

April 13, 2017

TO: Building & Planning Committee

FROM: Christopher Leswing, PP, AICP, Assistant Director, Planning

SUBJECT: AMENDMENT PLAN – 335 Righters Ferry Road, Bala Cynwyd, LD# 3690AA, Ward 9

Proposal

The applicant, James A. Nolen, IV, of Nolen Properties, LLC is seeking Amendment Plan approval for the following:

- Raising the ground floor elevation of the building an average of three (3) feet. The overall height of the building will not increase because the individual floors have been reduced from ten feet to nine feet;
- The extension of the entrance driveway an additional 70 feet;
- The relocation of two (2) parking spaces allocated for the existing house;
- The addition of a structured entry along the southern elevation of the building facing Bala Plaza;
- Conversion of all “Juliet” balconies to usable balconies;
- The redesign of the proposed stormwater management systems;
- The construction of additional pedestrian connections leading to Bala Plaza along the southern elevation; and
- The redesign of landscaped outdoor spaces due to the relocation of stormwater management facilities and additional proposed grading.

The proposed changes to the site plan are in response to the applicant’s desire to reduce the amount of fill that must be removed from the site. The applicant has also consolidated the stormwater management systems due in large part to the applicant acquiring an easement over two adjacent properties. There are no proposed changes to the approved density or site access from the previously approved plans. *The sum result of the proposed changes is that the building will sit approximately an average of 3 feet higher on grade than what was previously approved but will appear 15 feet higher due to the construction of a series of retaining walls at the base of the building.* The new retaining walls extend across the entire base of the building and range from 6.6 feet in height to 15.5 feet in height. There are also a series of four-foot-high retaining walls located along Righters Ferry Road.

The visual impact of the proposed retaining walls and the required fencing that must be placed at the top of the walls for safety purposes upon the Righters Ferry Road streetscape will be significant. The proposed regrading of the site will also compromise pedestrian access from the building to the required Public Gathering Space and proposed recreation area.

The staff memo and recommended conditions of approval are primarily focused upon visually integrating the applicant’s proposal into the site and ensuring that proper on-site circulation is maintained.

The following aspects of the previously approved project remain the same:

- Construction of a five-story apartment building with 210 studio, one-bedroom and two-bedroom units;
- Construction of a two-level parking garage beneath the building containing 316 spaces and 106 bicycle parking spaces;
- Construction of an interior loading area on the western side of the building;

- Installation of a series of public gathering spaces totaling 33,389 square feet containing benches, 38 bicycle parking spaces, a rain garden and a walking trail;
- Construction of a six-foot-wide landscaped verge and an eight-foot-wide sidewalk along Righters Ferry Road;
- Construction of an eight-foot-wide public multi-purpose path and a 10-foot-wide verge on the southern (rear) side of the building;
- Construction of 11 subsurface stormwater basins; and
- Preservation of the existing dwelling and the ruins of a barn's stone foundation.

The proposal is illustrated on the attached set of plans that includes twenty-two (22) sheets prepared by Momenee & Associates, Inc. dated October 3, 2014, last revised March 8, 2017 and a landscape plan prepared by Glackin Thomas Panzak dated October 3, 2014, last revised March 17, 2017. Architectural elevations prepared by Minno & Wasko, dated April 12, 2017, were also submitted.

Background

The Preliminary Plan for this site was approved on February 18, 2015 and showed a four-story building with 210 apartment units above two levels of parking. On July 20, 2016, the applicant received Amendment Plan approval to construct one additional floor, increasing the building height to five stories but maintaining 210 units.

Property Description

This site is split zoned City Avenue District- Regional Center Area (RCA) and R-6A. The R-6A zoning district exists along Righters Ferry Road for a distance of 120 feet into the site. The remaining portion of the site is zoned RCA. The boundary tolerance provisions do not apply in the RCA district. The property contains 5.1 acres and is bound by Righters Ferry Road and Hill Gate, a 46-unit townhome development to the north. Single family residential uses are located to the west of the property and office/commercial uses, including Bala Plaza, are located to the east and south.

A single-family dwelling dating to about 1695, with additions from 1876 and 1965, and stone ruins from a former barn, currently exist on the property. An old stone retaining wall also lines a portion of the property along Righters Ferry Road for approximately 100 feet.

Approvals

This application requires Amendment Plan approval.

Historical Commission

The applicant appeared before the Historical Commission on March 27, 2017 to present an application to add the main house and the barn ruins to the Historic Resource Inventory. The Historical Commission recommended that the existing residence, known as the Miller Bell House, and the ruins be listed as a Class II resource on the Township's Historic Resource Inventory. At the meeting the applicant agreed to return to the Historical Commission for review of any proposed changes to these resources once designated.

The Commission also found that there is no significant impact on the resource from the installation of the stepped retaining wall system, consisting of E.P. Henry segmental block, to the secondary elevation of the historic resource, subject to the re-purposing of salvaged stone from another retaining wall on site along the base of the proposed block stepped retaining wall.

Finally, the Commission recommended retention of the barn ruins, as proposed by the applicant, and urged the applicant to retain the greatest amount of historic fabric, including existing door lintels and openings. The Commission sees the barn ruin as a portion of the historic property.

Staff has included the Historical Commission's recommendations in the recommended conditions of approval.

Consistency with the Legislative Intent, Goals and Principles of the City Avenue District Regional Center Area (CAD-RCA)

The CAD-RCA zoning regulations are intended to promote the functional, economic and social development and redevelopment of the City Avenue District. The CAD-RCA standards promote high quality, visually attractive higher-density, pedestrian-scaled mixed-use development.

