

Urban Design Assessment - Summary Report Eastowne Medical Office Building Phase I

October 30, 2018

Prepared by: Tony Sease, PhD, Civitech, Inc., for the Town of Chapel Hill

At the request of the Town of Chapel Hill, Civitech was retained to provide an urban design assessment of the Phase I Eastowne Medical Office Building proposed by UNC Health Care at the corner of Eastowne Drive and Highway 15/501. This report summarizes interactions with the applicant, their design team, and Town staff regarding urban design considerations for the project including modifications to the plans spawned in part by those interactions. First the report describes an evaluative basis for the urban design review derived from existing Town plans, ongoing planning efforts, and best practices in sustainable urbanism. Also noted are aspects of the project excluded from the purview of this urban design assessment.

I. Basis of the assessment

Urban design is foremost the shaping of the public realm, and doing so in ways that accommodate multiple modes of mobility while creating a safe, comfortable, and interesting sensory experience. The Town's LUMO and the Blue Hill District Design Guidelines contain explanatory language and images describing what constitutes the public realm, noting that both streets and publicly accessible spaces such as plazas, courtyards and connecting areas are perceived to be so, whether technically public or not. More broadly, urban design is both an architectural and spatial exercise, with many interrelated considerations. In the absence of specifically defined urban design criteria for this site, this general framing of urban design is a necessary beginning.

More generally, several goals and themes identified in the Town's Comprehensive Plan are consistent with and supportive of good urban design outcomes. Some are excerpted here to help in further framing an analysis of the project. Italics are added for the most relevant points.

Chapel Hill 2020 Comprehensive Plan Excerpts: Selected Goals

Theme 1: A Place for Everyone

Goals:

- Family-friendly, *accessible exterior and interior places throughout the town for a variety of active uses* (PFE.1)
- A welcoming and friendly community that provides all people *with access to opportunities* (PFE.4)

Theme 2: Community Prosperity and Engagement

Goals:

- *Promote a safe, vibrant, and connected ... community* (CPE.3)

Theme 3: Getting Around

Goals:

- A well-conceived and *planned, carefully throughout, integrated*, and balanced transportation system that recognizes the importance of automobiles, but *encourages and facilitates the growth and use of other means of transportation such as bicycle, pedestrian, and public transportation options* (GA.1)
- *A connected community that links neighborhoods, businesses, and schools through the provision of greenways, sidewalks, bike facilities, and public transportation* (GA.2)
- *Create a comprehensive transportation system that provides everybody safe and reasonable access to all the community offers* (GA.5)
- *A transportation system that accommodates transportation needs and demands while mitigating congestion and promoting air quality, sustainability, and energy conservation* (GA.6)
- *A community that has a parking system based on strategies that support the overall goals of a holistic transportation system* (GA.8)

Chapel Hill 2020 Comprehensive Plan Excerpts: Selected Goals, continued

Theme 4: Good Places, New Spaces

Goals:

- *Future land use, form, and density that strengthen the community, social equity, economic prosperity, and natural environment (GPNS.8)*

Theme 5: Nurturing Our Community

Goals:

- Support the Parks and Recreation Master Plan and the Greenways Master Plan to provide recreation opportunities and *ensure safe pedestrian and bicycle connections (NOC.4)*
- Protect neighborhoods from the impact of development such as stormwater runoff, *light and noise pollution*, and traffic (NOC.8)

Theme 6: Town and Gown Collaboration

Goals:

- The University, the *UNC Health Care System*, and the Town will coordinate closely to manage development in ways that respect history, traditions, and the environment while fostering revitalization and innovation (TGC.5)
- Promote access for all residents to health-care centers, public services, and active lifestyle opportunities (TGC.6)

Informed by these Town documents and general urban design best practices, the assessment of this project evolved through two in-person meetings with the applicant, their design team, and Town staff, plus conference calls and multiple consultations on different sketches and plans for the project between July, 2018 and October, 2018. Certain physical aspects were excluded from the analysis and certain characteristics surfaced as most important.

