

Design Workshop #3

“Developing Feasible Options and Choices”

Break-Out Group Discussion Notes

The following sections are a compilation of comments received during the third Design Workshop to develop a Reuse and Feasibility Plan for the former Symmes Hospital site in Arlington, Massachusetts. The workshop, sponsored by the Symmes Advisory Committee (SAC), was held at the Arlington Town Hall on Thursday, September 26, 2002, and was facilitated by the Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, Inc. (VHB) consultant team.

The purpose of the workshop was to help participants develop an understanding of the feasibility of different uses for the Symmes site based upon the Selectmen's mandate and the site's physical and financial assessments. The meeting included a presentation regarding the feasibility of priority uses being proposed by the four SAC Working Groups. The presentation included an overview of development parameters for the site, including scale comparisons for different uses, building reuse, site design and market economics.

Following the presentation, workshop participants were split up into four groups to discuss how different uses may fit together given the physical and financial constraints associated with site redevelopment. The break out groups were facilitated by the VHB team, with members of the SAC, Town Staff and additional VHB Team members roaming between the four groups to answer questions.

Group Facilitators

- Blue Group – Robert Karn, AIA, VHB
- Yellow Group – Brett Donham, AIA, Donham and Sweeney Architects
- Green Group – Scott Schilt, AICP, VHB
- Red Group – Carol Lurie, AICP, VHB

Roamers

- Ken Schwartz, AICP, VHB
- Catherine Donaher, AICP, Catherine Donaher Associates
- Jeff Donahoe, RKG Associates
- Marshall McClean, AIA, Donham and Sweeney Architects
- Charlie Foskett, SAC
- Alan McClennen, FAICP, Town of Arlington

The Break Out Group discussions are summarized in the following sections, and are provided in the order in which they were received.

BLUE GROUP**Facilitator: Robert Karn**

- The statement that people won't pay \$750,000 for a house without a ½ acre of land is not true in Arlington. The site should contain a more urban model.
- Why are land costs so high?
- Preserve open space, as there is not a lot in the neighborhood. Topography limits uses. Sidewalks count. Parking is not included in the openspace calculation.
- Primary development space should be housing: a mix of 80% residential and 20% commercial. Any commercial use is appropriate.
- Retain 50% open space. There are concerns about density, especially buildings with heights of up to 4 stories.
- Surrounding uses are 1-2 stories, the site should be appropriately scaled
- Townhouses, clustered residential development.
- New development should be in "Green" buildings, with sustainable development and design. The site should have a natural feel, paying attention to the sensitive impacts on the environment.
- There should be a mix of housing types.
- The site should be largely housing, with a significant amount of affordable housing, not 200- \$700,000 homes. There should be a mix of housing: some market rate, some low, moderate and middle income ranges. Costs should be looked at by housing experts.
- There should be a careful focus paid to the integration of development and open space.
- Public use. There is a need in Arlington for a Community Center. The concept should include a pool, trails, gardens, fitness trails. Income for the center could be from a mix of profit and non-profit sources and user fees.
- We should focus on a mix of uses that we want to support overtime. There is a dearth of open space in Town. Commercial market could come back. We should consider land-banking some of the site for now, giving more flexibility in the future.

- Medical use.
- Make the best use of existing natural features.
- There should be no objection to high-density housing, as long as it is not all co-housing.
- The mix of uses should not overrun the surrounding neighborhood. Consider a mix of day and night uses. The site should contain 50-100 units of housing, with a balance of some commercial/medical uses to support it.
- Don't overdevelop the Symmes site. Arlington is already much too dense.
- Do not fix on a moment in time. The current market conditions can change, and we should be flexible. The housing market can change.
- We have an opportunity to create something that will be there forever. We should focus on what would be great for the residents of Arlington.
- A Vista Park and community center would create an identity for Town. The site should also include some affordable housing.
- Generate enough revenue to break even. Give consideration to mothballing the facility.
- Revenue neutral over 20 years, not 5 years. Conversely paying for schools firehouses. Revenue neutral as soon as possible.
- Light manufacturing space.
- Build another story or stories to increase building square footage on the site.
- I don't want a 10 story building in my backyard, buildings should have a maximum of 3-stories.
- Keep the site zoned for commercial and wait.
- Development has an impact on the rest of the town. Consideration should also be given to runoff and flooding.
- Don't want to trade-off the small town feel of the neighborhood at top of hill for the convenience of other users.
- Medical uses may be more appropriate on Mass. Ave.

