

Mr. Sills,

On November 6, 2019, the Town of Occoquan's Planning Commission will hold a public hearing on the three exceptions you are requesting regarding height, setback, and mixed use for the proposed Mill at Occoquan project. This public hearing marks the beginning of the formal evaluation process for your exception requests. In anticipation of the hearing, I would like to take this opportunity to provide you with a list of possible mitigation strategies that I have discussed with individual members of the Planning Commission related to your exception requests. Please note that the entire Planning Commission has not discussed any of these strategies and we remain open to a variety of ideas that would make your development successful while serving the public interest.

Of course, the Planning Commission public hearing also more broadly marks the start of a formal deliberative process by the Town Council and the Public. As you know, there has already been a Planning Commission meeting that solicited public comment on the project; this meeting was packed, lively, and provided a substantial amount of feedback that I feel is valuable to the Planning Commission, the Town Council, and your planning team. Accordingly, I thought it would be helpful to summarize for you some of the feedback expressed by the public at that meeting so that you have a sense of public sentiment. I recognize, of course, that you have not yet made a formal presentation to the public and that, consequently, some or many of these comments may become moot. Nevertheless, I thought it useful to provide you with this information.

Possible Mitigation Strategies for Exceptions Related to Height and Setback

Introduction

One of the obligations of the Planning Commission and Town Council is to consider possible options that will mitigate the negative impacts associated with exceptions sought by an applicant. The possible mitigation strategies detailed below are illustrative examples of what might be employed to minimize the impact anticipated from exceeding the Town's current height limitations and setback requirements. As you will see, they focus primarily on differentiation in the facades of the structure (to minimize a tunneling or claustrophobic effect) and visual and physical access to the waterfront. This list is not comprehensive, but simply illustrative of the types of mitigation strategies the Planning Commission believes would be helpful.

1. Differentiation of Facades Generally:

- 1.1. Creation of "social corners" or spaces for people to use on an informal basis, such as plazas, benches, or other focal points along the front of the building. Differentiation among corners is generally preferable to repetition so that each corner is unique in some way.
- 1.2. Creation of quasi-public spaces such as restaurant seating or courtyards open to business invitees. Stepped terraces, for example, provide opportunities for such quasi-public spaces while also differentiating the view from both street level and the water.
- 1.3. Step-up, in and out articulation, as shown in Attachment 8 of the staff report, including decks and stepped-out windows (e.g. bay windows) to provide view sheds for residents, but which also again differentiate the façade from street level and from the water.
- 1.4. Access points to the water, both visual and pedestrian, for people at street level. Such visual corridors move people both physically and virtually from street level to the waterfront.

- 1.5. Creation of green space. Green roofs, rooftop garden spaces, or plantings at various levels not only create green space, but again contribute to differentiation of the facades.
- 1.6. Creation of rooftop spaces for businesses or residents.
- 1.7. The abruptness with which the structure rises relative to adjoining structures is a significant concern related to the requested height exception, particularly as the east and west ends of the building, will serve as de facto gateways from and to River Mill Park. A facade on the sides of the structure that is livable and steps down to neighboring buildings is one way of addressing this.
- 1.8 Faux or other elements, including up and down articulation, that make the building look like separate structures at certain points would also add to differentiation of the facades. This is true certainly on the street side of the structure, but particularly on the water side which presently has no differentiation. Please see Attachment 8 of the staff report.

