



CITY OF NEWBURYPORT
HISTORICAL COMMISSION
60 PLEASANT STREET • P.O. BOX 550
NEWBURYPORT, MA 01950
(978) 465-4400
WWW.CITYOFNEWBURYPORT.COM

DOD Supplemental Report

Meeting Date 29 October, 2020
Property Address 93 State Street
Applicant Institution for Savings; Atty. Lisa Mead, MTC

Project description: Build a 2-story addition to the existing structure, with parking on the ground level and office space on upper story.

Plan(s) of Record: For this “supplement,” we referred to the latest revised plans submitted on 1 October 2020 (93_state_street_nbpt_hc_filing_9.30.20.pdf).

Purpose of this second supplemental report:

The Newburyport Historical Commission (NHC) submitted an advisory report to the Planning Board on 18 February, 2020, based on the plans originally submitted for review. A second, “Supplemental,” report was issued on 25 June, 2020, based on revised plans. Since then, the applicant has made substantial changes to the plans, and the Planning Board has asked the NHC to review these new plans and produce another report for their review.

The NHC heard a presentation from the applicant’s attorney and architect, and took public comments on 8 October. We continued the matter for further discussion at our 22 October meeting, so all members of the commission could contribute to this report.

Executive Summary

While the latest plans reflect an exemplary effort to make the architectural design of the proposed building fit more harmoniously within its setting, they do not resolve the single biggest issue: massing, or to use a more commonly understood term, “size.” It is clear that parking requirements are a key aspect of the “program,” but the parking system chosen requires a first floor height of about sixteen feet, which forces the rest of the building higher than normal. When you understand this, you easily understand why the universal sentiment expressed by neighbors is “It’s too big.”

Role of the Newburyport Historical Commission

The Downtown Overlay District (DOD) ordinance (XXVII-F -3.a.) requires compliance with “any relevant provisions of the United States Secretary of the Interior’s Standards as they may be amended from time to time, including all related guidelines, bulletins and other official guidance promulgated by the National Park Service.” (The National Park Service interprets the Standards in various bulletins, which the NHC consults.) The standards are clear about the matter of size, scale and massing, which is the main issue with this proposal, as these examples show:

- “Height and setback from the street should generally be consistent with those of the historic building and other surrounding buildings... So even if “the primary elevation is designed to give the appearance of being several buildings by breaking up the facade into elements,” those elements must be “consistent with the scale of the historic building and adjacent buildings.”
- “A new addition should always be subordinate and not compete in size or scale...”
- “When visible and in close proximity to historic buildings, the new construction must be subordinate to these buildings.”
- “Protecting the historic setting and context of a property, including the degree of open space and building density, must always be considered when planning new construction on an historic site.”

This recurring emphasis on the need to “protect the historic setting and context of a property,” “the historic relationship between buildings, the building’s site and environment,” and “other surrounding historic buildings in the district” is reflected in our DOD ordinance. It states that “New construction within the DOD shall not disrupt the essential form and integrity of the subject historic building... structure, **the lot where it is located, or its setting within the DOD**...New construction shall be compatible with the size, scale, height, color, material and character of the subject historic building...lot where it is located, and its setting within the DOD.” *[emphasis added]*

Size/Massing Analysis

The following image is a “section” taken along Prospect Street from the applicant’s presentation. Colored lines have been added to aid a comparison of height between the proposed structure and neighboring structures across the street. I have also added the (approximate) eave height for 9 Prospect St., which is an older and smaller house, and comparison lines at the approximate height of the second floor:

