

## MEMORANDUM

**TO:** City of Portland Planning Board

**FROM:** Matt Thayer and Margaret Hazlett  
Owners, 62 Munjoy St.  
Matt: Co-Chair, City of Portland Adams School Re-use Committee

**DATE:** February 3, 2016

**RE:** Adams School Redevelopment Phase II a.k.a. 65 Munjoy Street:  
Some Supplemental Comments about Design & Process Problems  
[Rough but Meaningful DRAFT]

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We are writing to call your attention to several major concerns we have with the proposed design and lack of appropriate public process with respect to the planned 65 Munjoy St. affordable housing project, and to offer several possible solutions. These comments supplement the information in several e-mails we have submitted as well.

Our concerns and suggestions are highlighted here, and are detailed below:

- 1) **Project Design Concerns**
  - a. Incompatible with the Neighborhood
  - b. Inconsistent with the RFP
  - c. Inconsistent with Good Design Standards for Urban Infill Affordable Housing
- 2) **Design Team Concerns**
  - a. Project Design Team Needs -- but Lacks -- an Architect with Extensive Experience in Urban Infill Affordable Housing Design
  - b. Local Designers Reluctant to Criticize "On the Record"
- 3) **Public Input Processes: Long History and Recent Problems**
  - a. 2006-2014 Neighborhood and Public Visioning Processes Ignored by Developers, but Still Highly Relevant
  - b. 2015 Public Input Process on Project Design Non-existent
  - c. 2016 Public Input Process is "Too Little, Too Late;" Violated Spirit (and Letter?) of Planning Board "Early On" Public Process Standards
  - d. Lack of Planning Board Workshop
- 4) **Possible Solutions**
  - a. Re-start RFP Process
  - b. Complete Project Re-design
  - c. Conduct Formal *Design Review* by Architectural Firm with Extensive Experience in Urban Infill Affordable Housing Design
- 5) **Recommended Solutions: Deny Approvals; Conduct Formal Design Review and/or Re-start Design Process**

Before we delve into the above points, we first offer some background in the 10-year long City-sponsored neighborhood input processes that we have been a part of since their inception, and that brings us to where we are today.

## **I. Background**

65 Munjoy Street is proposed for a parcel of land that has been the subject of a 10-year long neighborhood visioning process. The City of Portland Adams School Re-use Committee<sup>1</sup> worked during 2006 and 2007 to present a vision and recommendations for redevelopment of the site of the former Adams School. Most of the site was redeveloped several years ago as Adams School Phase I. The current proposal – called 65 Munjoy Street -- is Adams School Redevelopment Phase II.

The neighborhood visioning process included a Community Design Day in which dozens of people provided design ideas for the site. The recommendations that emerged from the Community Design Day and the numerous other public meetings that were hosted by the committee were ultimately reflected in a report that made specific recommendations regarding redevelopment of the site.

The essence of these design standards, for urban infill affordable housing, were more or less captured in the two subsequent city RFPs for the site, and in numerous mock-ups of proposed buildings for the site, all the way up to the fall of 2014.

## **II. Design Guidance, Design Concerns**

We have major concerns about the compatibility of Adams Apple's original 65 Munjoy design -- and their current design -- with the design recommendations of the Adams School Reuse Committee and the design requirements of the RFP.

In order for you to understand our concerns, we will quickly re-cap the neighborhood design recommendations and subsequent design guidance and ideas submitted over the years that are consistent with the neighborhood vision and with the RFP.

### **A. 2006-2007 Adams School Re-use Committee Report**

The committee recommended high quality, traditionally-inspired urban infill affordable housing. Specific design standards include those highlights under RFP II below.

### **B. 2008 RFP for Adams Redevelopment**

The RFP sought high quality, traditionally-inspired urban infill affordable housing. Specific design standards include those highlights under RFP II below.

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<sup>1</sup> Matt was Co-Chair of the City of Portland Adams School Re-use Committee.

### C. 2008 Avesta Housing Bid Submission – “Avesta I”

Avesta’s initial bid submission covered both parts of the site, both Avesta I and the current 65 Munjoy Street projects, and was consistent with the neighborhood vision and the design guidelines in the two RFPs, and was compatible with the neighborhood.

Avesta’s initial proposal for 65 Munjoy St. can be seen in the lower-left corner of the below sketch. It was a couple of traditionally-inspired, well-articulated triple deckers.



Here’s another look at Avesta’s design for 65 Munjoy, in the upper right-hand corner.



