

BALTIMORE CITY DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING
URBAN DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE REVIEW PANEL
MEETING MINUTES

Date: February 18, 2016

Meeting No.: 221

Project: Port Covington Master Plan

Phase: Discussion

Location: Hanover Street and the Westside District

PRESENTATION:

This presentation of the Port Covington Master Plan was a Discussion between Sagamore Development, their design team presenters and the UDARP panel members, and focused on the area of the Port Covington Master Plan defined by Hanover Street and areas west, known as the Westside District. It did not include the Westside Park, however, though elements of the district did encroach upon the areas reserved for the Park.

The presentation began with a summary by Caroline Paff of Sagamore Development. The area under review comprises the largest district of the Master Plan: 80-acres overall, 26-acres of park area, 27.5-acres of developable land. In addition to these statistics, Ms. Paff reviewed the process they are undertaking and their design goals, and reviewed the Panel’s previous comments.

Mr. Addison Palmer of STV Incorporated reviewed the existing conditions and influencing zones, including flood zones and setbacks.

Mr. David Manfredi of Elkins Manfredi reviewed the site plan and the associated massing, beginning with the overall plan and its relations to adjacencies and possible connections north. In review of the plan, Mr. Manfredi called attention to the “irregular” grid, with streets and avenues not quite conforming to a truly orthogonal grid. The design team aspires to celebrate this irregularity, focusing on the ends of the streetscapes, such as site lines to the “swing bridge” or the cultural building within the proposed park.

Mr. Manfredi described the nature of the district’s plan focusing on the Hanover corridor first and describing the first floor programming for both the residential and commercial blocks, and the opportunities for retail based on the scale of each block. Along the length of Hanover, the blocks have one- to two-levels of below-grade parking. Where possible, ground floor continuous retail will be accommodated. Upper levels are office and retail.

The design team desires to calm Hanover – “less highway” like, more walkable, with the acknowledgement that in order to achieve this, there may be a need to separate bicyclists and pedestrians from the intersection of Hanover and the Hanover Bridge.

Mr. Manfredi described the nature of the Westside street by street, with Black Street being largely retail and West Cromwell largely residential.

Chris Streib from BioHabitats reviewed the ecological principles which make up the master plan with a desire for resiliency and function. A primary goal will be to establish ecological corridors that will permeate the development with varied levels of performance throughout. In addition to ecological performance, there is a goal for species diversity, as well. Mr. Streib is working in collaboration with Michael Blier of Landworks to realize these goals in the context of the urban fabric.

Barbara Mosier and RJ Eldridge reviewed vehicular traffic patterning and multi-modal opportunities for the project. This review included key intersection strategies and separations of transportation modes, as well as existing traffic counts for routes through the site. Imagery of the assorted proposed streets in cross section were particularly helpful in understanding the linear spaces attributed to pedestrians, cyclists, public transportation users, as well as truck and car movements. “Protected” intersections are to be utilized for ease of street crossing and the separation of multi-modes of transportation.

In addition to the design team presentation, Caroline Paff acknowledged that it is Sagamore’s intent that schools will be included in the project area, although they have not been placed into the Master Plan yet, and that the placeholder civic structure at the end of Red Street is based on the plan of the Sydney Opera House (for scale). In response to energy efficiency (as a part of the sustainable aspects of the development), goals for energy reduction are under consideration for the project, including some aspect of “getting off the grid,” or at least reduced grid use. Sagamore is working with utility companies – however challenging their restrictions – to positively inform the site with more resilient energy usage. Sagamore continues to explore options for energy reduction. In addition, existing overhead powerlines are intended to be buried as a part of the development growth.

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE PANEL:

As is the case with a large master plan of this type, looking at districts in isolation is always challenging. Often, to understand one district holistically, it is necessary to see the adjacencies. As the review process proceeds, it would be helpful for the design team to offer more streetscape views, even in rough form, to understand how citizens of the area will experience to new site.

Concerns from the Panel focus on these matters:

Overall Site Massing

Overall massing is lacking compared to the other systems described in this discussion. There needs to be an exploration of massing typologies even in this preliminary stage. Please define the conditions and the requirements of the desired massing, so that strategies can be reviewed and discussed. Strategies are required for massing elements overall – setbacks, entries, service locations. Don’t leave the massing “to be resolved in the zoning process,” rather, the zoning language needs to begin to be expressed now to inform the process and the review. Important

moments need to be marked. Architecture has to reinforce those special moments. Presently, there is sameness to the massing. Diversity – something the team aspires for the project in other characteristics – is lacking in the massing currently described. The 135’ ceiling at the center of the plan is not broken. Opportunities to break that height would add greater character to the plan (consider how Battery Park City has episodic moments that break the standard elevation. If the West Cromwell area is to that area of “family”, the massing of the area should express that intent. A general note: the irregularities of the plan need to be celebrated – building and landscape should be equally thoughtful.

