



June 4, 2021

Ms. Colleen Willger
Director of Planning
405 M.L.K. Jr Blvd
Chapel Hill, NC 27514

Dear Ms. Willger:

We appreciate the extensive efforts and thoughtful consideration of the redevelopment plan for University Place. Ram Realty Advisors ("Ram") has been working collaboratively with the Town of Chapel Hill ("Town") Planning staff since August 2019 regarding the proposed modification to the Special Use Permit ("SUP"). The proposed Design Standards and SUP modification have been created to govern the future redevelopment of the project. We are committed to creating a new "place" that is consistent with the high-quality standards established by the Town and in keeping with the character of the surrounding area, while balancing the complexities associated with redeveloping a 40+ year-old mall (i.e., not a greenfield site).

The design and regulatory work were completed by a team of professionals that are credentialed and experienced with creating sustainable, economically vibrant, well-designed mixed-use environments. We believe the project will be economically successful and a valuable asset to the community.

As part of this process, we have held meetings with six Advisory Boards and had three meetings with the Town Council. This collaborative and iterative process has resulted in several improvements to the project. A summary of the key components of the redevelopment, including modifications made to address specific concerns, is outlined below.

Tree Canopy:

University Place is a 39.5-acre, auto-dominated property with only 13% of the property covered by tree canopy. Under the proposed plan, the canopy coverage will increase to 20%. The design team evaluated all potential areas for new green infrastructure and has developed a plan to plant approximately 250 new trees on the property. This level of commitment to new planting will increase the canopy coverage to the maximum practical tree canopy coverage that can be achieved at this time.

The Town's Land Use Management Ordinance ("LUMO") Section 5.7.2. provides for tree canopy coverage standards of 30% in Multi-Family Residential and Commercial developments. The ordinance allows for modification of the standard and places the "highest priority" on maintenance and replacement of the canopy on-site. The flexibility in these standards is needed for redevelopment projects like University Place where achievement of the 30% standard is not feasible, but maintenance and replacement of the tree canopy is accomplished.

In addition to the benefits associated with the significant improvement in canopy (i.e., 13% increased to 20%), we will evaluate additional tree plantings in future phases and are committed to using best efforts to maintain existing mature trees on site. This will include stringent management practices during construction to preserve the maximum number of existing trees.

Impervious Surface and Stormwater Management:

The proposed redevelopment will increase pervious area on the site by ~1.2 acres, reducing the impervious surface on the entire property from 78% to 75%. While University Place cannot meet the 70%

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target outlined for new developments in the LUMO, the proposed design is compliant with Section 5.4 of the LUMO because the redevelopment results in a net reduction of the impervious area (i.e., ~1.2 acres). These reductions were accomplished through a variety of sustainable design practices, including:

- Reduction in building footprint within the 100-year floodplain.
- Conversion of parking areas to green spaces.
- Addition of green parking islands.
- Enlarged bioretention areas.

The reduction of impervious surface and other improvements will have several positive impacts on water infiltration and flood prevention, including:

- A ~30,000 square foot increase in impervious area treated by green infrastructure.
- A ~37,000 cf increase in flood storage capacity in the 100-year floodplain.
- Additional rainwater capture in tree canopy during small rainfall events.
- Improved downstream water quality and stream health.
- An estimated 8% reduction in peak flow rates for the 10-, 25-, 50-, and 100-year return periods.
- A 2% reduction in peak volume for the 10-year return period and 3% for the 25-, 50-, and 100-year periods.

The stormwater measures proposed are supported by the Town's Stormwater Advisory Board.

Building Height:

The new buildings have been designed to provide appropriate density and integration into the existing improvements while trying to support other sustainable initiatives (e.g., reduced building footprint, use of existing infrastructure). In order to accomplish this objective, the Design Standards for Pod A allow a maximum primary height of 75' at the minimum setback and a maximum absolute height of 90'. The underlying adjacent Community Commercial (CC) zoning district allows a 60' core height, and other nearby mixed-use districts (WX-5 and WX-7) have allowable building heights of 60' and 90', respectively. Fortunately, as a result of existing topography, the proposed multifamily building in Pod A is 59' above grade along Willow Drive at the northern end of the building and 72' at the southern end.

