

Town of Milton – December 2, 2005

1. INTRODUCTION

The Boston District Council of the Urban Land Institute (ULI) originally studied the Central Avenue Business District (CABD) of the Town of Milton as a subject of their Technical Assistance Program (TAP) in July of 2003.

At that time, the ULI's recommendations were to consider mixed-use zoning options, revise the zoning of the area, hire a town planner and form an implementation committee. A town planner has been hired and the Town has been discussing possible zoning changes.

A new ULI TAP panel revisited the Town of Milton on December 2, 2005 for a second day-long workshop. The panel again concentrated upon the revitalization of the CABD, which is located at the intersection of Central Avenue and Eliot Street. While the ownership of parcels in this area is divided among the Mass Bay Transit Authority (MBTA), private entities and the Town of Milton, there is enthusiastic support from the Town to work with these owners in order to develop a win-win solution which supports and encourages new mixed-use development that will strengthen the Town's commercial base, provide new retail establishments for the community and provide a sense of place for the area. The Town's support and accomplishment of such a goal will manifest itself through an amendment or overlay of the existing zoning by-laws.

This is the written report of the panel's findings and recommendations for Milton's CABD.

1.1 Subject Area

The Milton ULI TAP panel studied the CABD, with particular focus on three sites 1.) 131 Eliot Street, 2.) 93-95 Eliot Street, and 3.) 36 Central Avenue.

1.2 Objectives

The Town and the ULI TAP panel both recognized that a main problem of the district is lack of a focal point; no "there" there. This is the result of a large amount of fast traffic and the absence of landscape treatments or architecturally significant structures at the intersection.

The Town's goal is to transform the existing commercial core in the CABD into a "destination location"; a community focal point. The Town indicated a number of specific objectives to the ULI panelists. In brief, these were:

1. Consider measures to revitalize the CABD through multi-use development
2. Consider measures to create commercial development opportunities that would increase the tax base for the area
3. Recommend measures to improve the streetscape of the CABD
4. Recommend measures to add amenities which serve the community
5. Ensure the preservation of the existing architectural heritage and character of the area
6. Capitalize upon the existing amenities, such as the multi-use bike path, the MBTA trolley stop and the Neponset River

2.0 ULI BOSTON PANEL OF EXPERTS

ULI Boston selected a panel, with a wide range of real estate expertise, in diverse areas such as planning, urban design development, marketing and finance.

The Panelists were:

Panel Chair: Charles Tseckares, Principal - CBT/Childs Bertman Tseckares, Inc.

David MacKay, Project Manager - Weston Associates

Evelyn Friedman, Executive Director - Nuestra Comunidad

Geoffrey Grout, CEO - Quonsat Development Corp.

Kishore Varanasi, Urban Designer – CBT/Childs Bertman Tseckares, Inc.

Matt Adams, Assistant VP – Key Bank Real Estate Capitol

Michael Salguero, Development Analyst - JPI

Paul Ferreira, Managing Director – Blue Hawk Investment

Robert Karn, Sr. Associate – Shepley Bulfinch Richardson & Abbott

Tim McGourthy, Director of Policy – Boston Redevelopment Authority

Alexa Arena, Student - Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University

3.0 SITE TOUR

The TAP started with a site tour which took the panel to The Landing, a recently completed 6-story, 73-unit condominium project in the Lower Mills area abutting a MBTA trolley stop, a multi-purpose bike path, a yacht club and a boat storage area overlooking the Neponset River, where boats are moored in the summer. It is expected that this development will provide the community with an estimated 1% of the overall annual tax revenue. (\$600,000 of the Town's \$62 million annual budget)

3.1 131 Eliot Street

131 Eliot Street is zoned for residential. Home of the former Hendries Ice Cream building, the site measures approximately 42,000 SF and is located on the corner of Central Avenue and Eliot Street – highly visible to the rest of the CABD. An MBTA trolley stop is located directly behind the building – its northern side, which also overlooks the Neponset River. This is also the terminus of a multi-purpose bike path. The building has been unoccupied since Hendries ceased operations over twelve years ago.

The ownership of this land is presently fractured. A private developer owns a parcel of approximately 35,000 SF which abuts a 7,000 SF parcel. This proposed development includes the remaining 7,000 SF parcel owned by the Town of Milton, which was purchased from the MBTA two years ago. We also understand one parcel is zoned commercial and the other residential. We assumed both parcels as one of 42,000 SF.

The Hendries building housed an ice cream café and terrace, which was used as a community area for enjoying ice cream, hotdogs and socializing. The Town of Milton is evaluating this proposal to determine the appropriate uses and density.