SITE VIEW LOOKING SOUTH



BECKETT GREEN  
CONCEPT SITE PLAN  
NO SCALE  
July 19, 2008



Finally, the below is a close-up of Avesta’s design ideas for both Adams I and Adams II (65 Munjoy). Their design ideas are compatible with the neighborhood, are consistent with the design standards that emerged from the neighborhood visioning process, are consistent with the design standards in RFP I and RFP II, and are consistent with good design standards for urban infill affordable housing.



VIEW LOOKING SOUTH ALONG MOODY STREET



BECKETT GREEN

NO SCALE  
July 19, 2008



#### D. 2010-2012 Avesta Housing Re-design – “Avesta II”

Avesta Housing had to scale back their plans when the economy “tanked” in 2008, and only develop the first 2/3 of the site, BUT importantly, they stuck with a high quality, well-articulated urban infill design, as seen in the photo below.



## E. Bluestone Group Report and Recommendations to the City

The city went back out to bid for Adams Phase II in 2014, but not first before engaging a consultant for ideas on project concepts that would be consistent with all the prior guidance. The Bluestone Group came back and recommended that the city proceed to bid seeking a development to include a couple of separate triple decker that would be designed in a way that respected the design concepts articulated in the Adams School Re-use report, in RFP I, etc. They suggested a traditionally-inspired design and development that would look like the below, which is from their report.

**Preferred Housing Plan:  
Prototype Triple Decker  
Style Example**  
The photo at right illustrates  
two side-by-side three-story  
triple-decker styled housing  
types that are similar in scale  
to the suggested preferred  
Plan.



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Though the Bluestone design is more traditionally inspired than the Avesta I and Avesta II designs, it represents a high quality, well-articulated design with robust references to the neighborhood vernacular, so we concluded that the Bluestone report design idea was consistent with earlier guidance, and suggested that the city was at that point still on the right track with a traditionally inspired, well articulated, high quality design.

We believe that ALL of the above design concepts – both traditionally inspired and more modern -- represent high quality designs that are compatible with the neighborhood, and with the various guidance documents, including the RFPs. We believe the Adams Apple design looks nothing like any of the above designs, that it's essentially just a poorly articulated "big box" that is incompatible with the neighborhood, and inconsistent with the various guidance documents, including both RFPs, and incompatible with good design for urban infill affordable housing.

## F. RFP II

The RFP for this project included the following City Goals:

The goal for the sale and development of the property at 65 Munjoy Street is to promote the development of affordable housing with a high standard of quality, design, and livability... Design principles should promote efficient use of land to create infill development that reflects and respects the existing pattern, streetscape, density, scale, massing, exterior materials and design elements that are reflective of the surrounding traditional neighborhood. Heights shall be less than or equal to the surrounding buildings and should minimize the impact of shadows on the adjacent public playground... Proposals should consider the recommendations outlined in the Munjoy Street Affordable Housing Feasibility Study completed by Bluestone Planning Group ... In summary, the study identifies the preferred design concept as two triple-decker styled flats with flat roofs...

*The RFP also included the following Design Compatibility Standards.*

Projects must be designed to contribute to the character of the neighborhood and adhere to the following guidelines.

1. **Connect the Neighborhood.** The development should not be an island unto itself, but rather blend into and enhance the surrounding Munjoy Hill community.
2. **Design Considerations**
  - a. **High Quality Design.** Excellence in architectural and landscape design is expected.
  - b. **Traditional Design.** Design shall be reflective of the surrounding traditional neighborhood and shall create an infill development that reflects and respects the existing pattern, streetscape, density, scale, massing, exterior materials and design elements of the neighborhood. Buildings should orient to the street.
  - c. **Streetscape.** The development shall enhance the pedestrian experience and the public realm..
  - d. **Height.** Heights shall be less than or equal to the average of structures in the surrounding block and should minimize the impact of shadows on the adjacent public playground.
  - e. **Permeability.** Design shall be permeable or porous. View corridors are encouraged.

## G. Selected Design Problems

We believe the project design suffers from the following problems, among others:

1. **“Big Box” Design (even with “new” bay windows hanging at one end)**
2. **Large and Fairly “Flat” Façades Facing Munjoy St and Park**
3. **Should Look Like a Couple Individual Buildings, with Connector in Middle.**



4. **Poorly Articulated**
5. **Insufficient Reference to Traditional Design Elements & Neighborhood Vernacular**
6. **Design Fail: Designed So You Can Park Your Car in the House!** Sits Too Low to Ground, so Now Designers Want to Install Porthole or Mini Windows in First Floor to Create a Sense of Privacy for First Floor Occupants. Will look ugly!
7. **Porthole or Mini Windows.** See #5 above. Also, all first floor windows facing the street should be full size. Frost the lower panes if necessary for any mini windows on first floor, including the garage, to help address the urge to go “mini.”
8. **Shouldn't Build a 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor So You Can Park Cars in Your House!** Gives the building a bad look at street level, and shades the homes on Moody Street.
9. **Designer Claims He Can't Design an Effective Interior If He has to go with Traditionally-Inspired, Well-Articulated Façades.** But why not? Architects have been doing “triple decker” designs for a century, both a century ago, and even today for urban infill projects. What's different now? Nothing!
10. **The “Look.”** Should be considering a more traditional look (Bluestone), or a more modern look but with better articulation (Avesta I). What you have right now is neither, it looks like just a cheap, low-budget big box.

