



Chestnut Hill Local

(/)

Friday, April 23, 2021

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Why we support 30 W. Highland development



(/uploads/original/20210421-120112-30W HIGHLAND AVE 210411-W HIGHLAND AVE VIEW 4-11-2021.jpg)

An architect's rendering of the proposed 30 W. Highland Ave. development as it would appear from W. Highland Avenue.

Posted Wednesday, April 21, 2021 12:02 pm

by John Landis and Joyce Lenhardt

Much has been written in this space during the last few weeks characterizing the proposed eight-unit residential project at 30 West Highland as being wrong for Chestnut Hill. As the co-chair of the Development Review Committee (Landis) and past vice-president of CHCA's Physical Division (Lenhardt), as an urban planning professor and professional architect, and most important, as long-time Chestnut Hill residents who have spent more than 20 years privileged to serve as stewards of our community's built environment, we wanted to share our reasons for supporting the proposal as endorsed by the Chestnut Hill Community Association's Development Review Committee (DRC) on April 13.

It must be said at the outset that the loss of any building of historic character is regrettable, especially in a community like Chestnut Hill, where our historic buildings and spaces are an integral part of our collective identity and one of the reasons why many of us live here. We listened skeptically to the project sponsor's reasons why the current building, once vacated, was unlikely to attract another quality commercial tenant; and why it could not be economically repurposed as housing in today's residential market. After peppering them with questions and asking them to produce alternate design schemes that preserved at least some of the current building, in the end, we found their arguments convincing.

Beyond the question of whether the present building should be preserved, we believe the proposed 30 West Highland project constitutes good urbanism and good design, is not out of scale with the neighborhood, and will benefit the entire Chestnut Hill community. Judged in balance, the proposed project is:

Good Urbanism: As Jane Jacobs wrote more than 50 years ago in “*The Death and Life of Great American Cities*,” getting the density balance right—which is at the heart of good urbanism—can be tough. Too much density and the buildings overpower people. Too little density and places become lifeless and uninteresting. 30 West Highland gets the density balance right. Its eight units will occupy a space of .43 acres, giving it a floor area ratio or FAR (the number urban planners and designers use to measure density) of 1.5, which is on par with the rest of the residential properties on the unit block of West Highland. Taking advantage of the lot’s depth, the building’s mass will be tucked away from pedestrian passersby, presenting a streamlined and unitary façade to Highland Avenue. Most important, the project will accommodate its residents’ cars—and it is cars not density that are the enemy of good urbanism—in garages that are largely out of sight of neighbors and pedestrians.

Good Site Planning: Looked at from above, the current site is composed of close to 100% impervious surfaces: rooftops and asphalt parking lots. Nearly half of the proposed project will consist of pervious surfaces and greenspace, significantly reducing the amount of off-site stormwater runoff. Except for the U-shaped driveway ringing the site, every square inch of horizontal space on the site will be reserved for people, whether the residents themselves, or pedestrians wanting to relax in the public parklet in front of the building. Indeed, from a site planning perspective, one of 30 West Highland’s best features is how seamlessly it’s open spaces transition from being public at the project entrance, to a combination of public and private along the courtyard-like passage that provides access to the individual units, to the private garden space or lawns in front of each unit. Because not everyone wants to be in the public eye, residents will also have access to their own balconies and roof decks, providing a mix of privacy options.

Good Mobility Planning: Residents of 30 West Highland will have the option of having cars but they won’t need to use them, being within quick walking distance of a vibrant commercial district and two SEPTA regional rail lines. Fewer vehicle trips—especially compared to the 20 or so commercial vehicles currently coming and going multiple times daily—will be better for the environment. The primary entering and exiting driveway has been relocated 30 feet west, reducing turning movements into the Highland/Germantown Avenue interchange, and of course, the availability of sufficient on-site parking will mean that residents don’t have to compete for street parking.

