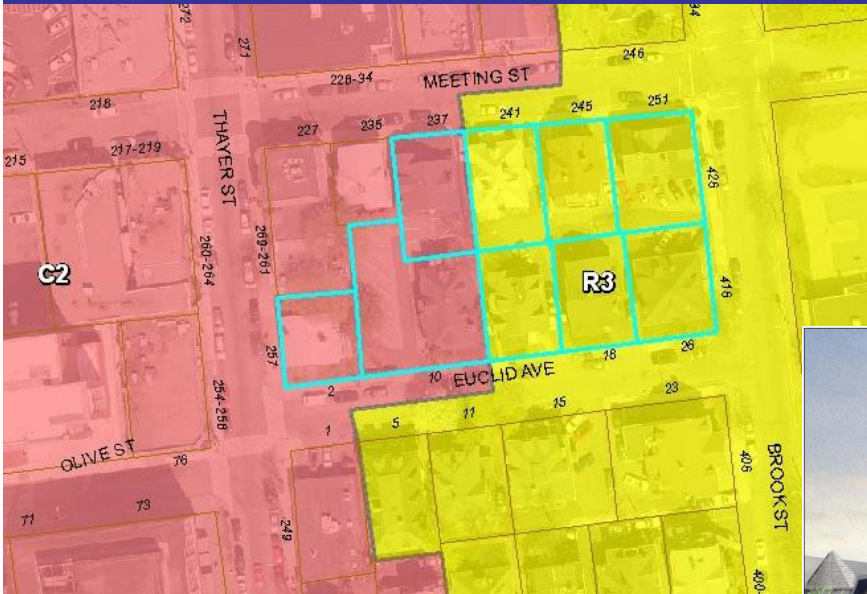


Providence City Plan Commission

April 24, 2012



AGENDA ITEM 7 ■ 257 THAYER STREET



An aerial view of the site showing existing zoning

A rendering of the proposed building

OVERVIEW

OWNER/APPLICANT: Gilbane Development Company	PROJECT DESCRIPTION: Construction of a mixed use apartment building with 102 units geared toward student housing with retail on the first floor, underground parking and an interior courtyard.
CASE NO./PROJECT TYPE: 12-011 MA Master Plan Approval	
PROJECT LOCATION: 257 Thayer Street	RECOMMENDATION: Approval of the Master Plan subject to the findings and conditions noted below.
NEIGHBORHOOD: College Hill	PROJECT PLANNER: Robert Azar and Choyon Manjrekar



A typical building floor plan

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The applicant proposes to demolish all buildings on site and construct an apartment building with 102 units. The building will primarily be oriented toward Thayer Street with frontage on Euclid Ave., Brook St. and Meeting St. The building will contain a small amount of retail on the ground floor, a landscaped courtyard, and underground parking. The subject property is located on lots 42, 48, 104, 234, 235, 236, 237, 238, 241 on AP 13. Lots 104, 48, 235 are zoned C-2 and lots 234, 241, 42, 236, 237, 238 are zoned R-3. Altogether, the lots measure approximately 33,592 SF.

EXISTING CONDITIONS

The development area is currently occupied by nine houses, some of which contain commercial uses, and others used as off-campus student housing. The subject properties are all in common ownership, and appear to be managed not as individual houses, but as a complex. The area between buildings is completely paved as one large parking lot, served by nine curb cuts, and containing roughly 26 formal parking spaces (it appears that other areas may be used as informal spaces). The property contains minimal landscaping. The buildings appear to be serviceable for their current uses, but

are not in excellent condition. The applicant reports that they have been greatly altered inside to accommodate a high density of students. Given their location and patterns of use in the area, it is unlikely that the condition of the houses would improve substantially.

ANALYSIS AND IDENTIFICATION OF POTENTIAL ISSUES

Comprehensive Plan and Neighborhood Plan

The future land use map of the comprehensive plan indicates two land use designations for this property: Neighborhood Commercial/Mixed Use to the west, and Medium-Density Residential to the east. Per the plan, the Neighborhood Commercial/Mixed Use designation is intended for traditional pedestrian oriented development that serves local neighborhood needs for convenience retail, services, professional offices and housing. Residential uses are encouraged. Development in the Medium-Density Residential areas are characterized by one- to three-family dwellings on separate lots that vary from 3,200 to 5,000 sq. ft. Some small-scale neighborhood uses like neighborhood corner stores may be considered appropriate. While the proposed development is consistent with the Neighborhood Commercial/Mixed Use designation, it is inconsistent with the Medium-Density Residential designation. The applicant

has petitioned the City Council to change the designation for the area bounded by Cushing, Hope, Angell, and Thayer Streets to Neighborhood Commercial/Mixed Use. Were the Council to make this change, the project would be consistent with the Plan.

The vicinity of the subject property was a topic of debate during the formulation of the College Hill, Wayland, and Fox Point Neighborhood Plan. There were arguments made that the land use for the area between Thayer St. and Hope St. should allow for mixed use and higher density. The counter arguments were that the land use should not be allowed to change. Ultimately, the Plan recommended that the current massing and scale of the Thayer St. commercial district should be maintained, and that the line between the commercial and residential zoning should not be changed. The neighborhood plans, while adopted by the City Plan Commission, are not a part of the comprehensive plan. They are intended to give the Commission guidance when considering projects and proposals, but their recommendations are not binding.

Zoning

Use

The subject property is zoned C-2 to the west and R-3 to the east. The proposed multifamily dwelling is permitted in the C-2 zone. However, the R-3 zone permits only one, two and three family homes. There is at least one commercial establishment in the R-3 zone on Meeting St., granted by variance.