The panel also visited the Neponset River, rear of 131 Eliot Street and the dividing line between the Town of Milton and the Dorchester neighborhood of Boston. The panel saw evidence of refuse collecting on both sides of the river.

3.2 93-95 Eliot Street

93-95 Eliot Street is the former site of the Fallon Ambulance Workshop and Garage. Fallon has moved out of the building; the move also released many of the parking spaces in the CABD, formerly used by Fallon employees. The existing building was originally built as a car showroom but had recently served as offices and a maintenance facility for Fallon Ambulance. The available parking on the present site is under the stipulated 4 parking spaces per 1,000 SF.

3.3 36 Central Ave

The tour stopped for an inspection of the 36 Central Avenue site. This is a privately owned site of nearly 23,000 SF, currently used for parking for locally employed individuals and retail customers. The site is zoned for commercial use. The only existing building on this site is a small garage.

A private developer had proposed plans for a three-story retail and office mixed-use development with surface parking three years ago, which had been preliminarily supported by the Town Planning Board. A bank had shown interest in a drive-thru operation under the proposed plans. More recently, the owner proposed a three and one half-story residential building of approximately 30,000 SF and 16 units including 7,000 SF of ground floor retail and associated parking.

4.0 COMMUNITY CONCERNS

4.1 131 Eliot:

The panel found that the community was concerned with the amount of traffic and parking demand the development would generate. They worried that local amenities and services, such as schools, would be overburdened. There was also concern about how a new residential development might address the issue of affordable housing.

4.2 Commercial –vs- Residential:

Residents expressed that the Town lacks space for retail business operations. They listed a sit-down restaurant, a bike store/rental shop, a florist, a fish market and a gourmet take-out food as amenities that they would like to see in the area. The community saw 131 Eliot Street as an opportunity for a mixed-use development, including retail and residential.

4.3 Taxes:

One of the community's strongest concerns was increasing the Town's tax base. Milton is primarily a residential community, with few developable sites available that could feasibly support substantial commercial development, and thus, reduce the residential tax burden.

4.4 Town Appearance:

Residents also mentioned that while they appreciated and needed the services of the dry cleaner and auto repair shop, currently located on Eliot Street opposite the abandoned Hendries Building, successfully relocating these businesses would benefit the revitalization of the subject area.

4.5 Parking

With the development of 36 Central Avenue, the Town will lose a substantial number of off-street parking. With the Fallon move, a substantial number of employees will not be using many on street parking spaces, releasing them for Town use. Concerns on both sides of this issue were expressed.

5.0 ULI BOSTON OVERVIEW OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Following a working session to consider all of the concerns, proposals and facts regarding the CABD, the ULI TAP presented the following observations to a group of approximately 70 town residents, leaders, and local business owners.

5.1 ULI Boston Observations of Central Avenue Business District

- The CABD is a small neighborhood business district, mostly of daytime use with particular focus on commuter hours between 7:30 – 9:30am and 4:30 – 7:00pm.
- The area lacks a strong focal point – a place for constituents to gather or make a destination – a center that bestows Milton with a stronger identity. Despite the current businesses available – pizzeria, café, dry cleaners, hairdressers, wine shop, sandwich shop, auto repair – the area provides limited enticements to prolong a visit – it is more conducive to short-term parking to pick up items or drop off repairs.
- The area lacks a strong sense of cohesiveness or vision. The appearance of the area could be dramatically enhanced through a few bold but coordinated moves.
- The area needs infrastructure improvements that will rationalize traffic flow, slow cars and enhance the pedestrian environment. The junction of Central Avenue and Eliot Street is, in fact, a haphazard and confusing meeting of five different roads centering in a wide-open blacktop area. Walkways for pedestrian crossings are located away from true pedestrian crossings, therefore not being well used.
- The residents and the Town are very interested in mixed-use development at each available site.

The site should be developed holistically, rather than parcel by parcel; market the area as a total entity as though it were both a neighborhood and convenience shopping center.

5.2 Commercial v Residential

During the previous TAP in 2003, it was clear the community felt strongly in favor of commercial rather than residential development in the area because of potential tax revenue. The ULI panel explained, at the time, the difficulties of this approach.

By analyzing the current businesses in the CABD it was clear that the majority of demand came from single/sole proprietors. Many of these do not require store windows and street frontage, because they are businesses such as insurance agencies or small law practices that do not rely on foot traffic to survive. Therefore, these uses do not encourage a more active streetscape that would, in turn, support additional storefront retail.

