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Dorchester Reporter

Foes of Hyde Park 'apartment community' put their focus on the environment

By Katie Trojano, Reporter Staff
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Developers hoping to build a 270-unit residential “apartment community” on what is currently a vacant site at 990 American Legion Highway in Hyde Park were met with criticism from neighborhood association members, abutters, and labor union workers on Monday during a virtual public meeting hosted by the Boston Planning and Development Agency (BPDA.)

During the meeting, which lasted longer than two and a half hours and drew 174 attendees, the proponent, MQMF Hyde Park LLC, an affiliate of Lincoln Property Company, detailed plans filed with the city in March to construct nine three-story buildings, an amenity “clubhouse” structure with a pool, and 415 on-site parking spaces.

The team wants to transform the property, which includes a quarry site, tree canopy, and rock ledge, into a residential “garden-style” community and maintain a natural landscape buffer along the adjoining stretch of the American Legion Highway. The site is adjacent to a shopping center and a residential neighborhood.

Plans also call for a pedestrian walkway and trail system throughout the property, an enhanced “planted area” or green space and a lawn, a main entry drive, a playground, an outdoor meeting space, a dog park, and a playing field.

John Noone, executive vice president at Lincoln Property, presented an overview of the project, saying the team is “at the beginning of the review process” with goals of “addressing everything we can and hopefully earn community wide support for our workforce development housing.”

The makeup of the residential units would offer a mix of one- and two-bedrooms, and of the total 270 apartments, 35 would be reserved as income-restricted or “affordable,” at 70 percent Area Median Income (AMI) per the city’s Inclusionary Development Policy (IDP.)

During the Q&A session, an overwhelming amount of the input from attendees centered on a few points: that eliminating the tree canopy would be an “environmental injustice”; ensuring local labor unions and diversity in contracting; and concerns over an insufficient amount of affordable units.

According to Noone, the team contracted an arborist in June to conduct a study of the site and existing tree coverage. Using 10 inches in diameter or more as the threshold, the specialist found that there were only 135 “large” or “mature” trees on the property.

“We feel that the best way to enhance the long-term viability of the area of the site that we’re not building on is by planting native species of trees and plants, bringing new topsoil, and allowing the trees and fauna to grow in a productive way in the next 20 to 30 years,” said Noone.

More than a dozen attendees opposed the project, saying they want “100 percent conservation of the land.”

Lakita Jackson, a Hyde Park resident, branded “clear cutting” the site’s tree canopy as “climate injustice,” and called for independent review of all studies. “It’s a thoughtful plan,” she said, “but we feel that it is the wrong place for it,” said Jackson.

Another resident, Nathaniel Thomas, asked BPDA officials to consider “what is going to be done for all BPDA projects going forward to prevent inherent biases performed by consultants of developers? They are seen as mitigation although they are vendors trying to appeal to their client,” said Johnson.

“There is a greater need for publicly overseen, third-party independent and unbiased mitigation assessments for all projects impacting people in the city.”

Dana Whiteside, deputy director of community economic development at the BPDA, said the agency considers public comment in assembling scoping determinations that are issued to developers, and often requires additional independent studies when the public calls for them.

Meghan Doran of Hyde Park voiced concerns over a lack of units that could accommodate families and said the proposal didn’t go far enough to provide adequate affordable housing for working class Bostonians.

Noone replied that the unit mix has not been finalized and expects that it could change as the review process continues.

Several attendees, including John Cody, a labor management representative and Sheet Metal Workers Local 17 member, aired concerns with Lincoln Property Company's contracting process on past projects, specifically their most recent project at 1545-1555 VFW Parkway.

"I was at the meeting in 2018 and Lincoln made promises to the general contractor and the community. Those promises were not kept and ultimately Lincoln chose Callahan Construction, which has no Boston residents, women, or minorities on the job," said Cody.

Earlier in the meeting, Noone said that the development team "completed an extensive community review process" for the 1545-1555 VFW Parkway project and "worked with families at the nearby trailer park who were a direct abutter," but he responded "no comment" to questions from attendees about the contracting process.

State Rep. Russell Holmes, who attended the virtual meeting, urged BPDA officials to look at developers' performance numbers in their review process.

"How they perform against the RJP (Resident Jobs Policy) is very important to me," he said.

An IAG (Impact Advisory Committee) meeting is scheduled for 990 American Legion Highway on Wed. July 28. The BPDA's public comment period for this project is now open, but scheduled to end on Aug. 27. Comments and feedback can be submitted online at bostonplans.org.

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