

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

Date: March 23, 2023

Meeting #75

Project: Key's Point

Phase: Master Plan

Location: O'Donnell Heights, Baltimore MD

PRESENTATION:

Context / Background:

Mary Claire Davis with Affordable Housing Inc. introduced the project, which is part of a 62-acre site, developed as a post war housing project in 1942. The Housing Authority of Baltimore City (HABC) has funding to redevelop the site and began the planning process and demolition more than a decade ago. The Phase II site is surrounded by cemeteries on the west, southeast, and northwest. There are 144 new units built in Phase I (completed). The presentation today is focused on Phase II, which is 22 acres. Each phases contains multiple sub-phases. The completed Phase I includes buildings that function and appear as if they are townhomes and others that function like true multi-family buildings. The project utilizes parking lots because they allow for aggregated parking, consolidated stormwater management and more generous rear patio areas. The patio areas function as outdoor amenity space for the residents and are accessed by the rear door of each unit.

The site has a great deal of grading challenges; these grading challenges have impacted the stormwater management design. Typical street configurations include traffic calming features such as bump-outs, trees, greening / planted areas, and parallel parking spaces.

Key's Pointe Master Plan has been evolving over the course of several years. The team pulled important features from the master planning efforts to guide their design proposal, but it should be noted that the concept design had several suggestions that could not be accommodated because of the site constraints. The features from the master planning effort that the team strove to incorporate in their design included the following:

- Integration with the community with
- Inclusion of the park and community center
- An array of housing options including more density along the larger streets
- Provision of a variety of open spaces

As noted, the Phase II site includes a number of challenges including drastic topographic shifts (more than 5% across the site), with the highest point at the southwest corner at Gusryan Street and Boston, and the low point at the northeast corner. There is also a transmission drain made of clay pipe and a transformer, each of which are not able to be relocated. The team studied several options, and arrived

on a layout that focuses the park on Gusryan and allows for much of the new housing to front onto this new community amenity. The park is further celebrated with the termination of Gary Avenue at the park; Gary Avenue links the site with the existing neighborhood to the east. The team included locations for future amenity [green / open] spaces as part of the presentation, but given that these are future phase development projects, no detailed design or programming is proposed at this time.

DISCUSSION:

The Panel thanked the team for the very thorough presentation and noted that this is an exciting opportunity. Much has advanced (including the nearby renovated schools mentioned by the team) since the last time the Panel saw the project. The Panel then moved into clarifying questions and comments.

Clarification:

- *How are the grade changes being accommodated with the proposed units for this phase?* From north to south, there would be a target of 2-3% on the north/south. The east/west streets would be steeper, approaching 5%. There is a significant grade break; the entrances would have a similar condition to Phase I with one at grade entrance and one entrance requiring stairs.
- *Is Team is required to address peak management requiring a pond or underground retention?* ESB micro-bio retention and bio swales will be utilized but it cannot accommodate the full requirements, so yes, this will be needed in addition to the other SWM interventions.
- *Is the strong presence of the park on the northeast corner in response to something?* There are residential units and residential adjacent to the school and directly across from this amenity space. The main driver for leaving this space open is the transformer, and the team will work to make this a true amenity space and not something leftover.
- *Has the team explored a pedestrian system that is independent of the street grid?* The team did not explore a specific pedestrian path system beyond what was explored for the park and the ped portion of the street network.
- *What is the process by which trash is stored and collected throughout the neighborhood?* There are designated spaces at the rear patio; each unit has their own bins and on collection days, the city picks up the trash from the designated areas. It is necessary for some units to roll their trash bins down the steps at the rear of the units.
- *Are the yards fenced?* The yards have privacy screens but are not fully fenced.
- *Are there accommodations for community type buildings?* There is not a community space in Phase II, but there is a maintenance / storage / small business center that was built in Phase IB. The portion of Phase II being reviewed today is not large enough to necessitate an (additional) community space, but there is a community center across from the park. The community center has robust programming, and the adjacent community pool is also slated for renovation.
- *What is the plan to accommodate pedestrian traffic across O'Donnell and Boston Streets?* The team would work with DOT to suggest a traffic light. On a related note, the community has continued to advocate for traffic calming and pedestrian prioritization. Children may go to Graceland or Holabird [schools], and these pedestrian routes could strengthen the argument for safer pedestrian routes, but the team does not have this information yet.
- *How many units are within Phase II and how much parking is required?* There are approximately 355 units in Phase II. The requirement is 1:1; in Phase I the team proved 1.2 spaces per unit with