II. Parameters excluded from consideration

While urban design is foremost a consideration of the shaping of the public realm, conventional use-based zoning including the underlying Office and Institutional districts applicable to the subject property are predicated on the separation of uses and distancing from the public realm through buffers, setbacks, and other considerations. A fundamental conflict exists between the parameters established in conventional zoning districts and attributes essential for the shaping of the public realm. However, conventional zoning does address related considerations such as building height. With building height addressed as part of the rezoning, that aspect of the project was not considered as part of this urban design assessment.

In the initial scoping of this urban design assessment an expectation was established that the parking garage location was generally fixed due to considerations including: project phasing for the site itself; future phasing for redevelopment of adjacent owned parcels in Eastowne; desires for connectivity through the site to the east to future redevelopment areas; and access constraints along Highway 15/501. That said, consultations with the applicant and exploratory sketches did address other options for siting and orienting the parking garage, none of which were deemed to be preferred over the current location given access constraints and program requirements. Separate from location, concerns regarding the size of the parking garage were expressed, as noted below in the observations.

Lastly, this assessment includes no consideration of different uses than those proposed by the applicant other than the identification of a potential future development parcel for residential, also noted below in the observations.

III. Points of primary emphasis

Given this framing of general urban design principles, relevant references from adopted Town planning documents, and an acknowledgement of items not considered in this analysis, two primary points of emphasis arise in evaluating the project. The first is an emphasis on providing an inviting, well-defined and publicly available means of pedestrian connectivity east-to-west through the site, both to the future redevelopment of applicant-owned properties to the east and to the proposed Gateway light rail station via some yet-to-be-determined means of connecting across 15/501 in conjunction with future development. Locating such an east-west pedestrian route internal to the site rather than adjacent to 15/501 is more desirable given the vehicular volumes, speeds, and character of that major highway.

The second point of emphasis is the frontage along Eastowne Drive. Unlike 15/501, Eastowne Drive is a thoroughfare people do and increasingly will experience on foot and on bike. The project is located along one side of this existing suburban roadway accessing office and multifamily residential, including aged multi-family residential across the street. This portion of Eastowne Drive is part of a bus route currently served by Chapel Hill Transit, and the Eastowne Drive frontage will serve as the main public pedestrian frontage for the project as well as the primary access via transit. This frontage also serves as the western edge of the larger Eastowne redevelopment area as contemplated by UNC-Health Care, and more generally of the transit station area for the planned Gateway light rail station area.

These two points of emphasis shaped many of the discussions with the applicant and many of the observations that follow.

IV. Summary of discussions, project refinements, and concluding observations

The two buildings proposed as part of this project – both the office building and the parking garage – are larger than nearby buildings, yet the focus of this urban design analysis was not on size but the quality and character of the outdoor spaces created by these buildings. The site is situated in an important transitional area as part of both a Town-designated ‘future focus area’ and within one-half mile of the planned Gateway Station light rail stop. Also, land east of the site to I-40 is owned by UNC Health Care, and all of that land is being contemplated for future redevelopment. The area offers the opportunity to create a well-connected district if designed and implemented with appropriate attention to the shaping of the public realm. This initial redevelopment site sits at the western edge of the potential district, along Eastowne Drive and next to existing bus service. The edge thus becomes important, and insuring that there is a welcoming connection through the project to connect to future redevelopment became a key point of emphasis in the dialogue with the applicant.

Challenges to that east-west connectivity include: 1) topography – the site sits roughly 15’ above this portion of Eastowne Drive; 2) existing suburban character – both the wide dimensions of Eastowne Drive and the dispersed character of development on nearby parcels; and 3) the applicant’s program relative to the ample provision of parking making the garage quite large. Each of these challenges were raised iteratively in the discussions with the applicant. To varying degrees design refinements were made to better respond to these challenges, although aspects remain to be addressed in future phases or as part of the Eastowne Master Plan.

Specific changes to the proposed plan as a result of this urban design analysis include:

- 1) Adding an elevator at the southwestern corner of the parking garage and adding a cascading stair aligned along the slope at the western end of the entry circle to directly connect Eastowne Drive near the proposed bus stop to the main building entry. The stair and elevator are both visually prominent from the bus shelter (See Figure 1). The stepping of the stair accommodates the topographical change in an inviting manner. The expectation is that this route should remain accessible not only to visitors to the office building but to future redevelopment sites to the east.

