

## Symmes Hospital Site Priority Usages

### **Introduction**

The Symmes Advisory Committee has compiled a list of priority uses for the Symmes site. This list has been developed from four sources. They are:

- **Vision 2020 2000 and 2001 Survey** – Vision 2020’s surveys of town wide issues were sent to every household in Arlington. In the 2001 survey, 14% of those receiving surveys responded. This survey was used as a starting point for understanding how the needs identified by citizens of the town might translate into usages for the Symmes site.
- **Public Survey** – This survey was sent to every household in Arlington in April 2002. Over 2,000 citizens responded. Citizens were asked in the survey to list their priority uses for the site by category; medical, commercial, residential, and public use. A large majority of the citizens responding also commented on uses that concerned them and what those concerns were.
- **Public Workshops** – Three public workshops were held in July, August and September where citizens were asked to comment on what uses they wished to see as well as concerns and issues they had about the development of the site. This information was compiled and major themes and uses were culled from the discussion.
- **Working Groups** – Usage working groups have been meeting since September, 2001 to investigate the best uses for the site within a specific category. The categories are Medical, Residential, Commercial and Public Use. Each working group consists of community members with expertise and a deep interest in a category. In addition, the Financial Working Group has been focusing on the financial aspect of the site and developing models for evaluating the opportunities and costs of different uses. In total, over 100 citizens have participated in these groups and over 125 public meetings were held. Each group has developed a list of priorities based on community feed back (from workshops and survey) as well as research in available options and opportunities in that particular category.

Below is the list of priorities by Category.

### **Medical Use**

The primary priority for medical use is to preserve and expand primary care medical services and related professional and ancillary services.

## Residential Use

The residential usage priorities are set down as a set of guidelines and are broken into four areas: density, affordability, type of housing, and environmental sensitivity. These guidelines should be used in evaluating residential usage options as more cost and constraint information becomes available.

- Density: The development should be clustered and should reflect appropriate density for the site – its other uses – and the surrounding neighborhood. The building heights should fit in with the surrounding environment, including other buildings, the neighborhood, etc.
- Affordability: 10% of housing should be affordable for households of very low income (up to 30% of median, or \$22,000 for a family of 4), 15% of housing should be affordable to low and moderate income (30% to 80% of median, or \$22,000 to \$58,000 for a family of 4) 10% of housing should be affordable to middle income households (80% to 120% of median income, or \$54,000 to \$88,000), with a priority for people who live or work in Arlington.
- Mixture of Housing: The site should contain a mix of housing, both in terms of ownership and rental and in terms of the number of bedrooms, so that the site can accommodate households of different sizes.
- Environmentally sensitive housing: The housing should be developed in an environmentally sensitive fashion.

## Public Use

The highest priority public-use goal remains the protection and enhancement of the natural spaces of the site, as public open space and as buffer for the neighborhood.

The incorporation of public spaces and functions into the site, and the creation of something truly special and unique to the Town of Arlington, is a necessary criterion of success for this project. We propose two outdoor enhancements that should be incorporated in the project; another that should be explored; and a “built” concept that requires and deserves serious in-depth exploration.

Scenic Vista Park: A public gathering place that takes best advantage of the views from the top of the hill. It should integrate well with and be readily accessible to any indoor public complex, to walking trails, and to parking. Landscaped areas should incorporate native plants and wildflowers, and provide benches and other areas for eating and relaxing.

Walking & nature trails: All features of the site, built and natural, should be accessible by walking paths. The natural areas offer opportunities for controlled exploration in varying degrees of difficulty given the topography of the site. Trails, like the vista park, should be designed in response to the site and should respect the conception of the site as a whole in redevelopment.

