

October 14, 2020

TO: Tarrytown Planning Board

RE: Development Proposals Currently Under Consideration

The Planning Board is currently considering development proposals that represent new and historically unprecedented standards for residential occupant density and building design/scale in the Village of Tarrytown. The population of Tarrytown has not varied above or below 11,000 by more than three or four hundred people in the past 60 years. Yet three projects alone, the 62 Main Street, 39-51 North Broadway, and 29 South Depot Plaza proposals, would in all likelihood increase our population to more than 12,000. Two of these proposals require a zoning variance from the current 35 or 40-foot maximum building height (representing the height of most existing buildings on Main Street) to allow a new height of 60 feet. With the exception of preserving the Main Street façade of the Y building, none of these proposals reflects any architectural sensitivity to the distinguishing characteristics of our historic building stock.

The immediate implications of these three projects are significant enough, but the longer-term cumulative impact of applying the new standards they represent to other “underdeveloped” properties throughout the village is staggering. Some of the broad themes reflected in Tarrytown’s 2018 Comprehensive Plan are being referenced as providing a mandate of sorts for this approach. However, the devil is in the details when it comes to the complicated process of operationalizing these themes in the form of a new set of standards that will dramatically impact the quality of life that is valued by Tarrytown’s citizens. If given the opportunity to comment on whether the new standards reflected by these proposals represent the kind of future they envision for our community, it is highly probable that a majority of our citizens would say no. Therefore, this communication represents an urgent plea for village officials to adopt a moratorium on approving zoning variances or changes in zoning regulations applicable to projects of significance until such time as the deliberative process can be informed by a broad-based cumulative impact study, evolving “new normal” realities of post-COVID life, and robust public input via actively promoted opportunities that extend beyond those afforded by public hearings (which currently cannot even be conducted in person). It would be a disservice to the community for a handful of unelected officials to proceed without benefit of the perspective these measures would provide.

The following represents an emerging “average citizen” perspective relative to the three above-referenced projects.

62 Main Street: 109-unit senior/multi-family building

This one was selected first because it illustrates an approach that reflects the kinds of public benefit trade-offs that have generated a well deserved reputation on the part of village officials as being wise stewards of development in recent years. While neighbors of the project are understandably concerned about the visual and resident density impact of the project on their daily lives, public comment has been relatively muted. Why? Because the project:

- Meets an identified need for affordable housing that is scaled/designed for seniors
- Preserves the historically significant façade of the former YMCA building
- Is four stories high, in keeping with the height of the YMCA building
- Provides additional badly needed and conveniently located public parking spots
- Is being undertaken by a credible developer with a proven track record for constructing this type of housing in a manner that is responsive to community interests and concerns



The potential for a negative visual impact of the project could be mitigated by a façade design that reflects more of a nod towards the historic character of our Main Street architecture in general, and the Y building in particular. It could be further mitigated by a generous setback from the street that would reduce the dominance of the structure along an otherwise low-rise residential street. That said, public reaction to this project has demonstrated that Tarrytowners are not averse to development per se. They just want it to be thoughtful and to add value to the community at large.

29 South Depot Plaza: 60' high with 88 residential units over a self-storage facility

The original proposal entailed a conversion of the existing warehouse to a self-storage facility ... not controversial from an average citizen's perspective. It then evolved to take the form of a three-story, 69-unit residential structure above a self-storage facility. The respect for Tarrytown's architectural legacy is reflected by the architect's September 2019 synopsis:

The overall design aesthetic of the building's exterior is a direct manifestation of the industrial fabric abutting today's project site as well as an homage to the once prevalent mill and factory buildings of Tarrytown's past. The selection of materials and colors primarily lends itself to being a modern industrial style of architecture. There is a neutral palette of gray hues which vary from dark to light. The flat roof and repetitious pattern of windows of the upper floors mimic the look of a late 19th century mill building. The use of ample glass together with metal and stucco combine with clean orthogonal lines to suggest a modernist approach to design. For these reasons, the building stands out from some of Tarrytown's more recent traditional examples of architecture such as the MTA train station but only at a first glance.