Council has thoughtfully expressed concern about potential impacts to nearby properties, most specifically the Willow Terrace Condominiums. The nearest Willow Terrace condominium building is ~113' across Willow Drive from the corner of the proposed multifamily building. However, this building does not face Willow Drive or the multifamily building. The section of the multifamily building nearest the Willow Terrace building is ~58' above the sidewalk, while the height of the Willow Terrace building is ~24'. However, because the Willow Terrace building is built on a hill, the height differences are mitigated (~28' delta). The design team believes the relatively modest height differences, combined with the significant separation and mature tree canopy, provides an appropriate buffer. A cross section is attached hereto as Exhibit A.

We believe properly scaled mixed-use buildings with well-designed ground level features allows for the creation of a vibrant and walkable place. The Town's Urban Designer has reviewed the approach and considers it consistent with sound planning practices given the nature of the redevelopment.

Setback and Buffer Modifications:

To facilitate a pedestrian friendly and walkable environment, the University Place Design Standards create design criteria for various street frontages found at the property. These criteria encourage generous streetscape elements such as sidewalks, planting strips and amenity areas/tree planting zones.

The Design Standards also create a Build-to-Zone ("BTZ") which provide minimum and maximum buffers beyond the dimensions required in the streetscape criteria.

Along Willow Drive the design criteria call for a minimum 16' buffer area, which includes a 5' minimum sidewalk, a minimum planting strip of 3', as well as a minimum outdoor amenity space/tree planting zone of 8'. The Design Standards require a minimum of 50% of a building's façade be built in the BTZ and that the BTZ have a minimum setback of 0' behind the streetscape buffer and a maximum setback of 20'. Based on the dimensions provided in the design criteria, 50% of the building's façade must be built between a minimum distance of 16' and 36' from the edge of curb. A diagram that shows these criteria has been provided as part of the Design Standards and is attached hereto as Exhibit B.

Comparatively, the CC District requires a 22' setback from the Right of Way (ROW). In order to preserve the mature trees that grow along Willow Drive, we designed the multifamily building to be mainly sited beyond the 22' setback. This approach allows us to maintain the existing mature tree canopy and create a soft landscape edge along the street frontage. Additional screening and landscaping are proposed along the building edge in the form of landscaped paths, public plazas, and garden rooms. The combination of these design elements is intended to create a safe pedestrian environment.

The building setbacks and buffers have been coordinated with the Town's Planning and Transportation staff and reviewed by the Town's Urban Designer, who considers this approach consistent with sound planning practices given the nature of the redevelopment.

Building and Block Lengths:

University Place as it exists today has a defined block layout. The length of the existing block configuration is ~600' between Willow Drive access points. Due to the grade change along Willow Drive and to preserve existing infrastructure (notably including the mature tree canopy), the existing block configuration will remain as-is. However, we have added a residential access point in between the existing curb cuts to align with Conner Drive. In addition, we have proposed significant improvements along Willow Drive to promote walkability including enhanced plantings, improved sidewalks, new crosswalks and a multi-use path. The Town allows for up to 600' block lengths in the Blue Hill Form District if a design alternative "supports connectivity to adjacent properties and supports a walkable public realm consistent with the purpose and intent of Section 3.11.2.1.B". It is important to note that LUMO does not regulate maximum building length.

Our redevelopment of the property will significantly reduce block lengths and improve the overall design. For example, the existing mall structure is over 1,000' long and approximately 370' wide, creating a building perimeter of over 2,760'. The proposed redevelopment will remove approximately 350' in length from the building and shorten the perimeter by almost 700'. The redevelopment of the mall will greatly enhance the walkability of the site.

We firmly believe that the quality of the public experience along Willow Drive, rather than the length of the block, is of utmost importance. For that reason, the multifamily building public space along Willow Drive has been designed to encourage pedestrian activity and link to the new proposed retail storefronts. After the addition of sidewalks and landscaping, the multifamily building will have a 535' frontage along Willow Drive. The building incorporates the Module Offset approach detailed in the Design Standards to create a segmented appearance along Willow Drive. The Design Standards propose a minimum module offset of 12' wide and 6' deep, but the Pod A multifamily building has average offsets of 57' wide and 39' deep. This degree of articulation breaks the façade into 3 separate masses along Willow Drive, preventing the appearance of a singular, long building façade.