2. *Waterfront-Specific Issues*

- 2.1. The lack of differentiation on the waterfront side of the structure is striking with a monolithic vertical facade. With the lack of setback on Mill Street the waterfront becomes even more important to a mitigation strategy that creates a feeling of space, as opposed to a tunneling or claustrophobic effect that the height and lack of setback may otherwise impose. Differentiation can be created, for example, on the right side of the boardwalk by building a larger space that allows a quasi-public space for restaurant use, benches, flowers, etc. Furthermore, additional outcrops halfway along the boardwalk and at the other end could provide additional seating, vegetation, and business usage opportunity. This would allow residents and other members of the community to interact with the water more effectively.
- 2.2. The waterfront side of the structure does not appear to reflect any aspect of the B-1 designation of the site. At the moment only the boardwalk and parking appear to occur on the waterfront side of the project. Four locations seem ripe for business placement consistent with the current B-1 designation. These are (a) on the waterfront on the right corner, (b) on the waterfront on the left corner, (c) on the right and left front street corners (Mill St.) where they can be changed to a “social” corner that has been stepped down to meet the neighboring building with a rooftop restaurant/bar/brewery, and (d) the structure’s right end on the walkway to the water – creation of in-building kiosks or bays with black metal half or full garage style folding doors, for example.

2.3. *Visual and Physical Access to the Water*

The construction of the building at the proposed height will essentially eliminate views of the water that have been in existence at the site for generations and will thus be one of the most significant changes experienced by the Occoquan community. Potential mitigation strategies include corridors, plazas, or sightlines through the structure that provide visual access to the water, as well as attractive entrances that draw people to the boardwalk.

Sampling from Public Comments

Although wide-ranging, public sentiment has focused most often on contextual issues, specifically the overall harmony of the proposed structure with the existing and desired characteristics of the historic district. Traffic considerations have also been a major concern.

The extent to which the structure is harmonious with the existing and desired characteristics of the historic district has generated robust commentary, and it is clear that as currently designed the majority of town residents find the structure's rectangular lines, vertical façade, and materials, substantially out of character with the rest of the historic district. Several residents have indicated that they do not wish to see a repetition of existing structures (e.g. Gaslight Landing or Rockledge Mansion), but that they nevertheless want something that looks more consistent with the district's character. Some residents have commented that the renderings seem to reflect the work of an engineer, which seem focused on maximizing the number of units, and are missing the architectural design elements that would make for an attractive building, palatable to the community and consistent with the historic district in which it will be situated. Such comments have not only referred to the overall shape of the building, but also to its materials, which exhibit none of the colonial, federal, Victorian, or arts and crafts movement features found elsewhere in the historic district – in other words that this has the look of a thoroughly modern building with no reference to the district's past heritage.

Some public commentary has focused on both the number of units generally and the minimum square footage of some of the units. This concern is tied to a history in Occoquan and the surrounding area of developers proposing subdivisions that they are unable to finish or unable to fill, with the result that a successor developer takes over the project and constructs or sells units that are different than what was originally proposed and approved. The relatively small size of some of your units, long, hotel-like halls and unarticulated outside walls, without differentiation, have contributed to similar concerns regarding this project.

We understand that the traffic studies will show that a purely commercial by-right use would generate more trips per day than what you have currently proposed. Nevertheless, the public views the anticipated number of additional trips with some alarm and has many questions about ingress and egress during rush hour, the impact on public street parking, the accessibility of the structure to emergency vehicles, the impact on public safety given the increased number of cars in a pedestrian area, and the impact on Town special events (e.g., will potential buyers be notified that for several days of the year Mill Street is closed to vehicular traffic), etc. Some of these are routine matters to be handled at the site plan stage, but others might bear some attention at this stage in the process.

Members of the public have also raised environmental concerns and those related to historical considerations. We know that that as an experienced developer you understand the various regulations you will have to comply with regarding such matters. Nevertheless, we would encourage you to consider ways in which you can address these concerns publicly at an early stage, whether through incorporation of historic elements in your design (e.g. plaques referencing the history of the site or prior structures) and the incorporation of attractive environmental features (e.g. rooftop gardens).

Finally, some residents have expressed concern about the units involved contributing to overcrowding in the nearby elementary school. I invite you to analyze what the impact of the residential development will likely be on the school system as a whole and to offer mitigation strategies for that impact, if any are warranted.

The above broad-brush summary of possible mitigation strategies and of public comment to-date is designed to provide you with information I hope you will find helpful in your planning process. The Planning Commission will be happy to discuss these or other mitigation strategies at a work session or after the public hearing.