the rear parking lots, and with the on-street parking it is more like 1.6 spaces. For the plan shown, the estimate is 1.5 spaces per unit not counting the on-street parking.

- *What criteria established the size of the future park?* The team was given direction from BCRP that the recommended size is 5-6 acres. The park shown is approximately 5.2 acres.
- *What is the reason for the new housing on the east not relating to the existing housing (beyond the site boundary)?* The team considered ways to tie into the alley, but in order to create outward-facing blocks and avoid building above the sewer pipe, powerline poles, etc. Each of the studies resulted in a challenge, which is how they arrived at the proposed configuration.
- *Why is it more beneficial to run the streets north / south than east / west?* The team looked at other options, but the steep grades of the sidewalk and road presented significant challenges. There were also additional costs associated with providing the required flat grade at entrances. With this configuration, the grades are gentler, and the stormwater facilities were also more visually accessible.
- *Has the team studied a “walk-out” condition in situations where there is an outdoor stair to absorb the additional stair?* The team has not studied this but will look into it.

COMMENTS:

Site / Landscape:

- Topography / Grading:
 - Having front / back doors so far above the sidewalk and parking lots (resulting in a lot of outdoor stairs) is very problematic.
 - Consider more grading interventions to lessen the need for stairs and be willing to lose some of the parking spots. There are opportunities to pick up some of the runoff, with more mews-like green spaces.
 - Panel suggests a grading study to see where there are opportunities to balance the site.
 - The housing unit / building block layouts need to be studied with the constraints of the topography to see how the buildings can work more with the topography.
- Open Spaces:
 - Open spaces need more consideration especially with regard to programming and the park. Can some of the pressure of the slopes be alleviated by spreading the buildings out more, which will use up some of the “leftover” feeling green around the edges.
 - The northeast corner where the transformer is located is a key anchor corner – the design of this space needs to be intentional and deliberate, and really anchor the corner.
 - Transformer parcel needs to be studied – there seems to be too much space devoted to this site challenge. Team is encouraged to rethink this corner of the site.
 - Eastern blocks can be tightened up and give this over to meaningful green space.
 - This is a very large site, and the zoning / programming seems appropriate, but the elements and orientation are not necessarily efficient enough yet.

