

Chapel Hill Planning Commission – Comments and Recommendations re: Eastowne Conditional Rezoning

April 2023

This document contains the Planning Commission’s comments and recommendations¹ to the Council concerning UNC Health’s Eastowne conditional rezoning application. It is organized according to the six “complete community” criteria used by the Planning Commission in its feedback on other recent projects. Key recommendations are in bold.

Complete Community Criteria	Comments
Mix of housing unit sizes/configurations that address affordability goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not applicable (commercial space only) • As the Town negotiates specific community benefits, including possibly financial support for affordable housing, it should understand any relevant limitations on permissible rezoning “conditions” under Section 160D and other applicable law (e.g., NC law on permissible “impact fees,” federal law on permissible “exactions”). An initial question is whether negotiated benefits must tie (in nature and amount) to specific impacts the project is expected to generate.
Walkable proximity to several daily needs, such as housing, jobs, schools, recreation. Mixed use buildings encouraged	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eastowne is flanked by existing neighborhoods to the north and west and, to the south, by significant residential projects in the development pipeline. Offices (including medical offices) in close proximity to residences comports with the complete community vision. Some employees who work at Eastowne may choose to live within walking distance. • Members stated that the project will not function consistently with the complete community notion of walkable neighborhoods unless an above- or below-grade crossing is established for 15-501 adjacent to Eastowne. We understand that staff has been exploring this issue and has brought NCDOT into the conversation. We suggest that, before entitlements are granted north or south of 15-501, the Town develop a high-level plan for the crossing and secure any needed financial commitments from applicants. Doing so could become more difficult and costly for the Town after entitlements are granted.

¹ The Planning Commission did not vote on whether to recommend or not recommend the project as a whole. Instead, it voted to provide these detailed comments and recommendations on specific aspects. This represents an intentional shift from past practice.

<p>Abundant greenway and transit connections</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cycling amenities internal to the site seem excellent, e.g., bike paths and lanes, covered bike parking, showers and changing rooms for bike commuters. • Members expressed concerns about cycling connectivity to Blue Hill. A February 2023 MPO presentation describes an extension of the Fordham sidepath between Willow drive and Old Durham Road (STIP ID EB-5998). The project entails construction of multiuse paths along both sides of Fordham Blvd. It is currently in the “project setup” phase, with “project initiation” anticipated in fall 2023. A subsequent discussion with Town Transportation staff revealed that the sidepath extension is already funded and simply awaiting staff bandwidth to initiate the design phase. <p>We urge the Town to consider now, if it has not already, how the project described in the MPO presentation ultimately will connect cyclists to Eastowne. The Eastowne development team, which was not aware of the sidepath extension project, suggested that a tie-in to Dobbins Drive would adequately connect the sidepath project to the site.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Currently the Eastowne site is served by Chapel Hill Transit buses. This existing bus service connects the site to main campus and other locations. The developer has offered to Chapel Hill Transit up to two additional bus stops on the site if desired. • In the future, it is possible that a BRT line along 15-501 will serve this location. It seems too early to gauge the likelihood or timing. • Planning Commission members expressed differing views on whether UNC Health should unbundle the cost of parking, with some members highlighting the need to incentivize alternative transportation and others expressing concern about inequitable impacts on low income patients and employees. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ One approach to implementation, described in the TOD literature, would involve UNC Health offering cash incentives to employees who choose not to use on-site parking. This approach may mitigate equity concerns. • Planning Commission members suggested that any internal wayfinding signage on the site should be in English and Spanish.
<p>Place-making and prioritization of the pedestrian realm</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The site plan broadly resembles a suburban medical campus, which seems inevitable if unexciting. Patients are expected to come from Chapel Hill and the larger region, and convenient parking is part of the medical services model, particularly insofar as sick and/or elderly patients are involved.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Members discussed the potential for public art and other design details to make visitors feel welcome, including those not accustomed to visiting large medical campuses.
Land use efficiency (measured as housing density per acre)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not applicable (commercial space only)
Respect for topography and natural landscapes, including protected natural areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Neither the Planning Commission nor the developer could say for certain whether the future parking garage proposed for the “Northern 20” acres overlaps with the “natural heritage” site. This information should be confirmed. As observed by the Vice Chair, a forest ecologist, old growth forests are valuable natural habitat and do not simply regrow; when they are lost, it is permanent. Chapel Hill has few such areas remaining. At a minimum, the Town should consider a stronger procedural hurdle for the developer to overcome if the developer ultimately decides that it needs the parking structure on the Northern 20. For example, instead of a simple entitlement, the developer could be required to obtain future Town approval based on conditions at the time (i.e., utilization levels of existing parking structures, status of possible BRT, current mode share patterns in Town). Separately, the developer’s proposal to improve stream conditions on the property by facilitating a more natural stream path and restoring flora furthers this criterion.