#### H. Selected Design Comments from Local Design Professionals

We have spoken with several design professionals who were happy to provide thoughts on the quality – or not – of the design, but who were reluctant to speak on the record about their concerns, presumably out of concern for their business relationships.

Here are some of their comments about the design:

1. **Lacks Life**
2. **Lacks Soul**
3. **Represents a Missed Opportunity**
4. **Presents Just a “Sheer Wall” Toward the Park**
5. **Sits Too Low. Shouldn't Be Designed Both Low to Ground -- and High in Air -- to Accommodate Cars**
6. **Small First Floor Windows Look Strange, Make First Floor Look Lifeless**

*The first several comments alone should motivate a second look at the design.*

#### I. Other: Good Design Standards for Urban Infill Affordable Housing

If anyone cares, you might also want to reference our recent opinion piece on affordable housing design in the Press Herald that's at [www.pressherald.com/2016/01/20/maine-voices-portland-needs-more-affordable-housing-but-appearance-matters-too/](http://www.pressherald.com/2016/01/20/maine-voices-portland-needs-more-affordable-housing-but-appearance-matters-too/) It includes a good photo of what this project should look more like -- a couple triple deckers -- versus what it actually looks like, which is a stripped down big box, with some modest design changes recently tacked on, changes that do little to solve the fundamental problems with the underlying big box design. While the opinion

piece specifically addresses design standards for urban infill affordable housing, the issues are very similar... project "fit" with the neighborhood... being careful about building mass... creating many traditional references or design elements in new buildings... many of the same requirements as in the Adams Report and the RFP.

*In summary, the design is fundamentally flawed. Hanging a few more local design elements on the box won't help it enough. The design process should start over, and the public should be invited to participate in a discussion of design concepts that would better meet the design vision articulated during the 2006-2014 public processes.*

### **Public Input Processes: Recent Problems**

As you know, the long public input process for Adams School Phase II a.k.a. 65 Munjoy St. reaches back to 2006. From 2006 to 2014, the design standards and designs that emerged from that public process and guiding language were consistent and appropriate. Opportunities to weigh in were sufficiently frequent and meaningful that the design ideas stayed on the right track. All of this up through 2014.

But 2015 has been a different story. We remain very disappointed that we were encouraged to share our concerns with and work with the developer on design changes beginning last spring, and that for nine months, we were essentially given just lip service by the developer about how they would work with us on design concept when the time was right, when they began to really consider a design. In the meantime, the developer did an end-run around us and headed for the planning board, getting their approvals and agreements with the city in place, doing final design work, etc., all while never reaching back out to us to have a substantive discussion about our concerns with their design. Once I finally got them to respond in January 2016, it was only after they had spent months finalizing their design. We should add that our various e-mails to the developer during the critical fall period ALL went without a response, leaving us with the impression that nothing was happening, while they worked feverishly to finish their design and get to the planning board.

**E-mails from Developer.** More specifically, in case you are curious, in a late Sept e-mail from the developer (below), they commit to reach back out to us once they start the design process, but the below is the last we heard from them, for months, until they all-but finalized their design and made it into the "end-zone" of the planning board...

On Thu, Sep 24, 2015 at 12:03 PM, Ethan Boxer-Macomber <[ethan@anew-development.com](mailto:ethan@anew-development.com)> wrote:

Hi Matt-

Unfortunately I don't have any new news for you on the design front. We've invested the whole of the spring and summer in negotiating and securing a grant to perform the environmental clean up of the site. During that same time, the City came up with some new ideas about buyer



restrictions that had to be negotiated, vetted with our sales team and construction lender, etc. ...

It's all coming together now but, given the delays, **we are probably not looking at getting back into the design in earnest until late fall...**

**I added the image that you sent me of the Scott T project to the top of the design file. I also provided it to the architect to generate some ideas.** We do intend to elevate the ground floor units, better articulate the facade, and define exterior materials. ... **Let's stay in touch. I'd like to share our progress with you both and get your feedback once we get back on to the architect's boards.**

Ethan

Unfortunately, that was the last we heard from the developer about their design, and soliciting our input on the design, despite several e-mails from us in the following several months attempting to follow up. I have also tried calling the developer before, but often hit a full voicemail box.

