

**Re: 201 Rutherford Avenue, Charlestown, MA 02129**  
**Project Notification Form (PNF) Comments**

The Charlestown Preservation Society Design Review Committee (DRC) has reviewed the Project Notification Form (PNF) submitted to BPDA on January 15, 2021, and listened to the virtual presentation by New England Development (NED) and architects from Elkus Manfredi to the Impact Advisory Group (IAG) on February 22, 2021. The overview presentation delineated aspects of the proposed project, including design principals, concentrated improvements to the existing retail building, and a new residential building on the site.

While we support the redevelopment of the site given the property's current underutilization, this proposal lacks a comprehensive PDA master plan and proposes an overly dense residential building that is not appropriate to the density and scale of this historic Charlestown neighborhood.

We have two specific planning/process concerns and additional design concerns. Process concerns include:

- 1. A Master Plan should be provided for the entire 6-acre site.** The proponent is looking to change the zoning *of the entire 6-acre site* from Neighborhood Shopping (NS) Subdistrict to a new "U" Sub district designation for the entirety of the Bunker Hill Mall/project site. The proponent suggests that this is a minor modification to Charlestown's Urban Renewal Plan, and that the "U" district designation is necessary to provide for the proposed mix of uses, including the addition of Compact Living to the current retail uses. While we support the mix of uses, the change to "U" district suggests that the community should understand the full build-out intent of the proponent. If, as suggested by the proponent, 490 total units will ultimately be added, the proposal does not specify where. It is important that the community understand what is being proposed for the overall build out.

2. **Significant changes and variances to Charlestown’s zoning should be deferred until Plan: Charlestown is complete.** An expected outcome of **PLAN: Charlestown** are changes to zoning, and changes should be considered comprehensively for all of Charlestown, not on a case-by-case basis by each development. This proposal asks to change the zoning use, exceeds the maximum building height allowed, eliminates public parking, and adds a significant number of housing units to Charlestown in an area not planned for such. These requests should be denied at this time—OR reviewed AFTER the current planning process for Charlestown has concluded, as this location could set a precedent for surrounding development and planning.
3. **The design of the new housing must be modified to reduce its scale.** We applaud the inclusion of transit-oriented housing onto this site, and recognize that this could be a good location to add housing. The proposed landscape along School Street will benefit the community and the building entry along School Street enlivens this corner and reinforces the street grid (as opposed to The Gatehouse 75’s angled façade across the street). However, other aspects of the building design require modification:
  - a. **The proposed Density and Height are far too great for this location** – the project seeks to construct 240 units on a one-acre site, already tenanted by the Ninety Nine Restaurant. While we support the 20% affordability, and the compact living use, the proposed density of 240 units per acre and 85 feet / 7-stories of height far exceeds any development built within the historic area of Charlestown. If approved, the proposed height would dwarf the surrounding area, perhaps setting the stage for future proposals of over-building by other development interests. New development on the west side of Rutherford Avenue (The Harvey, The Graphic) and the adjacent Gatehouse 75 have set a mid-rise/ 70-foot-maximum height precedent for this corridor. Additionally, these new buildings, unlike this proposal, maintain setbacks from the sidewalk and other buildings with landscaped open space, in deference to their historic context and to the nearby Hood Park buildings. (While taller buildings are proposed as part of Hood Park, they sit several hundred feet off Rutherford, against I-93.)
    - *For such a tightly constrained site, we recommend that the proponent reduce the scale of this building along Rutherford to below 70 feet and respect the typical setback along Rutherford.*
  - b. **The “Gateway” of NEC’s proposal on Austin Street is over-scaled and restricts entry views of the neighborhood and the Bunker Hill Monument.** The Austin Street / Rutherford Avenue intersection is Charlestown’s western gateway, and neighborhood efforts to beautify this area with landscaping and signage reflect the pride of our residents. Although the “proposed project aims to create a residential, transit-oriented ‘gateway’ on Rutherford Avenue into Charlestown,” this design falls far short of that. The 85-foot-tall building mass, coupled with its location directly at the back of the sidewalk, constricts what are now broad views into our neighborhood, overpowering the scale of historic homes along Austin Street. Moreover, Austin Street is characterized by a broad, 20-foot-wide planting strip between the sidewalk and the street; that planting strip now exists in front of the Ninety Nine Restaurant and should be maintained. A building

in the proposed location will severely restrict views and, we suspect, cause a dangerous entry/exit from the mall parking lot.

