

# MEMORANDUM



To: Planning Board  
From: Philip Hervey, AICP, Town Manager  
Subject: 25 Watson Avenue Concept Review by Planning Board  
Date: April 4, 2023

This memorandum forwards additional information on the Proposed Concept Plan developed by Union Studio in response to the Town's charge to redesign the 25 Watson Avenue site based on two scenarios I presented to the Town Council, which subsequently forwarded them to the Planning Board for review. At the end of this memo, I provide a recommended action for the Board to consider.

## **What is the reasoning behind the concepts presented to the Planning Board?**

The June 2021 Financial Town Meeting (FTM) vote took place without a firm plan for the property. The title of the resolution stated that the financing was for "preservation" of the monastery. It was clarified by the solicitor to mean the building could be renovated/alterd, but not torn down. It was presented by the Town to voters at the FTM as an opportunity for "senior housing" and "affordable housing." Therefore, voters approved the purchase (albeit by a single vote) with the Town stating its intention to develop housing at the site.

The public process, guided by a professional consultant team hired by the Town, produced sketches showing floor plans with 24 (rental) apartments within the existing building, and the potential to expand the building to bring the total to up to 44 apartments. Other concepts included converting the monastery to housing without an addition and building additional senior housing (cottages) on the site – scenarios that totaled up to 38 units.

The Town's financial feasibility report, however, concluded that converting the building to residential would be cost-prohibitive based on the high cost of the extensive amount of construction required, which would exceed the projected income from renting the apartments. A developer would not be interested in creating housing within the building since it would fail to produce sufficient return on investment (in this case, lose money). It would require a substantial amount of additional funding (Town and/or other sources) to make repurposing the building "pencil out."

Since the building is not economically viable for housing, new plans are needed if the Town is to achieve the FTM objectives - senior housing and affordable housing.

## **Why "pocket neighborhood" cottages? Are that many needed?**

The pocket neighborhood concept is a financially feasible alternative to multifamily senior housing. The number of "cottages" in the various new concept plans from Union Studio is consistent with the number of units that could've fit in the monastery building, as contemplated by the Ad Hoc Committee.

Unlike the apartments that could fit in the monastery (which is not a financially feasible option), the pocket neighborhood units would all be for-sale. Further, the units are more consistent with the single-family housing in the surrounding neighborhood, compared to a large multifamily building and associated parking (more than 50 spaces).

The pocket neighborhood concept is conducive to senior housing for multiple reasons:

- The site would be maintained by a homeowners association, as opposed to individual homeowners
- The units could be age-restricted through deed restrictions
- The unit types are adaptable such that they feature a primary bedroom and bath on the first floor
- The common green areas encourage socialization

The proximity of the senior housing to non- age-restricted housing creates a multigenerational community, which is what market studies state older people want (as opposed to living in an area with people of all the same age range).

The pocket neighborhood does require a certain number of units to offset the infrastructure costs (roads, drainage, street trees, landscaping, other public improvements), as well as ongoing maintenance of open spaces, if the development is to be self-sustaining and not burden the Town with additional operating and capital budget expenses.

### **Is R40 or R25 a viable option?**

Maintaining the existing R40 housing, or rezoning to R25, would result in all single-family housing across the 7-acre property. That is an outcome that could have resulted without the Town purchasing the property for “senior” and “affordable” housing. R40 or R25 zoning would trigger inclusionary zoning requirements of at least 20% affordable units. R40 would produce nine lots just 2 affordable units, while R25 would result in 15 lots including 3 affordable units.

Simply rezoning the property would not achieve objectives articulated by the Town at the 2021 FTM or, though not a complete consensus, be reflective of the Ad Hoc planning process. The R40 and R25 zoning scenarios would result in:

- No senior housing
- Few affordable housing units
- No public open space
- No trail connectivity for the neighborhood or community
- No on-site parking for public access
- The Town would not be able to require higher development standards through developer guidance - such as traditional architectural features (porches, for example) or designing the housing for solar access (as well as requiring solar panels on every unit)

### **What are the pros and cons of tearing down the building and creating an open space lot?**

Creating a new open space parcel may or may not preserve the property intact after the building is removed. The question for the community would be what should be done with the open space lot? A 7-acre park? Conservation land? Athletic fields with parking? A new recreation center/fieldhouse? A cemetery? The traffic impacts would vary significantly depending on the outcome. The amount of additional investment by the Town would also depend on the open space use.

An open space parcel would not achieve the objectives of the FTM - purchasing the property for “senior” and “affordable” housing.

This would also produce no income – from the sale of the property or future tax revenues – to the Town that otherwise would be result from the sale of the property to a developer under any of the housing scenarios. The Town paid \$3.2 million for the property and has spent approximately \$150,000 in addition to the purchase to evaluate options through the Ad Hoc planning process and pay for ongoing costs such as heating and electricity, and security.