Upon taking a closer look at the composition of the building's exterior, it becomes more prevalent that the rules of traditional architecture still apply. Perhaps the most important rule to abide by is having the proper proportions between architectural elements. There is a well-defined base, middle, and top portion of the building: a traditional must-have for all significant projects. The base portion, or plinth, is taller and more prominent than the upper floors. It is finished in stucco with horizontal banding that asserts its difference from the rest of the building. It evokes a feeling of heaviness which grounds the building. The upper floors which comprise the middle portion of the building utilize different materials, (brick, cement panels, metal, and glass) on different planes to give the building dimension and a sense of balance. There is a rhythm to the placement of windows and a repetitive vertical alignment between windows and bands of brick veneer. Traditional architecture uses elements such as turrets or chamfers to define important building corners. Here we have a distinct volume of glass and metal that overhangs at the corners of the building and establishes

where two building facades intersect. And last, the top portion of the building demonstrates an architectural frieze and cornice in the traditional sense. The roof thickness or cornice is well pronounced not only by overhanging the facade but also by being elevated from the uppermost windows courtesy of the frieze.

Furthermore, in the sense of facade composition, the building does not stray too far away from what tradition has prescribed. It is mainly the use of colors and building materials which abruptly distinguishes this building from its counterparts when viewed from afar. But once given a moment to study its envelope, the proportions of the well-articulated facade let the user know this isn't such a different building after all. It's safe to say we're in Tarrytown.

September 2019



This raised the yet-to-be-resolved issue of defining the parameters of what might constitute an appropriate cumulative increase in density associated with future development in Tarrytown. However, it reflected a sincere effort to honor Tarrytown’s architectural legacy and, given sufficient opportunity, members of the public might have been supportive of this approach as a worthy starting point for such deliberations. Instead, before it could really be considered and apparently with encouragement from some village officials, the developer returned in February 2020 with an amended plan for an 88-unit, 60-foot-high generic building which requires a variance from the existing 40-foot maximum allowable height and, it is safe to say, does not leave us feeling like “we’re in Tarrytown.”

February 2020



EAST ELEVATION

The pandemic that followed may have distracted the public for a while, but now that people are in a position to pay more attention to other significant factors that play an important role in their overall quality of life, neither village officials nor the developer should be surprised that we have serious questions and concerns. As soon as the notion of converting warehouse space to mixed use residential space was raised for consideration, community members would have expected the Planning Board to be mindful of some of the language in the 2018 Comprehensive Plan, such as:

Tarrytown Connected Goal #12 – “Maintain a Village identity.”

“Growth must be balanced with a sense of the historical legacy of place.”

Tarrytown residents often cite its historic character and lively downtown as two of the Village’s strongest attributes. Its consistent, pedestrian-scale blocks, celebrated historic structures, and intimate feeling contributes to its strong identity and sense of anchoring each neighborhood. A walkable and historic downtown provides a clear destination for all residents and is in close proximity to numerous recreational opportunities along the waterfront. Numerous historic buildings and institutions, such as the Tarrytown Music Hall which regularly attracts large numbers of visitors to its events, adds to the diverse set of retail options and anchors downtown. Maintaining and improving the built environment of Tarrytown requires the preservation of historically significant sites, buildings, and viewsheds.

“While the station area has seen significant growth in recent years, the village has not yet realized the potential to connect it to the downtown. The significant grade change between the station area and downtown divides the two areas.”

“Recent construction of additional housing units means additional strain is placed on Village infrastructure such as sanitary systems, water supply, and roads. These systems need to be maintained and expanded as demand grows.”

Reference to increased density is made when it helps “... create places that serve a wider range of residents while preserving the balance of built and open space.”

Traffic congestion is a daily occurrence near the train station and along Broadway and a major concern for many Village residents. As traffic congestion worsens, drivers increasingly find alternative routes, cutting through local neighborhoods using roads not designed for handling large volumes of vehicles. In addition to lengthening trip times, this traffic often creates dangerous conditions for drivers, pedestrians, and cyclists, as well as excessive noise and pollution for the areas along the congested routes. Traffic congestion is also influenced by factors outside of Tarrytown's borders: large developments near Tarrytown that are nearing completion, such as Edge on Hudson in Sleepy Hollow, represent an additional challenge for already-congested roads and highlight the importance of ensuring alternatives to personal vehicles exist to facilitate a shift in the way people travel within and around the Village.

close proximity within a central area. Despite this, barriers preventing the widespread use of non-motorized transportation are frequently cited by residents. A steep grade slopes upward from the station area to downtown creating topographic challenges. The Metro-North train tracks isolate the waterfront from the rest of the Village. Currently, the only methods of crossing the tracks include using a pedestrian overpass within the Metro-North Station or navigating the H Bridge, which is designed primarily for cars. While sidewalks are abundant within the Village's downtown and around the train station, pedestrians struggle with discontinuous sidewalks on a number of streets beyond these high-traffic areas. Along Route 9, missing and poorly-identified crossings makes pedestrian mobility challenging and points to an opportunity to improve safety.