- *We recommend that the new building respect both the maximum height (3 stories) and setback (20 feet) along Austin Street.*
- c. **The building design is too monolithic** – although the proponent described the design as “a series of buildings abutting each other,” the heavy building base coupled with a grid of glass and awkward overhangs creates the sense of an impenetrable wall along Rutherford Avenue. The two-story brick base is scaled to match that of the overhead street bridge, rather than the scale of the neighborhood. Windows on the base of the building along Rutherford are narrow to limit view into the parking levels, but that creates the effect of a building turning its back to this street. The Austin/Rutherford corner has no windows for two stories in height, due to the placement of a 2-BR townhouse on this corner – it is difficult to imagine a family living at street level in this location with the intensity of traffic rounding this corner.
- d. **The existing Ninety-Nine restaurant is negatively affected by the proposed residential building** – the proposed building design wraps so tightly around the existing Ninety-Nine Restaurant, it threatens to “squeeze” it out of business, obscuring its visibility and eliminating the possibility of any outdoor seating. The restaurant has been a successful business in Charlestown for many decades, and this plan should seek to enhance this business. As a result of the U-shaped building plan, 98 of the 240 units will have views over its mechanical equipment-filled roof, and windows open to the smells emanating from its roof-top mounted cooking exhaust hood.
- *We recommend eliminating the building wing in front of The Ninety-Nine Restaurant along Austin Street, to provide a landscaped, open space for outdoor seating and to improve visibility and image of the development.*
4. **Main Street retailers require additional thought and better store layout planning.** While we are pleased to see the proponent suggesting changes to update the Main Street façades, we are aware that Main Street retail frontage for these existing retailers has never worked. Unfortunately, many of its doors are oriented to the parking side, and retail layouts are not set up to monitor doors on both the street and parking lot sides. Updating finishes and inserting display windows will not activate Main Street as this plan is suggesting.
- *Consider carving out some smaller retail spaces, or splitting units into two – with access for some along Main Street, and access for others from the parking lot.*
  - **Pedestrian Lane** – we agree that removing the roof over this passageway connector will make it a more pleasant space. We like the idea of adding storefronts along its length. However, the Main Street “portal” composed of heavy steel sections seems out of place along this historic street. *We encourage the design team to rethink both the scale and materiality of this portal.*
5. **Traffic and Parking Concerns.** A total of 49 resident spaces (0.2 parking spaces per unit) is not sufficient for 240 apartments, even though the compact living units are not allowed to

secure resident parking passes. Similar TOD developments in the City have provided 0.5 parking spaces per unit. We also caution that the mid-block “thru-drive” exits onto Austin Street are too close to its intersection with Rutherford. Traffic regularly backs up here to cross Rutherford and it will be difficult for cars to exit.

- *Consider eliminating the exit onto Austin Street by limiting car exit to either School Street of the existing parking lot in order to use the existing driveway to Austin Street.*
- *Consider building a podium for a second level of parking accessed via a driveway on Austin Street next to the bank, with new mixed-use buildings at the street level.*

We recommend that the design issues be addressed by the proponent prior to approval of the Project Notification for this project. We oppose the requested variances for height and density and ask that the ZBA deny the zoning district change to a “U” District. Changes to zoning in the area should happen within the **Plan: Charlestown** process and not through this project.

We thank you for your attention to these matters.

The Charlestown Preservation Society is dedicated to protecting the architectural character of our community.

Sincerely,



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