

Riley, Kate

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From: Doug Brown <[redacted]>  
Sent: Monday, December 2, 2019 2:21 AM  
To: Riley, Kate; Black, Michael  
Cc: Peterson, Lisa; City Manager; City Council  
Subject: Feedback on Tobin School Project

Dear City staff,

Please accept the following comments regarding the three proposed designs for the Tobin School.

To begin, of the three designs presented, let me just say that I personally prefer Option #2 (the so-called "Wings" design) for the following reasons:

- It has the smallest building footprint (though it could and should be reduced further).
- It does a better job of combining open space into fewer, larger spaces (the "Pavilions" design chops up the open space into many tiny and disparate spaces).
- It does a better job of separating vehicle traffic from potential pedestrian routes (though the amount of surface parking should be reduced further, perhaps through increased underground garage space and/or drop-offs internal to the garage to eliminate some surface drop-off areas).
- It provides a better location for the playing fields next to the mature oaks along Vassal Lane rather than abutting the noisy parkway and neighboring car repair facilities.
- It preserves a tot lot and playground onsite (which, surprisingly, Option #1 does not).
- It does the best job of making use of solar exposure to the south.

Regarding possible improvements to the design, here's an alternative version of Option #2 by Chris Matthews, an architect and East Cambridge resident who works on Concord Avenue at Michael Van Valkenberg landscape architects. This version uses the same building shape, but reduces the footprint slightly and shifts the building somewhat to the northwest to free up more open space on the site:



This district has an open space requirement of 60%. Currently, the site is 72% open space (6.6 acres of a total site of 9.1 acres). In its presentation, the City claims that 5 acres (55%) of the site is protected open space under Article 79, but fails to mention the 60% zoning requirement. All three proposed designs have at least 55% open space, but none of them have 60%. In my opinion, all three designs would require a variance for reduced open space unless the open space percentage can be increased slightly. The modified plan above does so quite elegantly.

Similarly, the City will need a variance for increased Floor Area Ratio (FAR). The current zoning allows for an FAR of 0.25, while the largest of the proposed designs has an FAR of roughly 0.75, not including underground parking (which raises the FAR to 0.89). Though the Zoning Ordinance would allow for an increase of up to 1.25 for some school uses, this exemption doesn't apply to the Tobin site because it is not zoned for residential use.

Beyond a large stormwater tank to provide enhanced grey infrastructure, the presentation made no mention of any other resiliency features. I would like to see additional green infrastructure features (rain gardens, bioswales, green roofs) incorporated into the design.

I would also like to see a clear, straight, well-lighted connection between Concord Avenue and Vassal Lane/Fresh Pond Reservation as repeatedly mentioned in the just released Envision Alewife Master Plan. This path would ideally not need to meander excessively in order to avoid vehicular areas. A passageway through the building itself would be ideal, as it would allow better connections across the site rather than forcing pedestrians to walk all the way around the building as at present. Such a direct, external North-South passthrough between the preschool and Tobin wings of the building would best connect Concord Avenue and Vassal Lane, as well as fulfill the request for a pedestrian corridor from Fern Street to the parkway crossing at Vassal Lane as repeatedly requested in the Alewife Plan.

Finally, regardless of the design selected, I would like to see the Vassal Lane drop-off circle eliminated, because it causes too many cars and buses to drive down Standish Street each morning and afternoon. Standish Street is significantly narrower than Lakeview or Concord Avenues and becomes almost impassable to school buses in the winter when accumulated snow means that cars can't park as tight to the curb as during the warmer months.

Thank you for your time and consideration in this important matter.

Sincerely,

Doug Brown