Dimension

Density: The C-2 and R-3 zones requires 1,200 sq. ft. and 2,000 sq. ft. of land area per dwelling unit, respectively. Under the current zoning scheme, no more than 20 dwelling units could be built on site. The proposal is for 102 units, a density of 329 sq. ft. per dwelling unit.

Height: The C-3 and R-3 zone permit three stories of height, not to exceed 45 feet in C-2, and 40 feet in R-3. The building is proposed to be four stories and will not exceed 45 feet in height.

Parking: In the C-2 and R-3 zones, residences requires 1.5 parking spaces per dwelling unit; approximately 154 spaces are required for 102 units. The applicant proposes 80 underground parking spaces for 102 units. The parking would be insufficient under current zoning.

Landscaping: Landscaping will primarily be provided within the interior courtyard and on sidewalks surrounding the development, with a focus on canopy coverage provided along Brook and Thayer Street. It would exceed what currently exists on site.

Proposed New Zone

The applicant has proposed an amendment to the Zoning Ordinance to create a new C-3 zone and apply it to all of the subject lots. This zone would permit the proposed use, density, building dimensions, and reduced parking ratio as of right.

Building and Site Design

Section 609 of the Development Review Regulations details physical design requirements for land development projects. The following analyzes the project for conformance to these regulations.

- The building façade occupies the street frontages on Thayer, Euclid, Meeting and Brook Streets. The main entrance orients itself to and is accessible from the corner of Thayer Street.
- Two curb cuts, on Euclid Ave. and Brook St. provide access to the property.
- The ground floor façade incorporates significant amounts of transparency and is composed of brick, glass, steel and other materials that are characteristic of development in the surrounding neighborhood.
- It is unclear where proposed retail will be located. It should be located fronting on Thayer St.
- The building presents areas of visible blank walls adjacent to neighboring buildings. This is a concern that should be addressed through building design.
- The proposed development is considerably larger, but not necessarily taller than other developments east of Thayer St. The massing of the building is more characteristic of institutional buildings to the west of Thayer St. and to the east of Brook St., within the Brown and Wheeler School campuses. The building's design should minimize the impact of this massing. The building should also be an example of outstanding architecture, and in no way seem generic.

DISCUSSION

This project represents a substantial departure from the plans and zoning for this area of the city. As such its impacts should be considered carefully and public input must be considered when considering its merits and the proposed comprehensive plan and zoning changes. From the DPD's perspective, there is much to like about the proposal. In many ways, it represents "smart growth." While the project is partially inconsistent with the comprehensive plan's land use designation, many of its features are consistent with the plan. These include:

- Locating high-density housing in areas proximate to public transportation
- Providing lower parking ratios and bike storage to promote walking and biking
- Providing below-grade parking
- Locating student housing proximate to campuses to discourage driving and conflicts with neighbors
- Eliminating curb cuts to prevent vehicle-pedestrian conflicts and open up more on-street parking
- Installing new landscaping
- Reconstructing sidewalks
- Providing mixed use
- Reducing stormwater runoff over current conditions
- Promoting energy efficiency through LEED certification
- Increasing property tax revenue

The benefits of the project must be weighed against the potential negative impacts. These include:

- More vehicular traffic than currently exists
- Demolition of nine existing buildings
- The large massing of the building that could set a precedent for other developments in the area

FINDINGS

Section 806 of the Commission's *Development Review Regulations* requires that the City Plan Commission make the following findings as part of their approval of all land development project applications. Based on the analysis contained herein and subject to the conditions contained in this report, staff has prepared the following findings regarding the request for approval of the Master Plan stage:

1. *Consistency—The proposed development is consistent with the Comprehensive Plan and/or has satisfactorily addressed the issues where there may be inconsistencies.*

As noted above, the proposal is consistent with many aspects of the comprehensive plan, but is inconsistent with the land use designation for a part of the block. The proposed comprehensive plan change would accommodate the project.

2. *Compliance with Zoning Ordinance—The proposed development is in compliance with the standards and provisions of the Zoning Ordinance.*

The proposal is not in compliance with use and dimensional regulations of the zoning ordinance. The proposed zoning change would accommodate the project.

3. *Environmental Impact—There will be no significant environmental impacts from the proposed development as shown on the final plan, with all required conditions for approval.*

To mitigate stormwater runoff, the applicant is required to provide a detailed stormwater at the preliminary plan stage.

As the development will be a dense housing development, a traffic study should be prepared to determine its impact.

The applicant should assess the impact to the built environment through a survey of the existing structures on site.

4. *Buildable Lot*—The subdivision or development project, as proposed, will not result in the creation of individual lots with such physical constraints to development that building on those lots according to pertinent regulations and building standards would be impracticable.

There are no physical constraints that impact development of this property.

5. *Street Access*—All proposed development projects and all subdivision lots shall have adequate and permanent physical access to a public street. Lot frontage on a public street without physical access shall not be considered compliance with this requirement.

Adequate vehicular and pedestrian access is provided from Thayer Street, Euclid Avenue and Meeting Street.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the analysis and findings contained in this report, the DPD recommends that the Commission approve the Master Plan, subject to the following conditions:

1. The applicant shall present a utility and stormwater management plan at the preliminary plan stage.
2. The applicant shall conduct a study detailing the impacts of traffic generated by the project.
3. The applicant shall prepare an assessment of the impact to the built environment through a survey of the existing structures on site.
4. The design of the building shall be refined to respond architecturally to its surroundings and to address concerns of the impact of its large massing on the area.
5. The Commission shall conduct a public hearing on the comprehensive plan change and make recommendations to the City Council on the proposed comprehensive plan and zoning changes. Should the plan and zoning changes fail to be approved as proposed, the plan shall be modified accordingly.