Memorial Grove/Columbarium: The Cemetery Commission has proposed exploring creation of a memorial grove in the Summer Street woodlot. This naturalistic park would incorporate spaces for the interment of ashes and serve as a place for quiet reflection. In Arlington as everywhere there is a finite amount of interment space available, and infinite demand for it. Columbarium space could provide expanded capacity, and creative and sensitive landscape design can enhance the natural values of the site. The Cemetery Commission projects this proposal to bring net positive revenue to the redevelopment. On that basis, we endorse the concept for detailed study and planning in conjunction with the Commission.

Community Center: There is a spectrum of needs in the Town that might best be met (perhaps can only be met) by a multi-function community center. There are infinite variations on the theme, and defining the programming and physical facility to best match the community's needs is a critical part of the planning process. It would certainly include a core of multi-use meeting and event rooms, kitchen/catering facilities, and space for display of art and education exhibits. An aquatic center is a top priority, with one or more indoor pools offering both recreational and rehabilitation/physical therapy opportunities. Parent-supervised play areas (a "Tot-Stop"-like facility), an indoor track and fitness center, a well-equipped theater or other performance space, activities for active seniors and teens, all are among the many potential components that must be evaluated to form a cohesive concept that is both responsive to the needs of the community and sympathetic to other uses at the site.

Defining the program and mission of a center is one significant step. There must also be an examination of a range of possible forms of financing, ownership and operation: public versus private, for-profit versus non-, and public/private partnerships. The possibility of establishing a local not-for-profit and recruiting energized board members to raise funding, potential involvement of other municipal agencies (Council on Aging, Youth Services, Recreation Department), state funding sources – all of these possibilities need to be considered.

Experience in other communities indicates that a multi-purpose community center can be self-sustaining. The Symmes redevelopment may present an opportunity not available elsewhere in Arlington to create such a facility. Significant citizen leadership will be required; judging by the comments and inquiries the committee has received there are many residents interested in working toward this goal. We suggest that professional guidance will also be required to help the Town fully evaluate this opportunity in the timeframe of the Symmes planning process.

## **Commercial**

Along with residential uses, commercial uses are the likely candidate for providing the economic engine that drives the successful redevelopment and reuse of the site. Over the last two years an economic recession in the national economy, deflation of the "internet bubble", and broad ranging overcapacity in the telecom sector have all had a negative impact on Massachusetts business environment and the commercial real estate market in

particular. In addition the 9/11/2001 attack on the world trade center has introduced a degree of uncertainty to the property investment environment.

The Commercial Use Working Group has reviewed the following potential development options as priorities:

- General Office
- Research and Development
- Biotech
- Restaurant
- Institutional

General office use is an extension of or complementary to potential medical offices, and the site could be attractive as a HQ or regional center for corporate activities. Research and Development use has always been in high demand in eastern Massachusetts, but the currently high commercial vacancy rates (as much as 15 million to 45 million sq feet may be on or coming on the market) undermine the attractiveness of this development channel. Biotech research and office space is still in high demand in Boston, Cambridge and the adjacent suburbs. While this is a very attractive and high-value use, the relatively high build-out costs suggest the need for identified tenants prior to development. Restaurant or other similar hospitality applications can benefit from the location and views, but limited highway access may militate against this use. Finally, the campus configuration of the site may lend itself to development by educational or research institutions that demand campuses for a satisfactory operational milieu.

## **Evaluating the Priorities**

The priorities developed by the community are being evaluated against the constraints and market opportunities that the site presents. The task at hand is to understand if and how these priorities can be combined on the 8 acres available for development in a way that meets the selectmen's mandate. The Symmes Financial Analysis Working Group is developing models that will be used to evaluate cost and opportunities for identified priority usages. VHB, the consulting firm selected by the SAC to aid in the development of a plan for the site, along with helping develop the financial models will provide in depth market analysis for the different usage. In addition, VHB will define the operating constraints – environmental, social, neighborhood and infrastructure - on the site and provide an evaluation of the priorities against the constraints. These constraints include density and volume, traffic and infrastructure, environmental, and neighborhood impact.