Due to the significant grade change on site the Design Standards propose allowing for a design alternative in the form of public outdoor amenity space in lieu of the Pass-Through. Ram believes that providing high-quality public amenity space and creating a series of garden rooms linking the ends of the building is additive to the public environment and a better option than a building Pass-Through. During the May 19th Council meeting, concern was expressed with the overall building length and questions were asked about access along the Willow Drive frontage. The attached Exhibit C shows the location of resident access to the building and public access to the balance of the property. The residents can access the building directly from Willow Drive, while the public will have a better pedestrian experience into the commercial and public spaces by following the enhanced pedestrian paths along the existing access drives. We believe this approach promotes walkability and provides for a safer condition.

The building articulation and pedestrian linkages were reviewed with the Town's Urban Designer, who considers this approach consistent with sound planning practices given the nature of the redevelopment.

Traffic Impacts:

At the May 19th meeting, Council asked about the impact of the redevelopment on the Fordham/Estes and Franklin/Estes intersections. A Transportation Impact Analysis ("TIA") was performed to study the impact on these intersections and others near to the redevelopment area. Although the TIA noted that poor conditions already exist at the Estes/Franklin intersection, improvements are not a requirement of the University Place project; however, several improvements were identified to mitigate the impacts of the University Place redevelopment. One such improvement is that Ram will be required to extend existing northbound dual left turn lanes on Fordham Boulevard at the intersection with S Estes Drive to provide a minimum storage length of 700' each, doubling the storage capacity of each turn lane. This improvement will be made in the first phase of construction.

The Transportation Board, NCDOT and the Town's staff have all reviewed the project and provided several proposed conditions for approval including roadway improvements which must be completed prior to the issuance of a Certificate of Occupancy. Ram has agreed to those conditions.

Additional Enhancements:

We have provided several additional enhancements to the project to address concerns previously raised by Council. We believe these enhancements, all of which will be provided at Ram's sole expense, will further support the Town's goals and improve the nearby community.

- Affordable Housing – Ram has agreed to include either 10% of total residential units at 65% AMI or 15% of all units at 80% AMI, with the Town having the ability to choose which option will be required.
- Chapel Hill Farmer's Market – Ram has designed a Market Pavilion along Willow Drive that would provide a permanent home for the Farmer's Market and other seasonal activities.
- Gateway Sign on Fordham Boulevard – Ram has agreed to withdraw the request for a 24' gateway sign and will adhere to existing regulations governing sign size without modification.
- Utilize Solar Power to Reduce Greenhouse Gas Emissions – Ram has agreed to install a solar array which will power the multifamily building's common areas within Pod A.
- Conversion Rights – Ram has agreed to provide a "lock out period" on multifamily conversion rights so that a building permit for multifamily units utilizing conversion rights cannot be obtained until July 1, 2024 at the earliest. Additionally, Ram has proposed that conversion rights only be available if the project includes at least 375,000 SF of commercial; that all future multifamily be

vertically integrated with ground floor commercial; and conversion rights shall be at the ratio of 1 unit per 800 SF of unused commercial rather than 1 unit per 1,000 SF of unused commercial.

- Single Story Buildings – Ram has agreed that buildings within a portion of Pod C be a minimum 2-story height, including any buildings facing the new Main Street.
- Stormwater – Ram has proposed adding rain gardens and other green infrastructure to increase the drainage area treated by using green infrastructure by approximately 30,000 SF, increasing the total drainage area to approximately 105,000 SF.
- Minority Owned Businesses – Ram has agreed to set aside 20% of the incubator retail spaces within the Pod A multifamily building for minority owned businesses.
- Additional Green Area at Internal Main Street – At the request of Council, Ram has agreed to remove the word “Optional” from the outdoor amenity space description and has agreed to increase the minimum width of the green space from 10’ to 50’.
- Connectivity – Ram has committed to extend the multi-use path north along Fordham Boulevard by an additional ~620’ to connect with Willow Drive, subject to approvals from Binkley Baptist, NC DOT and other third parties from whom approval is required.

Ram remains committed to breathing new life into University Place and creating a community asset for the Town. We appreciate the time Staff, the Advisory Boards, and Council have spent reviewing the SUP modification request and Design Standards. We trust that the information necessary to reach a decision has been provided and we remain available to answer additional questions.

