

To: Mayor and Town Council
From: Community Design Commission
Date: June 5, 2015

RE: Comments and Recommendations regarding
Obey Creek Design Guidelines, May 18, 2015

The Community Design Commission authorized at its May 26, 2015 meeting a subcommittee to draft comments regarding the Obey Creek Draft Design Guidelines. Subcommittee members, who met on June 2, 2015, are: Chris Berndt, Susana Dancy, Lucy Davis, Dixon Pitt and Polly van de Velde. This work builds upon our previously submitted recommendations dated March 21, 2015 (attached).

A. URBAN / SUBURBAN BOULEVARD & SOUTHERN ENTRANCE TO CHAPEL HILL

We support the Urban / Suburban Boulevard as recommended by the town's urban design consultant and shown in the NCDOT Complete Streets Planning and Design Guidelines. The planted entranceway medians and edges, along with the one-way frontage roads, are essential components for placemaking in southern Chapel Hill.

The current road design, as described in the NCDOT memo dated May 25, 2015 does not support this model; it perpetuates a car-dominated arterial road without adequate design cues to slow drivers and signal the entrance into Chapel Hill. Equally important, the current design does not provide sufficient design priority for pedestrians and bicyclists, as required by NCDOT Complete Streets Policy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A.1. Town Council should require the developer to obtain NCDOT permission for design components of Urban / Suburban Boulevard for any improvements to 15-501.

A.2. The one-way frontage road ("slip street") should be mandatory for the length of the project, wherever possible and with minimal interruption. In addition to establishing an outward-looking development that embraces Southern Village and possible future development on the west side of 15-501, this will provide greater connectivity to sites north and south of this parcel.

A.3. Landscaped medians are essential to humane design, therefore road design should use medians to separate through-traffic from local traffic and to provide pedestrian refuges for those who cross 15-501. Language should be added to the Development Agreement and Design Guidelines specifying the use of landscaped medians along 15-501, between through-lanes and frontage roads, and in the two entrance "stem" roads into the development at Sumac Road and Market Street.

B. GREENWAYS AND PEDESTRIAN CONNECTIVITY

The current site plan design does not place sufficient priority on pedestrian and bicycle connectivity. The idea of a continuous greenway/bikeway around the perimeter of the project has been eliminated, and pedestrians have not been planned for at intersections and along Sumac Rd and Market Streets. The site plan currently lacks sufficient east-west pedestrian connections because of the sizes of Buildings J and K.

RECOMMENDATIONS

B.1. Plan for ped-bike users first and cars second, especially at intersections, which appear dangerous for pedestrians in the current site plan and NCDOT memo dated May 25, 2015.

B.2. Restore the continuous greenway/bikeway around the perimeter of the project that was depicted in earlier site plans. A continuous paved path on the east side of Wilson Creek Drive that would connect to the 15-501 sidepath would provide residents with a loop walking/biking system around the project.

B.3. Landscaped medians with pedestrian refuges on stem roads would soften entrances and signal that cars are entering space where pedestrians are primary users.

C. PUBLIC PLACES, URBAN SQUARES AND LINEAR PARK

Small urban spaces are important for a quality development and a humane environment. They support different activities than a linear park or a large urban park, both of which are important. The current site plan needs multiple smaller green spaces that allow connections along the streets, plazas, pocket parks, etc. These smaller urban spaces also can assist with creating more interesting streetscapes and with providing variation in the articulation of buildings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

C.1. The site plan should provide a significant relief in the facade at the point where Park Lane terminates on Main Street in order to break up the massing of Block J. A large pocket park or plaza at this location will provide a focal point at the end of Park Lane and will simulate a smaller block structure that might not be possible because of topography and/or parking deck.

C.2. Locations of additional small public amenities, such as public squares, plazas and pocket parks, should be built into the conceptual site plan shown in Design Guidelines. The locations of these amenities, along with the locations of the streets, should remain generally consistent with the approved plan.

D. BUILDING ARTICULATION

There is insufficient articulation required in the facades, particularly at the pedestrian level and for upper-story residential. Large block sizes, especially at Building K and Building J, are of particular concern, and developer should provide extraordinary effort to break the facade in a way that enhances pedestrian experience.

RECOMMENDATIONS

D.1. The Design Guidelines should require a minimum of 8'x10' recess every 200 ft of streetfront. Two recesses could be combined to make a pocket park or to provide similar relief in the design. For example, a 16'x10' recess could be placed every 400 ft.

D.2. Design Guidelines should require that upper stories of residential buildings provide a minimum of 4 ft relief with balconies, bays or recesses.

E. PARKING GARAGE FACADES

Design guidelines for Type 6 Building Typology, Structured Parking, has been removed from the current version of the Design Guidelines.

RECOMMENDATIONS

E.1. The design principles articulated in previous versions of the Design Guidelines should be reinstated.

E.2. All parking garages should be faced with buildings, to minimize visibility of decks. Where not possible, decks must have vegetated screening and/or receive appropriate architectural treatment.

F. BUILDING SECTIONS, TYPES AND HEIGHTS

No maximum building height has been established in the Design Guidelines and illustrations of building sections, starting on p. 30, show roof structures that reach as much as 30 feet in height, which was concerning. Additionally, we noted a number of inconsistencies among the sections of the Design Guidelines regarding the number of stories.

RECOMMENDATIONS

F.1. Maximum building heights should be established and expressed to reflect Town Council's preference. This would allow greater predictability for maximum building heights while allowing for generous floor-to-ceiling heights at each story. Parapets and pitched roofs proposed for mechanical equipment purposes and included as part of the allowable height, but not counted as a story.

F.2. Create a table that reflects the building, building type and min./max. heights allowed, at the appropriate roads. This would serve as the controlling item in the Development Agreement and eliminate any confusion created by discrepancies between text and illustrations. For example:

Bldg	Allowed Bldg Type	Min Height at 15-501	Max Height at 15-501	Min Height at Creek Ln	Max Height at Creek Ln
A	Type 1	3 stories, 40'	4 stories, 64'	3 stories, 40'	4 stories, 64'

F.3 Review sections of the Design Guidelines and check thoroughly for consistency regarding building heights. Illustrations are not always consistent with the Building Heights map on p.30 or with the principles listed in the Building Typologies in the Design Standards.

G. PHASING

Current development agreement allows for isolated buildings with no internal circulation. This provides the possibility that, if the project isn't completed, the result could be individual tall buildings (or small groups of tall buildings) that have no connection to each other and lack internal connectivity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

G.1. Create detailed building phasing plan as an attachment to the Development Agreement that ensures streets and public amenities are constructed and dedicated at appropriate times.

G.2. Building designs should relate proportionally to each other, and materials should be compatible. The context of surrounding buildings, both existing and planned, should be shown as each building is brought to the Community Design Commission for approval.

H. OTHER RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT AGREEMENT

H.1. Language should be added to the Design Guidelines to make it clear that the principles are mandatory requirements, rather than optional.

H.2. In the Ephesus Fordham District, the 60 percent glazing requirement has already caused design problems. That number should be flexible depending on design and use of building, but in no cases should it be less than 50 percent.

H.3. All lighting should be LED or other high-efficiency lighting.

H.4. Buildings should meet high-efficiency building standards established by the US Green Building Council or similar organization.

H.5. Because this project abuts a nature preserve, Dark Skies need to be established as a guideline and massive glass expansions need to include bird protection.

H.6. Hard line protection, such as a chain-linked fence, is needed for the RCD during construction, and consequences for violations need to be significant.

H.7. Plantings of any material on NC invasive species list should be forbidden.