Although these considerations are clearly relevant in evaluating the appropriateness of the current proposal, the Planning Board appeared ready to simply move the project forward without pursuing any more impact analysis than the minimum required by regulation. Fortunately, alarmed citizens made their voices heard and a vote to move it forward was deferred. When the issue is revisited by the Planning Board, there will be even more concerned citizens raising questions that deserve answers. They will be calling for further study of the long-term implications of embracing a new standard for taller, higher-density buildings than has been applied throughout the history of the village, along with active public engagement in discussing these implications.

39-51 North Broadway: 60' high with 88 residential units over street front retail

This proposal requires a variance from the existing 35-foot maximum allowable height, dwarfing the historic Lyceum building that it abuts. The developer relied upon a generic stock façade in the rendering that was submitted and the design shows no respect whatsoever for the historic buildings that stretch from the corner of Main Street up to the point where the proposed structure begins. The proposal would eliminate public access to 19 of the parking spaces behind the building that are currently available for public use. Available retail space is greatly diminished and it is entirely possible that the owner will not have to be particularly concerned about renting it out due to the tax breaks associated with vacant retail property and the substantial profit that will be generated by the residential units. That profit potential will be enhanced by the fact that the developer already owns the property and it is already served by utilities.

Village officials have a pretty good track record for securing substantial public benefits in exchange for granting zoning variances. However, in this case, the developer is proposing a structure that will dramatically alter the streetscape in a manner that is not at all sensitive to the scale/design of the adjacent historic building stock, while reducing currently available retail and parking space. Where is the public benefit? How can we assess the impact on our community, not just of this project in isolation, but of this project in the context of all the other developments of similar scale and density that will follow, citing this project as an example? Does our community really want Broadway to be walled off from the rest of the village by a 60-foot-tall 175-foot long generic structure (which could set the standard for a similar structure extending from the north driveway to Central Ave)? You can expect many questions and concerns in this regard when this issue comes up on the agenda.



The Issue of Density

Members of the Planning Board are certainly better versed in this area than the average citizen. That said, a quick search for information on the topic suggests that the context often has to do with promoting density as an alternative to “suburban sprawl.” In that context, higher density mixed use development offers the opportunity to preserve open space and reduce reliance on cars. Yet, as the Comprehensive Plan indicates, Tarrytown is already effectively built out and there is little if any open space at risk of being developed. Since the economics of development in communities where land is scarce and land acquisition and construction costs are relatively high tend to incentivize construction of taller buildings, that is a consequence of increased density that the Tarrytown community is being asked to accept. Many underdeveloped sites that might be candidates for redevelopment in Tarrytown do not offer much in the way of an opportunity to expand open space as a tradeoff for the intrusion of the taller buildings into their visual space.

Tarrytown’s identity as an historic village/river town is well established. It is also a metropolitan area suburb with a Main-Street-centric commercial district that offers a modest urban style experience. As the density map below indicates, it is a low-density community and has not, nor has it ever been, an urban center.