- There should be two integrated plans – One revenue neutral and one not. Think about a community wide network – YMCA type.
- Be aware of how much each traffic is generated by each use.
- How much square feet would you need to rent to break even.
- Reuse of existing buildings involved operating and acquisition costs only, as there is minimal rehabilitation work needed. How much would we need to lease it for? \$12 a square foot if it is completely full.
- Keep in mind that a goal of buying Symmes is to prevent a dense, private development.

YELLOW GROUP**Facilitator: Brett Donham**

- Mix of uses? Evaluate the type, location and costs for various mixes of uses. Would a hotel work? What if it were a specialized hotel?
- There should be 2 acres of commercial use off Summer Street; others disagree.
- Luxury Housing is very attractive. Land cost would be 20% \pm of total affordable housing element.
- Most public uses are not revenue generating and would require ongoing subsidy (except a columbarium). Funding for public uses should draw from revenues from private uses.
- Costs for housing will be added strain on Town services, namely schools and transportation.
- A community center might be combined with affordable housing.
- High traffic uses should be near Summer Street.
- Keep views open to public. Development should be where the existing parking lot is now. We want to emphasize access to open space and great views.
- Summer Street area currently experiences traffic problems. The DPW has plans to improve busy intersection at Summer Street and Grove Street.
- There should be a "Campus" concept (similar to the National Institute of Health), with possibly a single end user.
- Stress the need for a cultural center – with fees to support its operation costs. It is possible that a cultural center could financially break even on an operating basis. Capital fund raising would be required.
- Should the community hang on to the space? The site should be for use by all interests in the Town.
- Will a scale model be made available – redevelopment is difficult to visualize.
- Open space and affordable housing should be held as high priority.
- The entire site should be offered to development community for ideas and input on what would work; don't limit their flexibility now.

- A Medical facility is needed in Arlington. Efforts should be made to coordinate medical uses with other commercial enterprises.
- Look at future uses which address elderly and medical needs. Practice use of good site planning techniques.
- Respond to needs of special groups who would create diversity.
- On question number 2, stress the need for commercial uses.
- It is important to minimize traffic impacts, with less development on the top and near abutters.
- Place emphasis on developing commercial on lower areas areas of the site. Facilities should be handicap accessible.
- 4 Points
 - Protect all public vista points - comparable to waterfront access rules
 - Allow disproportionately high density at lower levels
 - Linkage to costs - affordable housing can be developed off-site
 - No more curb cuts on Summer Street.

GREEN GROUP

Facilitator: Scott Schilt

- Given the ledge and topography, how would structured parking work? Blasting would most likely be required. Is it realistic to have mixed use on the site, and have it be revenue neutral? It would depend upon the amount and density of different uses. Revenue generating uses would have to offset non revenue generating uses.
- Has a hotel been considered to use the existing building? It would seem that development costs would be the same for a hotel as it would be for residential.
- On the Analysis, the net fiscal impact numbers are the same for all of the uses—please explain. The breakdown includes financial impacts related to the fiscal costs to provide services for residents, employees and school aged children.
- Residents voted for hospital – what happened to that goal? People expected a medical facility. It seems as though there is a prejudice against medical.
- What is the cost per town per school child?
- How many floors can we add to existing buildings? Limit the height to 5 stories, unless you put residential on top of something else.
- Can the north wing be used as assisted living?
- We must make sure that the mixed uses are cost effective.
- It's difficult to give uses with what we know now. We need more information about the costs involved for specific different alternatives to evaluate land use combinations.
- This plan should promote the needs and desires of the community. If a developer won't be interested in our design, why bother to develop a plan?
- The current site has a lot of parking spaces. Why do we need more? What about parking putting parking underground to save space on the site?
- Will there be additional roads to the site? There are concerns about how bad weather may impact the roads, and additional traffic into the neighborhoods. The Plan should account for these impacts.
- The site plan should include a restaurant in the overlook Vista Park (*two similar suggestions*).