By repurposing the property as open space only, the Town would be foregoing all potential tax base that would result from any of the housing scenarios. This equates to approximately \$2,000 per \$100,000 in assessed value per unit per year. The lack of tax base means existing taxpayers would have to continue to pay debt service on the purchase for years to come, cover the cost to demolish the building, improve the open space (whether a passive park or recreational facility), and maintain the property.

### **What options would reduce the number of units?**

The Union Studio “Proposed Concept Plan” presented on March 28th depicts 36 units (22 cottages, and 14 single-family houses) includes about 2 acres of community open space. The unit count is within the range contemplated in the financial feasibility study that resulted from the 25 Watson Avenue Ad Hoc Committee process.

One of the major features in the Proposed Concept Plan presented by Union Studio is preservation of approximately 2 acres of open space to the south of the building. Doing so reduces the amount of land available for development of housing, including senior housing. The concept of cottages, as described earlier in this memo, is a good model to produce senior housing, as residents would have less land to maintain, and the smaller cottage units allow for downsizing.

An option that could reduce the number of units required to create a viable development project is the utilization of frontage of Watson and Freemont to create larger single-family lots, along with a mix of smaller lots with cottage-style housing. Smaller cottage-style houses on smaller lots, or on one larger lot, would allow for senior units to be incorporated in the plan, as well as meet the 20% affordable on site. Due to the depth of the 25 Watson parcel, these “senior” units could be set back from both streets facing a small public park. This would allow for the creation of a public amenity on the site, albeit not as large as the open space on the Concept Plan presented on March 28.

Bottom line: With the mix of house lots utilizing existing streets – which is how a conventional R40 or R25 subdivision would be laid out on the site – the overall unit count could be reduced.

This also provides the opportunity to eliminate or greatly reduce the need for interior roadways, including a new road extending from Watson through to Freemont. As a result, the development cost would be reduced, as well as the impact on the land.

I recommend directing Union Studio to develop a **new** concept as an alternative to the Land Plan Scenarios presented to the Planning Board (Land Use Plans 1 and 2), as described below.

### ***Recommendation: New Concept Plan***

I recommend charging Union Studio with developing a revised concept plan for review at the Wednesday, April 26th Planning Board meeting that includes (see next page):

1. A maximum of 24 total housing units
2. A mix of single-family lot sizes on Watson and Freemont
3. Senior housing units (approximately 10 to 14 total) with floorplans that feature first-floor primary bedrooms and baths
4. Dedicated public open space
5. No through street from Watson to Freemont

**What are options for developing Developer Guidance / Comprehensive Plan Amendments for the property?**

The Ad Hoc Committee did not vote on a recommended unit count for the property, though it did vote (11 for, 4 against) in support of a motion at the 2022 FTM to ask voters to allow the option to tear down the monastery building for future use of the site. The vote at the FTM failed by voice vote. Since the 2022 FTM, the Town has received the final financial feasibility report that concluded saving the building is not financially feasible.

The Committee did reach consensus on two specific objectives – protection of a portion of the site as open space and the inclusion of sustainability features.

The Developer Guidance in the Comprehensive Plan provides the basis for the future rezoning of property, as zoning must be consistent with the Comprehensive Plan. One of the tasks of the Planning Board related to 25 Watson will be framing and recommending the developer guidance for adoption into the Comprehensive Plan by Town Council. A rough draft of potential Developer Guidance has been shared with the Planning Board at a previous meeting.

Table 2 on the following page is provided for the Planning Board's consideration to help further the discussion of Developer Guidance, framed by the Major Themes of the Comprehensive Plan and the areas of consensus of the Ad Hoc Committee (open space and sustainability).

**Table 2 - Achieving Comprehensive Plan Themes**

Based on Recommended Scenario of 24 Maximum Units

Comprehensive Plan – Major Theme	Options - Developer Guidance	Notes
<b>Meeting the needs of an aging population</b>	Require percentage of units to be age-restricted (age 55+) senior housing units	The larger single-family lots in the plan would not be suitable for senior housing. The Town’s minimum affordable housing percentage for all proposed development of 3+ units) is 20% of the total. 24 units = 5 affordable units.
<b>Strengthening connectivity</b>	Require inclusion of public space/park, potential path connection(s) through site	A walking path would connect units on the Freemont side with the neighborhood
<b>Embracing a cleaner, greener future through sustainable practices</b>	Require units to be designed for solar access, best practices for stormwater management (bioswales, etc.), site houses and driveways to minimize tree loss, require tree planting to offset loss of trees of certain size, etc.	Potential to include in the Developer RFP requirements that “raise the bar” such as achieving a Net Zero energy standard, other sustainability practices
<b>Conserve and protect the special qualities of Barrington’s neighborhoods</b>	Require units to incorporate architectural features consistent with traditional architecture found within the neighborhood (porches, roof pitch)	Require building elevation sketches in Developer RFP
<b>Achieving resilience in the face of a changing environment</b>	Require underground utilities, .... See also <i>Embracing Cleaner, Greener Future theme</i> .	The parcel is outside flood zone at elevations of 30 to 45 feet, making it much less vulnerable to climate impacts compared to low-lying areas in town.