

H P A C

Historic Preservation Advisory Committee

Borough of Bernardsville: c/o Daniel W. Lincoln, RA
28 Olcott Avenue; Bernardsville, New Jersey 07924

February 7, 2024

Ms. Denise Filardo, Administrative Officer
Borough of Bernardsville Planning and Zoning Boards
166 Mine Brook Road; Bernardsville, New Jersey 07924

RE: Planning Board **Application #SP-247RDP – AR at Bernardsville, LLC**
Preliminary & Final Mixed-Use Retail & Multi-Family Residential Site Plan: 35-39 Olcott Square and
5 Morristown Road: B: 125, L: 1&3, Palmer Square Redevelopment Zone (PS-R)

Dear Ms. Filardo, Chair Graham, and Planning Board members:

The Bernardsville Historic Preservation Advisory Committee has reviewed the subject Planning Board application and documents for this 1.083 +/- acre property located at 35-39 Olcott Square, and 5 Morristown Road in the Borough of Bernardsville. This property is in the PS-R, or Palmer Square Redevelopment Sub-district zone of the Borough. The application involves the demolition of multiple existing 18th and 19th century structures including the 1770 +/- Boylan House (35 Olcott Square), and construction of a new, 4-story, mixed use retail and multi-family residential complex with underground parking. Sixty-eight (68) market rate dwelling units are proposed surrounding an enclosed private park. There are 139 parking spaces proposed at two underground levels. 236 parking spaces are required when the proposed retail and residential uses are combined. The parking levels are accessed by a sloped ramp off Morristown Road. The subject lot and this ramp are to be located directly adjacent to the former 1910 Congregational Church (Masonic Lodge) and across from the Parker Tavern, a one and a half story timber frame residential structure dating from between 1730 and 1750. The Parker Tavern is listed on the NJ and National Register of Historic Places (NR 12/14/78; NR Reference # 78001796; SR 4/15/1978)

The neighborhood is comprised of multiple, potentially historic, one- and two-story structures. There is one three-story, turn of the last century, retail office building located at 27-29 Olcott Square. (B-Boutique) The Masonic Lodge is essentially a one-story structure with a high ceiling and several multi-level towers. The existing architectural styles vary considerably from early Colonial and Federal period, and modified late Victorian vernacular wood framed structures, to slightly art deco style brick faced buildings. At least two buildings are built from locally quarried stone. The scale of most surrounding buildings at Olcott Square and Morristown Road is modest at this part of downtown. The buildings get somewhat larger as one proceeds south on Mine Brook Road. All the surrounding buildings including those slated for demolition are illustrated on the John Smith Historic map of the Somerset Hills 1893-1939. However, only the Parker Tavern is individually listed on the NJ and National Register of Historic Places. The downtown has potential to be a registered historic district for its collection of 18th, mid to late 19th and early 20th century structures. Some of these such as the relocated 1881 former Bernardsville Railroad station (Bernardsville News) could be individually listed.

Regarding potential building relocation, some discussion about the historic significance of the late 18th century Boylan House (35 Olcott Square) should be addressed. This reviewer personally spent 40 to 50 unpaid hours researching a potential relocation (moving) of this structure to a lot on Olcott Avenue. This effort was undertaken with the support of the Owner and Developer. However, the owner of the Olcott Avenue lot was scared off by the cost of relocation even though several hundred thousand dollars could be made on the project. HPAC requests that the Owner and Developer make some effort to save this unofficial historic building. For example, advertising its availability for relocation would demonstrate some respect for a building not only long standing and locally important, but also owned for multiple generations by the Palmer family. Relocation would require availability of an open lot within a few blocks of the current site. The loss of this historic building would be an significant disappointment for Bernardsville.

The Palmer Square Development buildings are proposed at 4 stories and significantly taller than every adjacent building except perhaps the bell tower of the adjacent Masonic Lodge. Traditionally, church towers are supposed to be taller than the surrounding structures so they can be easily seen and identified from a distance. This project would block that view from the south and east. Our committee has a serious concern about the scale of this proposed project. The height of the buildings at Olcott Square and Morristown Road is inappropriate from a scale and contextual basis. The building will block light from the street and create a wind and noise corridor. It is basically across the street from the 1½ story Parker Tavern, and will have a negative effect on this historic structure.