The panel was concerned that if just a few more stores were to be incorporated into the CABD, there would not be enough business from Milton residents alone to sustain these new ventures. A purely commercial facility at 131 Eliot, as many residents then favored, would be a difficult project to finance or market without expanded markets or income from residential development. Therefore, the panel decided there was limited feasibility in creating a fully commercial facility on the 131 Eliot site. Our panel reaffirms this position.

The community currently recognizes this and is more supportive of a residential / commercial mix.

5.3 Recommendations to 131 Eliot Street (Hendries Ice Cream)

All parties realize the importance of the revitalization of the 131 Eliot Street site to the revitalization of the CABD. The location and size of this parcel make it particularly useful to a) the surrounding communities of Dorchester and Milton as a destination location and b) the generation of much needed property tax revenues.

The ULI Boston panel recommends that the Town encourage this development so that it serves as a gateway into the CABD and an obvious commercial center – encouraging community members and visitors to interact.

The panel's critique of the project includes the following:

- The height of the building, facing the intersection, appears tall and somewhat overbearing. We recommend that this façade should be two stories high at the street line and the remaining floors out back. This would provide a more suitable pedestrian scale at the sidewalk.
- The west end of the development has parking visible from the public way and abutting the adjacent property. We recommend reducing the view of parking from the public way and to include a low building mass abutting the next property. This would make the streetscape more “village like”.
- We recommend the retail at the first floor be retained, and up to 48 residential units, including 10 % affordable units, be allowed with required parking, resulting in an FAR of 1.5.

Other benefits include a) the affordable units would count toward the Town's 40B goal and would encourage people from all stages of economic spectrum to live around the transit facility provided by the trolley stop, and b) the retail units would allow opportunities for local entrepreneurs to start businesses and local business owners to expand operations.

5.7 Recommendations to 93-95 Eliot Street (Fallon)

While 93-95 Eliot Street is approximately 28,000SF a portion is conservation land. We recognize the limited building footprint due to the size, the configuration of the site and the fact that the conservation easements must be respected. Also, any new structure on the site would have to accommodate increased parking requirements over the original structure allowance. The panel recommends that residential use with first floor retail be encouraged. As a result of the limited footprint of the building, we also feel retail on the first floor should occur at the sidewalk level only with the rear of the first floor being retained as residential.

We recommend up to 25 residential units be allowed. This would result in a FAR of approximately 1.5.

5.8 Recommendations to 36 Central Avenue

The current proposal for 36 Central Avenue is ambitious, but could be accomplished. Our critique of the building is as follows:

- The height relative to the street seems appropriate.
- The building is articulated in such a way as to make the building appear larger than necessary. We recommend “calming” the building architecturally to appear more benign and relate better to the residential character of Central Avenue.
- Maintain the first floor retail.
- Encourage one curb-cut rather than two, with two-way traffic instead of one-way traffic through the parking lot.
- We recommend up to 16 residential units be allowed, resulting in a FAR of 1.35.

5.9 Town of Milton Commitment

The ULI TAP panel has real concerns over the physical environment of the CABD, because there seems to be no sense of place. This is caused not only by the physical appearance but also because of the traffic speed and large scale of the streets entering it. We feel that this could be rectified by appropriate traffic calming elements and a landscape solution at the intersection of Central Avenue and Eliot Street.

In order for this area to be a success, the Town must make certain infrastructure improvements with contributions from abutting developers, so long as appropriate density levels contribute to an overall feasible development.

According to one local participant, a one million dollar state grant for street improvements has been authorized for the Town. A certain portion should be allocated for road and sidewalk beautification, including street narrowing to calm traffic and landscape improvements, to provide a focal point to the area and public parking.

Special care should be given to the maintenance of the Neponset River bridge and regular clean-ups of both sides of the river.

5.10 Retail Association

For the retail activity, the business owners should consider forming an association to provide leadership and guidance as well as a collective marketing strategy. Activities, such as seasonal decorating, seasonal open house, etc., should be organized.

6.0 IMPLEMENTATION

The ULI TAP panel offers Milton future assistance in terms of professional insight, relationship building, and facilitation. We recommend that the Town not only look at the Milton side of the Neponset, but to consider the impacts of development and activity on

the Dorchester, Lower Mills side of the river to generate cross-fertilizing opportunities. Milton should view the Neponset as a mid-point rather than a boundary.

We also recommend that the Town encourage the MBTA to move the trolley stop to the other side of Eliot Street, which would be open and more visible. Of course, the stop would have to be located in such a way that the train will not impede traffic on Eliot Street. If in the future, the gas station and laundry were to be relocated, a small open space along the waterway could be developed with the trolley stop as a feature. The stop would also be near the 93-95 Eliot Street site.