- Many of the green spaces feel remote and exclusive. Think about how the green spaces will feel to the community as a whole – are they supposed to be only for specific blocks or are they for the community as a whole? Having a clear attitude in the design will help clarify these spaces for the residents. Team is reminded that ambiguous spaces can become problematic and attract illicit use and/or territory conflict.
- The site is over-parked; the team may find that there is an opportunity to optimize the parking. Take advantage of on-street parking in the fronts of the units to minimize the amount of asphalt.
- Centrally located park on Gusryan:
 - The park feels oversized; if this size is mandated by BCRP the team may need to consider the shape – the rectilinear shape makes the amenity space across Gusryan seem cavernous.
 - The program, layout and shape will be critical to ensuring this park feels appropriately scaled to the neighborhood.
 - Consider fronting a portion of the multi-family building on the park to help ground it.
 - Remember that the units across the street to the east are not looking at a flat park. Consider the size, scale and form of the park with the consideration of the units and their views into the park as the park design develops.
- Circulation:
 - Next level of design should include give more thought to pedestrian movement through the space and connection to the schools.
 - Some of the “Green City” style pedestrian circulation (that departs from the streets) could be accommodated by loosening up the sticks of rowhouses. See if addressing the grade presents opportunities for green path systems to emerge throughout the site.
- Blocks / Street Typologies:
 - Exciting to see that the team has establish typologies of street types, which is a very solid approach to community design. The street typologies are a strong start.
 - This plan doesn’t quite take full advantage of the relationship of the street and the street walls. Where do these exist in the plan? There are almost as many exceptions to the type as there are instances where it exists.
 - The diagram is very strong, but the execution is fragmented; the urban experience isn’t carried through enough yet. Take another look at the diagram and see where the design can adhere to the ideas more firmly, with the understanding that there are significant site constraints.
 - Try to use the primary block as much as possible. Start with the multi-family site; there isn’t a lot of neighborhood-making.
 - On the corner of the block to the north of the park, this stick needs to run all the way to the end. The team needs to be very disciplined and reinforce the main avenue along the edge of the park with housing;
 - Allow the multi-family building to be rotated 90-degrees counterclockwise (toward the park); this will allow a presence on O’Donnell and Gusryan, and the park.

- It is critical for this project to reinforce the streets and make strong urban blocks; take another look at the northeast cluster of houses and at nuanced areas where the neighborhood block language starts to break down. Maintain the overall pattern wherever possible – if the pattern isn't maintained from block to block, the site will not feel cohesive.
- Rowhouse blocks need more than 5 or 6 units; these smaller sticks and the failure of the corner units to follow through to the end are undermining the strength of the plan. To reinforce the plan, set up a hierarchy – if this is the north/south artery along the park, reinforce it by facing the units on to the street.
- Boston Street can become a gateway by facing the houses onto it; then as you move into the neighborhood, face them onto the north/south main artery through the site.
- Revisit the diagram, which was very clear about the goals.
- Site Perimeter:
 - O'Donnell Street needs more study. The pattern shown in this iteration reads: multi-family, driveway, side of the house, stick of buildings, leftover green space. This sequence does not create a strong urban edge, but there is a good possibility to improve the pattern and create a sensitive, responsive, integrated edge.
 - The eastern edge needs more connection to the existing neighborhood; these spaces present future challenges.

Buildings / Architecture:

- The Panel suggests continuing to learn from previous phases, especially with regard to the stairs.
- Panel agrees with the approach of refreshing the architectural language. Keeping the roofline gives a nod to the existing, which is appreciated.
- Detailing the openings and the entries will be key to maintaining the architectural language and keeping the intent of the concept.
- The rectangular dark-colored vertical strip adds unnecessary noise. Team is encouraged to study this without the break in the roofline.
- Study the proposed architecture over the course of many blocks – how can the feature that breaks the roofline be toned down and reserved for important moments only?
- Moving ahead, team must assess which elements are worth keeping. There will almost certainly be a tradeoff of value – emphasize the most important features now to ensure they aren't removed if (when) there is a need to value engineer the project.
- May have to develop one – two other rowhouse typologies to contrast with this over the entire site, as there are more than 200 units planned.
- Corner units are extremely important – develop a unit type that turns the corner gracefully. These end-of-group units really have two primary facades, which will need to be designed intentionally.

Next Steps:

Continue moving the plan forward with consideration to the Panel's comments. Work with Planning staff before returning to UDAAP.

Attending:

Courtney Galiber – MRA

Aaron Zephir, Magda Westerhout – Moseley Architects

Kerina Spencer, Mary Claire Davis – AHC Inc.

Cynthia Newman-Lynch – HABC

Bethlehem Wolde, Carley, Ed Gunts, Elisa Flores Thronton, Nkechi Animashaun – Attending

Anthony Osbourne, Sharon Bradley and Pavlina Ilieva* - UDAAP Panel

Ren Southard**, Caitlin Audette, Matt DeSantis - Planning

* UDAAP Chairperson

** Assigned Planning Staff