The CAD-RCA specifically seeks to *transition in bulk and scale between higher-density development and existing residential neighborhoods* and *enhance the visual character and identity of the district through building mass, scale and design, landscaping and signage, all appropriate to the goals and objectives of the RCA zoning 155-217.A.2(d)(e)*. The applicant's proposal which effectively places the building upon a large 'concrete block retaining wall pedestal' significantly increases the visual mass and bulk of the project from the previously approved plan. In staff's opinion, the increased visual mass of the retaining walls has not been sufficiently mitigated through terracing, material choice or landscape architecture and is therefore inconsistent with the goals of the CAD-RCA to provide a transition in bulk between new development and existing residential neighborhoods and enhance the visual character of the district through mass, scale, design and landscaping.

Staff has included recommended conditions of approval to address the inconsistencies between the Plan Amendment and the goals of the City Avenue District. The recommended conditions of approval include recommendations to:

- Reduce the bulk and mass of the retaining walls through additional terracing, including incorporating terraced steps to promote pedestrian access from the building to site amenities.
- Promote consistency of the proposed walls with the established neighborhood character through the appropriate selection of materials, color and patterns.

Consistency with Established Neighborhood Character

Retaining walls in themselves are not out of character with the surrounding built environment. Large, irregular stone retaining walls are a defining feature of the Bala Cynwyd landscape. While primarily recognized for their aesthetic benefit, the retaining walls of Bala Cynwyd were originally constructed as a practical means to develop challenging topography and to utilize local rock and stone.

The applicant has worked with staff to mitigate the impact of the walls along Righters Ferry Road by creating four foot terraces and by agreeing to construct the shorter walls with a dark gray colored concrete block with an irregular pattern. However, the applicant's choice of a regular patterned concrete block for the 12-15-foot-high walls at the base of the building is out of character with the surrounding built environment.

Issues

1. Stormwater Management & Landscaping

The applicant has obtained an easement for stormwater over 347 and 349 Righters Ferry Road and proposes to construct some of the required stormwater management on those properties. The acquisition of this easement enables the applicant to consolidate 11 stormwater facilities in to six facilities. This also results in the creation of a larger surface detention basin located on the lower portion of the site adjacent to Righters Ferry Road. Staff is concerned with the appearance of the surface basin and recommends the applicant design the basin and provide appropriate plantings so that it is an attractive amenity.

Staff is also concerned with the location of the underground basins and the need to provide appropriate landscape screening for the proposed retaining walls. Since the installation of large trees and shrubs with

deep root systems is not recommended above stormwater management systems, as roots can interfere with the functionality of the systems, staff recommends the applicant work with staff on the selection of species to ensure that the plant material will not impact the systems.

2. Mitigation of Grading

As noted above, raising the ground floor of the building three feet results in the need for many more retaining walls than were previously shown. Staff prepared the attached diagram outlining the extent of the additional walls. In addition, portions of the building are much higher above grade than previously proposed.

Staff has been working with the applicant to minimize the impacts of these retaining walls. Mitigation measures discussed include terracing the walls to reduce their height, constructing them with high quality materials and selecting appropriate landscaping to ensure that they are properly screened.

A successful smaller scale example of a terraced wall can be found at the recently developed Whole Foods Market in Wynnewood. While this design strategy would reduce some of the flat and useable land on the lower portion of the property, it would have a positive visual impact on the entire site as viewed from Righters Ferry Road.



The proposed 15 foot retaining wall at the base of the northern most part of the building will have the effect of the building being placed atop a podium. A similar local example of this is the Corinthian on Presidential Boulevard. Staff is concerned with not only the visual appearance but also with the inability of residents to access the recreational amenities located on the site, such as the public gathering space, recreational trail, and dog park. As currently proposed, residents would have to exit through the main entrance and travel down the driveway to the public sidewalk and then back up through the site to access these amenities.



According to the applicant, the retaining walls will be constructed out of EP Henry materials. Staff is working with the applicant to utilize a style of stone that varies in size, shape and color. Another important aspect of the design is the material used to cap the wall. A condition has been included that requires the applicant to continue working with staff on the final selection of materials for the retaining walls including the stone caps.

Staff will also continue to work with the applicant to provide adequate landscaping to screen views of the walls including layered plantings and either climbing or hanging plants. Staff has also included a condition requiring the applicant to provide a pedestrian ingress/egress and connection between the building and the public gathering space.

3. Pedestrian Paths

Staff would like to ensure that all changes to the plan present an opportunity for increased usability of the outdoor space on the site as well as connectivity throughout the site and to adjacent properties. Staff has included a condition requiring the applicant to continue to work with staff on the connectivity of the recreational spaces.

4. Recreation Area

Staff discussed the incorporation of the two additional properties along Righters Ferry Road into the development with the Township Solicitor who determined that the additional land area should be included in determining the total amount of land required to be set-aside as recreational lands. Staff will continue working with the applicant to determine whether sufficient land area has been provided or if a fee must be paid.

5. Architectural Elevations

Staff has reviewed the revised elevations submitted by the applicant. Generally, on all elevations since the building has been raised three feet, more of the foundation is visible than on the previously approved elevations. This results in larger portions of the foundation being visible. Staff recommends that greater articulation of the facades be provided at the ground plane.

6. Waivers

The following waivers were previously approved by the Board of Commissioners. Due to the extensive changes to the site grading, staff recommends the Board reconsider the first two waivers.

- a. Natural Features Code Section 101-5.B.2 to disturb or remove vegetation occupying environmentally sensitive areas including slopes 15% and greater.
- b. Natural Features Code Section 101-5.C.2b to disturb slopes 25% and greater.

The following waivers remain in effect with this Amendment. The Board of Commissioners does not need to take any further action on these waivers.

- c. Natural Features Code Section 101-9A to allow for substitutions within plant types.
- d. Natural Features Code Section 101-5B to allow a portion of the required compensatory trees to be 8-10' tall evergreen trees.