- The Summer Street section is suitable for a recreation/community center, with multifamily housing in other areas on the site. A significant proportion should include affordable housing. The site should include development of offices and luxury homes on the top of the hill to subsidize public uses at the bottom along Summer Street.
- The Summer Street section should house a Columbarium with walking trails connecting to open spaces at the top. Or, the Summer Street frontage should be maintained as existing open space.
- Efforts should be made to maintain a public buffer which includes an overlook (tower idea). *A show of hands indicated that 50% agreed with the overlook idea.*
- A strong concern about density. There should not be any 20-story buildings.
- There definitely should be a Community Center with aquatic, general meeting space and a center for young families all supported by membership fees. There should also be an intergenerational mix. Mixing this type of a center with housing could create a good neighborhood setting.
- There is a need for more industry to offset taxes for public uses.
- Market rate housing and commercial development is needed to balance funding for public uses.
- Medical uses are not essential at Symmes, and may be more suitable elsewhere. The market is not there, as evidence by the lack of current occupants.
- When does the plan need to be revenue neutral?
- An alternative should include development of the Overlook, with a parking garage, high-end condominiums, and a restaurant. The top of the hill should be developed for housing. The Summer Street area should feature the Columbarium/walking trails. The Ridge area would be suitable for a Community center.
- The photos shown at the last workshop, with the Tuscan hillsides as model show that density and development could be accommodated given the current topography. One should also look at Spinnaker Island in Hull as an example of how residential densities could be accommodated.
- The voters approved on Board of Selectmen's mandate, and we need a plan that incorporates all of the uses, regardless of the costs.

- With regard to reuse of the existing buildings, we should do whatever is financially feasible.
- It should be noted that the Town purchased the property to protect the site and avoid potential 40B development that could have come from a private developer. The intent of this plan is to provide something that the Town can control.
- Can we keep the existing buildings and have it be fiscally viable?
- The site plan should provide services used daily to support 100-200 units housing units, such as dry cleaning, day care, convenience stores, café, and newsstand. This would help to decrease traffic, including providing services within a walkable distance from existing residential uses.
- The School at St. James Church (3-14 age group, primarily with autism) is looking for 20-30K square foot, and would like to be considered as part of the Symmes site.
- Keep woods as they are on Summer Street, they are a good buffer zone. Efforts should be made to promote additional access to the site to come from the hill, not from Summer Street.
- The site plan should make a statement about what is important to our town - and support our kids, seniors, and a diverse community.

RED GROUP**Facilitator: Carol Lurie**

- Possible uses should include a multi-use conference center, which can generate income. The community center should serve underserved needs in Arlington.
- Is housing a required land use?
- Medical uses should be included as part of the final plan, with symbiotic land uses around the medical uses. Efforts should be made to maintain the existing medical offices already in place with long-term leases.
- The presence of rock and ledge on the site will make it difficult to develop, but it provides opportunities for higher density.
- Abutters are concerned about additional residential uses and increased density.
- Other uses can also create traffic problems.
- Supportive that 50% of the space should remain as open space. Different types of open space should be considered. Contiguous open space is more valuable than connected open spaces.
- Non-profit uses can attract grants to cover development and operating costs. This would help offset negative financial impacts.
- Consider working with a coalition to build multi-use community center, that can include a theater and exhibition space.
- Consider senior housing that will then use the community center and be close to existing doctors offices.
- Encourage a mixture of residential types. Group is willing to consider higher density residential (3-4 stories/clustered) as long it is set back from the road and “nestled” into the hill
- Medical and office uses – i.e. laboratories, diagnostic.
- Life care facility – can support/use medical services.
- Restaurant. Good location would be on scenic overlook area
- Density is difficult to conceptualize, there will be different impacts on different sections of site. Increased density will impact traffic.

- Gorgeous/prominent buildings – can take advantage of views and be accessible to the public. The “scenic overlook” should be reserved for public uses.
- The primary access to the site should be off Summer Street to mitigate impacts to surrounding residential neighborhoods.
- Cemetery Commission needs a ‘house’ for ashes, which can possibly generate revenue.
- Concern of corporate headquarters, as it is not appropriate for the site. The site is also not likely to be attractive to CEOs.
- Concern that small businesses are subject to economic downturns.
- Offices supported by other uses on site would be feasible.
- Mandate for 15% affordable of any housing built. [correction – this should be 25%]
- Summer Street abutters do not want Summer Street to turn into a commercial strip with the associated traffic impacts.
- There is a need for an event center with an operating kitchen in Arlington
- An emergency room is not feasible, but it could be possible to house 12-hour urgent care.
- Support for office uses that are flexible office space and readily adaptable to a changing market.
- Overlook space is valuable.
- Need incentives to keep medical tenants. There is solid incoming rent right now.