Sincerely,

Jeff Kurtz

Jeff Kurtz
Director of Development
Ram Realty Advisors

Exhibit A

Cross Section of Willow Drive

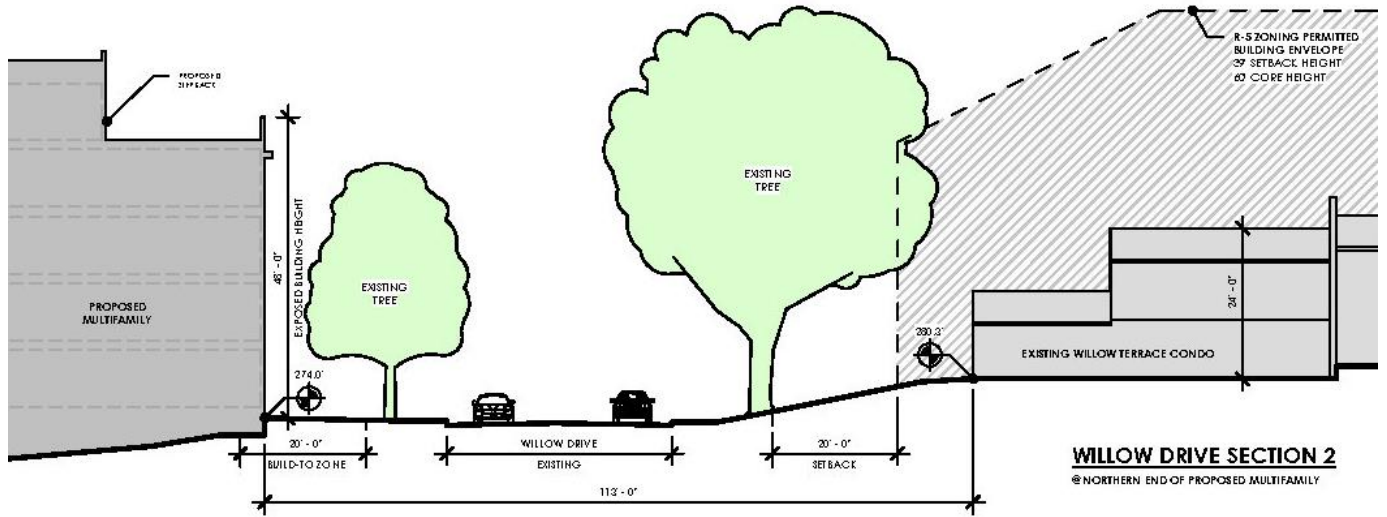


Exhibit B-1

Streetscape Buffer and Build-to-Zone Diagram