West Cromwell and “Perches”

The width of West Cromwell has diminished in scale since prior review and the connection to the north is no longer articulated in the plan. This street has also largely been described as residential in nature. Yet the landscape plan of the street suggests a multi-alley, tree-lined boulevard. Perhaps the streetscape needs to adapt to the diminished character of West Cromwell.

Although the concept of “perches” at the end of the west district streets – programmed plazas that extend each street into the as-yet undescribed park – are appreciated, they are, perhaps, too grand a gesture at this time given the undescribed character of the park itself. Perhaps, rather than extend the streets into the park, the park should extend into the streets, pulling the ecology and character of the park into the new urban fabric. A couple of the “perches” will carry importance, in particular, Blue Street and Red Street, due to the swing bridge and the civic building in the park respectively.

Embedded within the conversation was also the idea of expressing and exploiting, so some degree, the irregularities within the site organization; allowing those unique places to play a larger role in the planning and development of the master plan. Currently, those places seem to be after thoughts and disengaged from the larger block formations.

Hanover Street Character and the Gateway Bridge

Hanover Street is of the scale of a two-way Pratt Street. The median strip which pinches down to six feet through a significant portion of the street is not enough space for both safety of the pedestrian or the planting that is described for those areas. Greater relief for pedestrians as they cross the street is desired. Of particular importance, the intersection of Blue Street and Hanover needs to support this important east/west pedestrian corridor. The vehicular east/west movement also seems to be challenging as described. As noted by Mr. Manfredi, perhaps consider the character of Commonwealth Avenue in Boston which has no turn lanes along its length but still carries significant traffic and pedestrian activity. Perhaps Pedestrian flow and movement is focused to select intersections along Hanover St. where the east-west movement takes priority through the street and is articulated with site design. There will be different types of traffic in the development depending upon the time of day. That said, the intersections throughout currently accommodate every type of anticipated mode, perhaps to the confusion of prospective users. There will clearly need to be signage – both on the ground and within visible site lines – to clearly educate users.

The Gateway Bridge – a pedestrian and cyclist bridge to cross Hanover Street at its southern extent – met with a challenged response from the Panel. In general, people do not like to go up to come down as a means of crossing a street, however handsome (or expensive) the construct. And because the entrance and egress of the structure is set back a block or more in both directions from the intersection of Hanover, there will always be persons who need to cross at the road proper (who haven't made a decision in a manner that will allow them to take advantage of the above-grade crossing). There is also a desire to disengage the bridge from the adjacent architectural elements.

The structure seems superfluous in the context of the development, as gateway can be described in many ways. It does need to be civic gesture, but perhaps it can be handled at street level. A traffic circle was suggested, however, the design team acknowledged that it has already investigated this option to no avail. Understanding the challenge is based on the need for significant freight traffic, as well as speed of traffic, are there precedents where truck traffic and civic character can be envisioned together with limited detriment to both? It seems the diminution of speed of all traffic – signaling that a new urban/urbane condition is present – should happen starting on the Hanover Bridge, rather than at the immediate threshold of the new development.

Streetscape Diversity

Time did not afford this topic enough discussion. It would be valuable if study of this subject continue with the design team but allow the Panel to participate as it progresses. What was evident and acknowledged is there is a need for coordination of approach regarding the selection of street trees and their consistency or diversity. The goal of the streetscape should be to inform a uniform massing, so that the streetscape looks consistent, however diverse in nature.

PANEL ACTION: Discussion only.

Attending:

Betsy Boykin – Core Studio Design
Mark Sardegna, David Manfredi – Elkus Manfredi Architects
Michael Blier – Landworks Studio Inc.
RJ Eldgridge – Toole Design Group
Alex Jackson – Maroon PR
Chris Streb, Jennifer Dowdell – BioHabitats
Ryan Barth, Addison Palmer – STV
Caroline Paff, Steven Siegel – SDC
Bimal Devkota, Valorie Lacour – BC DOT

Messrs. Bowden, Haresign, Burns, Rubin* and Ms. Ilieva - UDARP Panel

Tom Stosur, Anthony Cataldo, Christina Hartsfield, Wolde Ararsa, Theo Ngongang, Laurie Feinberg - Planning