So the next communication from the developer about the design came months later, on Jan 15, and included the following statement:

**"[A]s of late fall, we have taken design to a *significantly* (sic) more refined level having now worked through all of the engineering (survey, geotech, environmental, civil, structural, mechanical, electrical), unit and common area layouts, and code review." In other words, we're now done with the design.**

**So there was no "sharing of progress," no "getting your feedback," as had been promised, at least not while there was still an opportunity to influence the overall design concept and direction to make the project design more consistent with the City RFP and the recommendations of the Adams School Re-use Committee.**

**Planning Board Public Participation Process Expectations.** The way we've been treated during this process also makes a mockery of the below statement about public participation from the planning board page on the city website. We have begged for a real conversation with the developer about their design concept for a full nine months -- at the direction of the City -- and have been completely blown off.

**Planning Board Public Participation (from City of Portland website)**

Over the years, there has been an increase in public participation in the development reviews. ... The changes require the development community to work with the impacted surrounding neighborhoods during the design development phase. Through a series of neighborhood meetings, communication between the groups offers an opportunity for the

applicant to hear neighborhood concerns and to address any issues early on through quality design.

How ironic we were personally reaching out to the developer, via phone and e-mail, and even attempts to meet them in person, and they all but ignored us until they made it to the planning board. The also didn't have a neighborhood design meeting or a substantive conversation with us "early on" in the design process about alternative design concepts; they first finalized their design and applied to the planning board, and then held a token "post design" neighborhood meeting in January apparently so they could check it off their "to do" list, making a couple minor design tweaks so they could say they were responsive to public input, all while ignoring our pleas to have a real conversation about the design concept and direction before they pushed to finalize it.

**So Who's In Charge of Determining Design Compatibility with RFP at City Hall?** So can you all tell us who has determined that this project meets the design standards in the RFP, and the letter and spirit of the Re-use Committee public input process and report, and any design requirements associated with the public funding? Is it an architect skilled in urban infill affordable housing design? If so, how come this project diverges so much from what was originally envisioned, and from what's been envisioned over the years (a couple triple deckers, or something that looked like a couple triple deckers), and diverged from designs like the below urban infill affordable housing designs from affordable developments in the Boston area, in urban neighborhoods not unlike Munjoy Hill, such as East Boston and Jamaica Plain?



*\*\* By the way, the above new yellow-beige project is interesting in that it is a very deliberate attempt to create a new three-story urban infill affordable housing complex that looks like it was once a two-story apartment house or condo project; you'll note that the 3rd floor appears very much like an addition to an old two-story house. Given that two, two-story buildings "sandwich" 65 Munjoy, one to the north, one to the south, this design technique is worth keeping in mind. Anything like this at #65 might need to be a bit wider, but the basic concept of the 3rd floor "addition" to break up the three-story mass is worth considering for the 65 Munjoy site.*

### **Possible Solutions**

**Conduct Design Review by Experienced Urban Infill Affordable Housing Design Architects.** We encourage you to send this project for a formal **Design Review** by an architectural firm skilled in urban infill affordable housing, since so much for public resources is being put into it. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts reportedly has four such firms, including The Narrow Gate in Boston, that are hired to perform Design Reviews of other architect's plans in certain circumstances, in part to ensure quality designs that are consistent with design requirements of any associated RFPs or public funding sources, and to ensure that the projects represent good quality design for urban infill affordable housing. Selecting an experienced out-of-state firm for a formal Design Review of this project would have the added benefit of bringing in experts who won't be afraid to speak their minds about this project, as they presumably have less at stake than local design professionals if they speak up about it, and will therefore be more frank in their assessment of it (please see related discussion in our recent opinion piece in the Press Herald, referenced above).

*In summary, this project cries out for a formal design review by an architect experienced in urban infill affordable housing in well-established neighborhoods.*

In the meantime, we urge you to deny any requested permits or approvals for this project, and urge you to require the developer to outsource a genuine design review of their project, and ultimately, to re-engage the neighbors in a discussion of design concepts and design alternative that will lead to an improved design. We also ask they you direct them to return e-mails and phone calls from affected neighbors re their project design, and to engage substantively with neighbors about their concerns.

If anyone has any questions or concerns about the "big box" design, and about the lack of fit with the neighborhood, and lack of compatibility with the design standards in the RFP, and/or about how we've been treated during this process, pls let us know.

### **Concluding Comments**

We shudder to think what the future holds for Portland if this process in any way represents how the city and developers are going to go about building the thousands of units of affordable housing in Portland that are your goal, what they are going to look like, how prior neighborhood visioning processes will be respected (or not!), and how neighbors and adjacent property owners will be treated and ignored during the process.