

Committee denounces Hancock Village expansion plans for South Brookline

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Brookline — A developer's \$100 million expansion plans for Hancock Village hit a snag last week after a Brookline committee produced a draft report criticizing the proposal.

The developer, Chestnut Hill Realty, had been looking for community support for contentious plans to add hundreds of apartments to Hancock Village, which is located in South Brookline. In 2009, the Hancock Village Planning Committee was formed to try and find common ground between neighbors, the town and CHR.

"While the Committee was willing to entertain zoning changes in order to accommodate a smarter design that met the Town's and neighborhood's concerns, CHR has not presented any plans that satisfy those concerns," the committee concluded in the draft, which they discussed at their June 23 meeting. "Consequently, the Committee cannot support the proposals that CHR has put forward."

But representatives for the developer disparaged the report in a written statement earlier in the day.

"Chestnut Hill Realty disagrees with many of the conclusions," wrote Joe Geller. "Many of the conclusions are not based on facts and some misrepresent information presented by Chestnut Hill Realty."

A spokesperson for CHR refused to identify which facts or information they were referring to.

"We're not going to do tit for tat," said Margaret Murphy. "There's so sense in doing that."

As proposed, the CHR expansion project would have added 466 units to Hancock Village. The most recent iteration of the plan included adding 260 units for residents 55 and older, 172 one-bedroom units and 48 two-bedroom units. As part of the project, 14 current units of Hancock Village would be torn down and rebuilt, resulting in 480 new units total. The project would have required town meeting to approve a series of zoning changes.

Built in 1946, Hancock Village borders Beverly and Russett roads, and has a present total of 789 units. Of those units, 530 reside on the property's 50 acres in Brookline.

Selectmen Nancy Daly, who chaired the planning committee, cited additional pressure on already overcrowded schools and preserving open space as a few of the reasons the committee decided not to support CHR's proposal.

"There still seems to be quite a wide gulf between what neighbors want, what the town wants, and what Chestnut Hill Realty wants," Daly said. "Ultimately there doesn't seem to be a lot of support for any kind of zoning change."

In the draft report the committee worried that some of the hundreds of new apartments would bring additional children to Brookline, increasing pressure on the nearby Baker School. Those worries persisted even as the developer insisted that that most of the new units would be senior housing. A few months ago the committee and the developer released dueling reports on how many children the development would bring to the area.

Another sticking point was the development's potential impact on open space in the neighborhood. CHR's proposal called for much of the construction to take place on currently undeveloped land west of Beverly and Russet roads.

With their report the committee issued a strong signal that that CHR's proposal will not receive community support in its current form. With that in mind CHR said in their statement that they will present new plans over the next year.

Though CHR would not say exactly what those plans might look like, Daly said she suspects they will try to go through the special permitting process, which does not require Town Meeting approval. However, there is some disagreement between the committee and the developer about how much of the project could be allowed through special permitting.

"The standard for special permits is whether it has a negative impact on the neighborhood and obviously chestnut hill think it's a lot less negative than the neighbors do," Daly said. "Possibly they could get some part of what they are looking for out of that."

But even if CHR chooses to circumvent Town Meeting they will likely face a protracted battle with neighbors.

"Oh I think they will," Daly said. "Many neighbors are going to be opposing expansion even if they go for some kind of expansion through the special permit process."

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