One Eye on History, the Other on the Future: Communities are living entities, constantly in need of new ideas to meet changing times as well as new investments to renew them. With a nod toward Chestnut Hill’s history, the first floor façade of the project along West Highland will be constructed from the same Wissahickon schist stones that make up the present-day building. The West Highland façade will feature a vertical series of bay windows that not only recall the current building but relate to similar features throughout the neighborhood. The second and third floors of 30 West Highland will be wrapped in a Roman brick similar in shape and form to the bricks that adorn its neighbors and many of the other homes on Highland Avenue. The street entrance to the project’s courtyard will emulate similar features on Chestnut Hill’s great Woodward buildings of the early 20th century like

Roanoke Court. But 30 West Highland will also have one eye on how people want to live now and in the future, with its flexible floorplans, windows that admit light from nearly every direction, energy-conserving HVAC systems, and opportunities for residents to install solar panels on their roofs.

A Good Design: Yes, even with its extensive use of Wissahickon schist and Roman brick, 30 West Highland's more rectangular facades will make it look different from its neighbors. But look again at the project plans and renderings, and you will see the artful way the project carries through the horizontal building lines of the adjacent properties, and how, despite its four stories, the project does not appear to be physically taller than its three-story neighbors. Or look at how the single-passageway entrance will accommodate the residents of eight homes within a single modest entryway. Or look at how the locations of the upper floor windows and balconies will create horizontal and vertical rhythms that tie together each façade. Or think about the building massing that you won't see, thanks to the plentiful use of trees and screening vegetation which will soften the building's visual impact on the street while providing privacy to residents. Most of all, look at how the design takes what could just as easily be another series of townhouses and makes them into a real physical community—the same thing we appreciate in the Woodward properties Chestnut Hill is so proud of. Instead of insisting that every new development conform to a fixed set of design expectations, we celebrate the fact that Chestnut Hill is associated with no single architectural style or form, but rather, to quote the Chestnut Hill Conservancy, that our community is “home to outstanding examples of architecture from three centuries.”



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A Good Neighbor: To make sure that neighboring properties aren't overburdened by trash pickup, snow removal, parking for package delivery, and all the other services needed for modern life, at the request of the DRC subcommittee that reviewed the project, its developer has agreed to form a homeowners association which will ensure that all residential services are delivered in the least impactful way possible. The developer has also agreed to pay to upgrade and maintain the alleyway behind the commercial buildings on Germantown Avenue. Last but not least, the project's parking and circulation improvements will reduce the volume and intrusiveness of traffic entering and leaving the site.

It is for these reasons that we humbly ask the Chestnut Hill Community Association Board and the Philadelphia Zoning Board of Adjustment to support the 30 West Highland variance application.

We also wanted to take this opportunity to respond to charges that the DRC and CHCA mindlessly rubber stamp any and all development proposals, and that approving 30 West Highland will unleash a torrent of hyper-dense and out-of-scale projects. Nothing could be further from the truth. The DRC, like the other Chestnut Hill Committees charged with reviewing development projects—Land Use Planning and Zoning, Streetscapes, and the Historic District Advisory Committee—consider each project

individually, relentlessly asking sponsors to demonstrate how their schemes benefit the community and recommending against projects that do not. Indeed, if anything, it is because of these efforts that Chestnut Hill has acquired a reputation in Philadelphia City Hall as being too tough on developers.

Finally, we want to recognize the work of the nine community members who volunteered to serve on the DRC Review Subcommittee and who had the thankless task of trying to reconcile so many divergent viewpoints. They worked tirelessly on behalf of their constituents and the result was a much-improved design. Far from dissing the community, as some have alleged, DRC's subcommittee review process and the many open meetings the CHCA has convened on this project have brought the community right into the heart of the design process. Not everyone got the outcome they wanted, but everyone had multiple opportunities to be heard and listened to, and there are few other neighborhoods in Philadelphia where community input is so highly prized.

For plans and other documents related to the project, see this page.

(https://www.chestnuthill.org/rco_variance_projects_under_re.php) The CHCA Board of Directors will consider this proposal on Thursday, April 22. That meeting, at 5 p.m., is open to the public. See this page (https://www.chestnuthill.org/2021_upcoming_meetings.php) for more details.

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