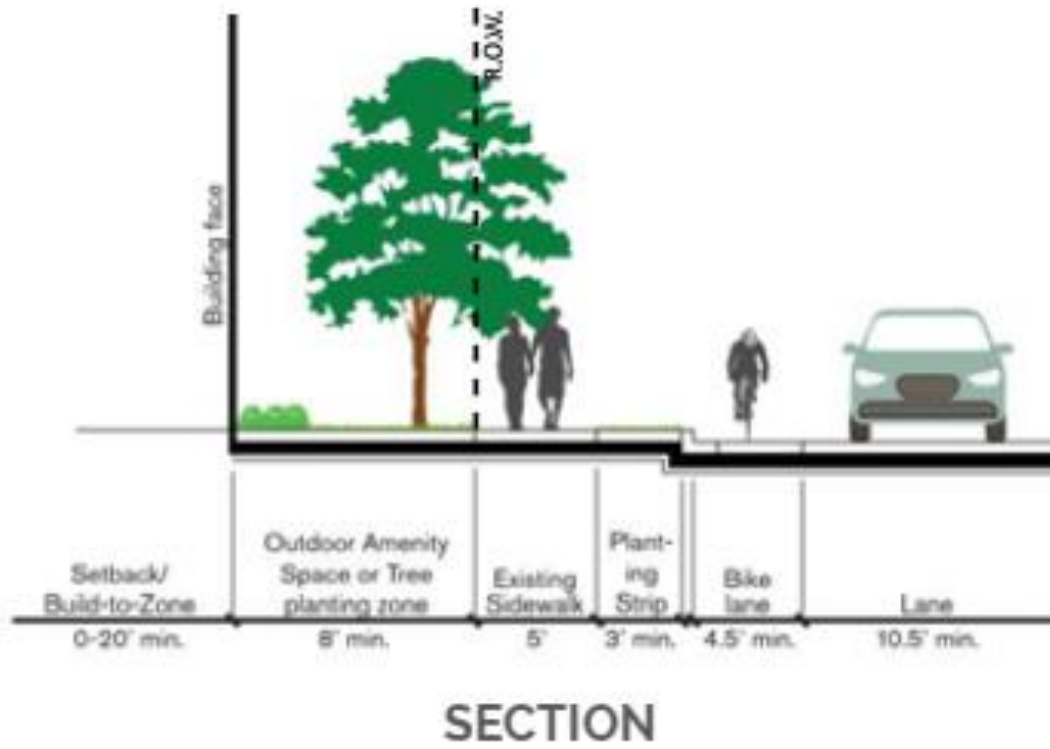


Exhibit B-2

Streetscape Buffer and Build-to-Zone Diagram

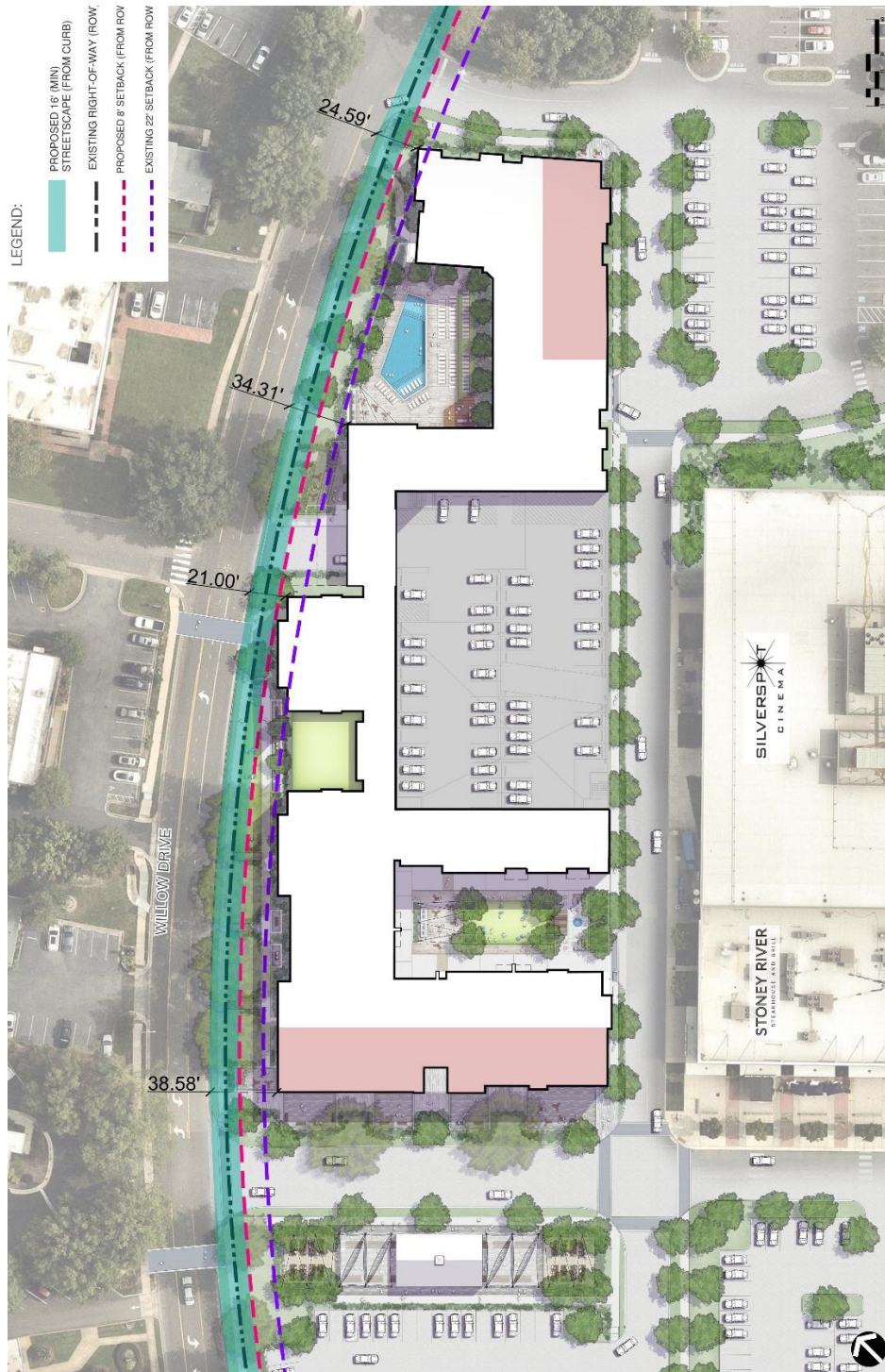


Exhibit C

Building Entry Points

BUILDING ACCESS - POD A