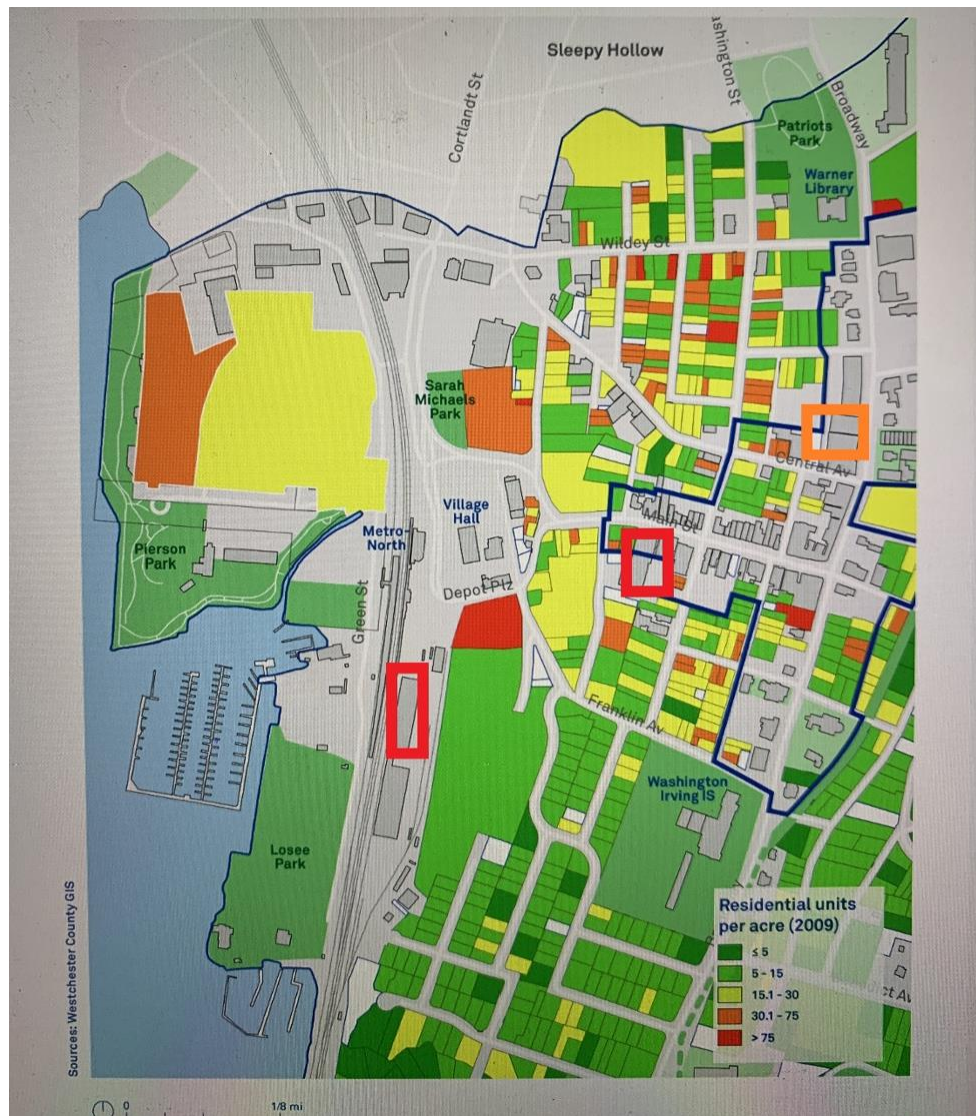
6-11-20 CHAZEN TECHNICAL REPORT 1 - 29 South Depot Plaza.pdf



Sources: Westchester County GIS

Yet the thinking around future development that seems to be reflected in recent project proposals, and in changes to zoning regulations being contemplated by village officials, suggests a trend towards embracing a “new urbanism” characterized by higher density, “transit oriented development.” The evidence from the current 29 South Depot Plaza and 39-51 North Broadway proposals suggests that developers are interpreting this trend as an invitation to construct generic high density (by Tarrytown standards), 60-foot tall buildings that do not look like they belong in Tarrytown. The roughly modified map below illustrates the density impact of these two projects, along with the Y project at 62 Main Street, which clearly increase the existing stock of higher density properties by a significant order of magnitude.

Density Impact of Three Current Project Proposals



The more important question to ask has to do with the big picture cumulative impact of increased density and taller buildings if this approach becomes the standard for redeveloping “underdeveloped” properties throughout our community. While there are site-related factors that might mitigate against planting 60-foot-tall, high density buildings on some of these properties, the crude rendering below illustrates the hypothetical application of this approach to sites currently occupied by one or two story commercial buildings throughout the area covered by this map. (And this does not even take into consideration the implications of allowing development of land currently owned by the Village, which was referenced as a possible option in the Comprehensive Plan.)

Impact of Hypothetical Future High Density Development



Conclusion

The Planning Board is considering development proposals that will take Tarrytown in an historically unprecedented direction ... permanently altering the character of this historic village and the quality of life that is so highly valued by our current residents. The 29 South Depot Plaza and 39-51 North Broadway project developers are proposing buildings that are generic (by Tarrytown standards), high occupant density (by Tarrytown standards), and tall (by Tarrytown standards). This “new urbanism” approach is based on a “transit oriented development” concept that should be subject to serious questions in the wake of the pandemic. Its assumptions regarding the benefits of higher population density are perhaps more relevant in suburbs with open land that is available for development than in an historically low-density village which is already fully built out.

It is not in the best interests of the community for a handful of unelected village officials to move proposals like these forward without pausing to consider the impact, not just of these specific projects, but the cumulative impact on all aspects of village life (thoughtfully referenced in Tarrytown’s Comprehensive Plan) if this approach were to be applied to “underdeveloped” properties throughout the village over time. As you proceed with operationalizing the themes expressed in the Comprehensive Plan in the form of new standards for development, it is critically important that your work is appropriately informed by a more comprehensive perspective on its potential impact. You should sponsor a comprehensive study of the implications of the new standards you are contemplating and then provide ample opportunities for the public to comment on these standards and their implications before they are applied in approving development proposals of this magnitude. Until this work is completed, the responsible thing to do is to declare a moratorium on approving zoning variances or changes in zoning regulations applicable to projects of significance.