Under Article 1. General provisions of the Municipal land Use Law, Section 40:55D-2. Purpose of the act, it states under letter j. (that one of the purposes of the law is) **“To promote the conservation of historic sites and districts,** open space energy resources and valuable natural resources in the State and to prevent urban sprawl and degradation of the environment through improper use of land;”

If the Master Plan intent is to protect our historic resources and the unique character of Bernardsville, then some significant effort should be undertaken by the Applicant and Architect to reduce the height of the buildings at the street front of Olcott Square and Morristown Road. They should reduce the building height by one story at these streets. Undoubtedly, there will be a concern about the number of units in relation to the cost of the project. Therefore, HPAC respectfully suggests that the Planning Board consider allowing a portion of the rear structures be constructed at 5 stories. This height will not significantly impact the surrounding neighborhood because of the roadway slope on Mount Airy Road. In effect the existing drop off from the east side of the railroad tracks to the west side will hide one of the five stories. The Developer and Architect should also understand that they have a responsibility to the historic character of the area, and residents per the design guidelines of the Borough.

Please refer to the attached design from the Architect’s website for the Downtown Darien (Connecticut) Development. This project is a similar mixed-use retail and residential project designed by the Architect. This project clearly shows a two and a half (3-story) proposal in the downtown of Darien, a similarly sized town to Bernardsville. There is a similar context of one- and two-story mix of neighboring buildings. The architect considers historic context and scale to be important. Please refer to the attached partial article on this architect’s project, The \$150 million Museum of the American Revolution in Philadelphia, Pa. A quote by Mr. Stern from an article on that project states “The building is meant to capture the spirit and context of the area”. “The massing takes its cues from the neighboring historic buildings’ cornice lines, Pennsylvania red brick, white trim and keystone accented arches (which) dutifully reference the neighborhoods aesthetic .” This reviewer also recalls similar statements from Mr. Stern when he (the reviewer) was a student in 1978-79, at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Architecture. Mr. Stern was a guest professor for one semester, and made similar statements during his critiques.

The design of the subject application buildings is attractive, if overscaled, and the materials selections appropriate for the town design guidelines. The Planning Board should confirm that the materials include real 3“ min. thick veneer stone, brick, copper flashing and roofing, and a Grand Manor type asphaltic slate look shingle. The trim should be a painted, PVC type material rather than wood. We respectfully suggest, however, that in addition to dropping the front building one story, that the third-floor roof be revised to a “Gambrel” style. We suggest this revision for several reasons. Firstly, the Gambrel style roof will provide more room for the apartments at the top floor of the building especially at any added shed dormers. Secondly, this roof style is appropriate to the selected stone and shingle siding materials. Thirdly, this roof style is common to historic areas in Bernardsville. There are around 8 examples in the Olcott Avenue Historic District just two blocks away from this site. A photograph of the existing residence located at 36 Olcott Avenue is attached. This is an excellent example of the Shingle style with a Gambrel roof. There are also Gambrel roofed structures up in the Mountain Colony historic estate area. (A mansard roof style has also been suggested. However, this style is more appropriate to Italianate and Victorian houses in Basking Ridge. Mansard roofs are not generally very common in Bernardsville.) Finally, Gambrel roofs are very successful in making a building look less imposing, and lower to the surrounding buildings including the Palmer Building which is to remain. The renderings make the Palmer Building look dwarfed by the proposed 4 story development.

Please thank the Planning Board members for their interest in our comments on historical issues in Bernardsville, and for their support of our committee. We apologize for the length of this review, but could not keep it shorter without compromising the important historic considerations of the town, and what it should look like based on the approved design guidelines.

We are all volunteers who care about Bernardsville.

Sincerely yours,

Dan Lincoln, review member: Bernardsville HPAC

cc: HPAC members:

Gerry Jo Cranmer, Chair; Valerie Barnes; Joseph Bonk; Eileen Grippo; Daniel W. Lincoln, RA; Steven Sbaraglio