- 2) Providing a sufficient planting strip, 8' wide, between the sidewalk and travelway of Eastowne Drive to provide a safer and more comfortable pedestrian realm (see Figure 2).
- 3) Adding a future liner building site along the western elevation of the parking garage, to allow future development, if approved, to screen the parking garage from view to the public thoroughfare while possibly achieving a mix of uses, such as urban residential or general office.
- 4) Improved streetscaping elements were also added along the northern façade of the proposed building. These details can be extended eastward in conjunction with future phases, but in the interim a sidewalk connection to existing paths around the pond to the east is included in this first phase.

Each of these changes were the result of a number of conversations and design iterations conducted by the project team in response to the emphasis on pedestrian connectivity and access to the site and the creation of a comfortable pedestrian realm along Eastowne Drive.



Figure 1. Stair and elevator near transit shelter on Eastowne Drive (Image from applicant letter, October 16, 2018)



Figure 2. Illustrative site plan showing a) liner building site along western elevation of the parking garage, b) alignment of stair along western end of entry plaza connecting to the bus shelter, and c) street trees in an 8' planter strip between the travelway and sidewalk along Eastowne Drive. (Image from applicant letter, October 16, 2018)

Additional observations are enumerated as follows, with potential action items noted where appropriate either as part of the current project or - in most cases - as part of subsequent projects in the vicinity:

- 1) A sidewalk is included along the western façade of the building to provide a direct connection from the entry plaza to the southwestern corner of the site and the pedestrian crossing at the corner of Eastowne Drive and 15/501.
- 2) Concern has been expressed to the applicant regarding the size of the parking garage in terms of the number of spaces provided, more so than the bulk of the building. Effective Transportation Demand Management is dependent upon priced parking and some limitations on supply, rather than suburban contexts in which ample, usually free parking, is expected. A robust, multi-modal transportation network is undermined by the excessive supply of unpriced parking, and separately the provision of ample parking has spatial implications in terms of creating a highly permeable pedestrian network. While parking ratios for the garage as shown may be considered high to moderately appropriate, there is a practical consideration put forth by the applicant in construction the garage in conjunction with the current project to accommodate demand associated with future development. In terms of supply, future phases on this site and sites to the east should implement shared, managed, and priced district parking.
- 3) In terms of the spatial impacts of the garage as sized, a future development site lining the western elevation along Eastowne Drive has been identified on the plans. Development of this site could accomplish multiple urban design goals: screening of the parking garage from Eastowne Drive; potentially introducing a mix of uses as a more efficient and vibrant use of space and infrastructure; and providing better spatial definition of Eastown Drive (the height should at least three stories but would not necessarily have to be as high as the garage to fully obscure the garage from street level.) Identifying the site does not imply approval but suggest that consideration of the site should be included in conjunction with future phases of this site or the larger Eastowne project.
- 4) In the interim, light pollution from the parking garage especially along the western façade to Eastowne Drive and the multi-family residential should be limited to the extent practical. This issue should be addressed at the architectural scale through fixture selection and other design details. Similar considerations should be given to the other elevations of the garage, but none are as important visually as the elevation exposed, at least initially, to Eastowne Drive. In addition to architecturally addressing this issue, landscaping choices can be helpful in addressing the experience at street level.
- 5) No review would be complete without noting the importance of street design in shaping the public realm. Eastowne Drive is an existing suburban thoroughfare, one that will become transitional in character in conjunction with this project. The current plans do address the project frontage, but full reconsideration of the thoroughfare dimensions, desired travel speeds, and street design details should be completed in conjunction with redevelopment of the larger area, and with the leadership of the Town in close collaboration with redevelopment efforts whether by the current applicant or others.

In closing, this review is limited to the extent many project considerations have been addressed through other municipal approvals. This assessment is therefore not comprehensive. Also, while general language from the Town's Comprehensive Plan is relevant and helpful, no specific urban design criteria are in place within the applicable municipal requirements for this site. Adding such criteria or mechanisms for urban design consultations especially in the Town's future focus areas could have multiple benefits to review processes, organizational awareness and understanding, and built outcomes as these areas transition in character.