

Brenda and Ed Owre
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Burlington, Vt. 05401

Burlington Development Board Hearing
Re: 66-96 Colchester Avenue
March 8th, 2017

COLCHESTER AVENUE HOUSING:
Scale It Down, Improve Its Long Term Impact!

The historic residential neighborhood of Fletcher Place (six homes on Vermont's historic register)/Colchester Avenue and its unique surrounding mix of institutional and professional buildings, Queen Anne and earlier style homes, open space, and city forest, are jeopardized by the current proposal. To revitalize and integrate the older neighborhood with new development, to improve environmental impact, to maintain accessible green space for new residents, to fit into the larger character of the university/ and the north-of-Colchester Hill Section, the proposed project needs a smaller footprint and fewer units.

Three Big Problems with the current plan:

I)

Oversized and Out of Scale, Unbroken Massing, too close to single-family Residential Back Yards, Insensitive non-integrated Design. Proposed flat roofed buildings (with mechanicals, elevator tower, solar array, roof deck), with long unbroken facades rising from initially built-up elevations, looming too close and too high over our backyards and second storey windows. A visual insult, minimized and set back perhaps from Colchester Avenue non-residential homes, but not from our backyards on Fletcher Place. The proposed design entirely disregards the "Queen Anne" styles of the adjacent houses, yet it is not compensatorily or innovatively "modern"... but rather "commercial" and serviceable at best-- fitting the most bodies into the smallest space. In short, it's too close to our houses and to a precipitous ravine, and too big for the available buildable space.

II)

The proposed and very large Density Increase overwhelms infrastructure, jeopardizing neighborhood identity. Despite the applicant's assessment, traffic and parking are already difficult problems. The current light backs up traffic on Colchester Ave. often making access on to or out from Fletcher Place difficult and

dangerous. And Fletcher Place serves two child-care facilities: fire and rescue could be further impacted—also potential access into hospital emergency. Privacy and noise will also be a problem, with roof top socializing, and with cars coming in and out during late hours—not a problem for daytime Colchester offices perhaps, but a big problem for Fletcher Place residences, especially at night. (There is no onsite management or supervision proposed for either building.) And proposed outdoor recreational green space for the multiple residents of 75 more units is minimal...mostly taken up as it is by parking, or storm water discharge.

And it's not just Fletcher Place, but the wider area comprising the northern sections of the hospital, the university campus and Fleming museum, Mater Christie and the Sisters of Mercy Property, the Trinity Campus, the professional buildings and the older homes integrated throughout: what's characteristic and special about this successfully mixed neighborhood is the interspersal of open space: lawns, playing fields, grassy pathways, the large heavily wooded watershed down to the Winooski. In other words, breathing room in the midst of the city. The current proposal breaks the spirit and character of this larger neighborhood by trying to jam too much into too small a space.

Neither the hospital nor the university (for whom the zoning designation "institutional" was meant to serve) would actually press so close against a residential neighborhood with such large buildings. It's likely they would observe a more respectful distance and set back and reserve some additional green space for their own residents. The city too should value the special character of the institutional zone, and not support a density more suitable for downtown.

III)

Significant increase in water discharge and topological stability will endanger the Class II wetland and could cause subsidence and damage to our properties on Fletcher Place. The project proposes to build the north building right up to the very rim of a steep ravine underlain by very unstable soils. But significant subsidence and erosion are already problems in our back yards.

Also excessive coverage of the usable land necessitates a waiver from usual storm water management practices, which normally require direct groundwater recharge. We, the residents of Fletcher Place, unfairly bear the brunt of this potential waiver: the developer proposes "an extended detention permanent wetland pool" crowded right up to our back yards. This "pool" would be permanently filled with street runoff, will breed mosquitoes, and will potentially require a commercial high fence for liability. There is no room left for even the planting of trees which might screen us from that unwelcome "neighbor." (Incidentally, the currently existing screen of mature hemlocks, which we planted decades ago, will surely have to be eliminated—despite the symbols on the plan.)

Yet more unsettling, the plan calls for the deep retention pool perched atop the steep ravine—a potentially unsafe location. Geo webbing may hold it near term, but what about the ten-year or even hundred-year flood? Our properties could be severely damaged in the event of erosion or failure. Such a location with little or no setback from adjacent properties suggests again that the plan is trying to fit in too much.

Additional Comments:

For five years, we and/or our neighbors on Fletcher Place have attended every one of the numerous meetings and hearings connected with this project. For five years, we have cited our concerns about the project's impact on our neighborhood and our individual properties. Yet for five years, these concerns have led to no material accommodation or adjustment of the project. In fact, the project has only grown larger, and with the addition of the retention pond right up to our property lines, it is now more intrusive and disturbing than ever.

We understand that at some point in the past, Fletcher Place was swept into the “institutional” zone (although we also understand that such a designation may have been inadvertent, and that we more properly and accurately should be designated as “residential” along with similar streets such as Nash Place.) Unfortunately in this case, the “institutional” designation allows the developer to count as saving “green space” the very steep land that is clearly non-developable under any circumstances. Through that loophole, he is now requesting to crowd onto the only small flat usable land available, two very large buildings, parking lots, entry drives, water recharge facilities, snow storage, etc., all of these features having an outsized and deleterious effect on our small neighborhood.

The applicant has not yet purchased the additional land in the ravine that could technically allow him to build so many units on so small and tight a space. Rather he maintains an option to do so. But nothing compels him to do so. He could go ahead with the property he currently owns, and create a wonderful and welcome infill project.

There is a resolution to the problems expressed here, a win-win solution for the developer, for the neighborhood, for the environment, and for the city's need for more housing. That solution is to significantly scale back the project, perhaps to somewhere around half its proposed size and half its number of proposed units. Such a size would still add a significant number of units and beds, and yes without crowding, it could potentially enhance and enliven the existing neighborhood. It might comprise one or more buildings, but certainly it would preserve more “breathing room” and crowd its residential neighbors less—and it would allow for storm water recharge without a detention pond. Though we might prefer yet more

intimate in-fill housing to a scale and design that actually fits our neighborhood, the solution posed here would serve all interests well.

And most importantly, a somewhat scaled back project would serve the greater long-term goals of the city: new development and reasonable growth while respecting and sensitively integrating that growth with existing and historic neighborhoods such as ours. Fletcher Place is over a hundred years old. We have lived on the street for nearly half that time. We have been lucky to live in a close-knit neighborhood, with both green space and the amenities of first class institutions, and of a great city, close at hand. Please consider the values of preserving and enhancing such a neighborhood for the future when you make your decisions. After five years, we especially appreciate your thoughtful consideration.

Thank you,

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