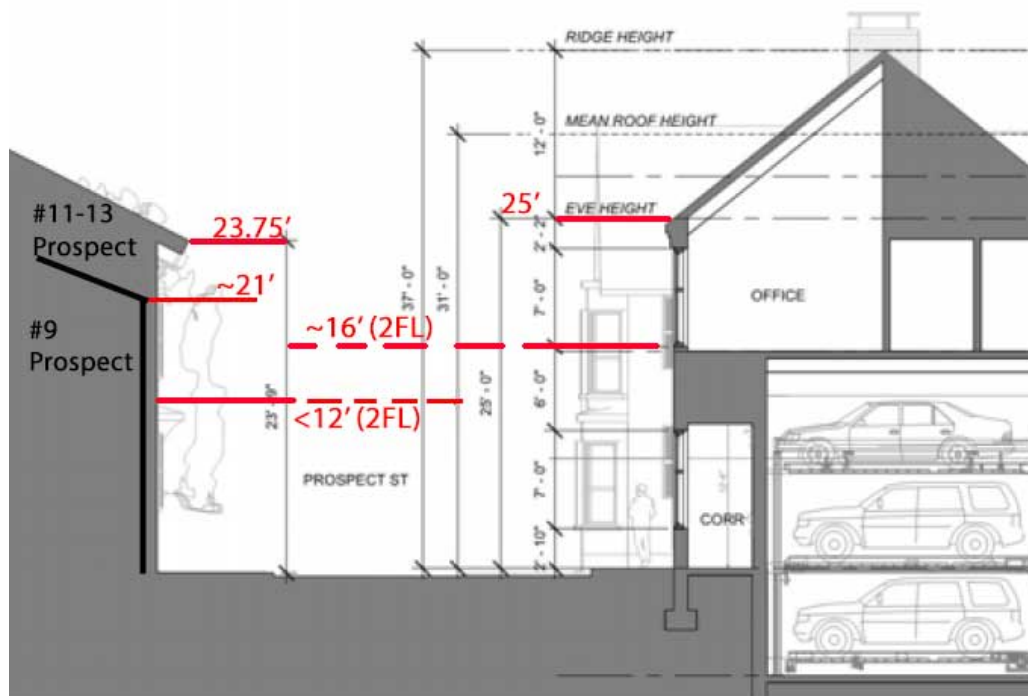


Illustration 1: Section looking East down Prospect St.

NB: The provided renderings of this view from the 3D model are of limited value because they are oblique views, which make direct height comparisons difficult. The Planning Board may find it helpful to get renderings from the model of this, and similar views, that are straight-on, to avoid distortion caused by horizontal perspective, where nearer objects appear relatively larger than they normally would.

The image below, also from the applicant's presentation, is an aerial rendering which illustrates the contrast in size and massing between the proposed structure and its nearest abutter:



Perhaps these images are better than words to show that the proposed structure is too massive – especially too high – to fit harmoniously into its locale.

Legal Analysis

An argument we heard from the applicant is that there are ‘historical patterns’ throughout the city – including some within the DOD – where large commercial buildings have been built among older residential structures. Rather than favoring the applicant, it seems this argument actually illustrates the need for the DOD ordinance, to help avoid or control inappropriate development.

By the DOD ordinance, the task of the NHC is to evaluate how well proposed projects adhere to the provisions of that ordinance and the Secretary of the Interior’s standards to which it refers. We strive to do so as fairly and objectively as we can. This is especially true in this case, as we are aware of the high regard that this applicant (the Institution for Savings) has earned for itself among the citizens of Newburyport. We do not take a position “for” or “against” any project; we only try to fulfill our obligation to make and report our determinations based on the evaluation of the applicant’s plans and exhibits and our research.

Further Analysis and Commentary

In terms of the relationship of the proposed structure to the historic 93 State Street building, there was agreement that because its location is set back to the rear of the lot, the size of the addition is less overwhelming to the historic structure than might otherwise be the case. But that only holds true from the State Street perspective. The fact remains that the size of the addition is considerably larger than the historic building, a condition considered inappropriate by the Secretary's standards.

Further, the massing problem, especially along Prospect Street and Otis Place, is little changed from prior plans. In those locales, the addition still looms very large, despite the improvements made to the design and materials that allow it to better harmonize with the neighborhood. The latest plans lower the **eave height** through the use pitched roofs, but it should be noted that the buildings are about **five feet higher than originally planned at the ridge**. The design change from flat to pitched roof might have been successful if it were not for the unusual height or the second floor, due to the requirements of the parking system.

As stated in prior reports, the neighborhood surrounding the bank's lot is considered special not only by its residents, but also by the Massachusetts Historical Commission. The MHC found the locale of sufficient historical interest to merit documentation in a "Form G," used to document a historic local area or streetscape.

According to the historical architect in the Office of Historic Preservation at the National Park Service, "To the degree that the existing neighborhood context has a positive, consistent, and valued character, and to the degree that the proposed design would substantially alter that character, the proposed design must bear the burden of proof for demonstrating that the benefits to the neighborhood context and to the city as a whole will outweigh the residual unavoidable harm that would be done to the sense of place. The location of the burden of proof is upon the architects who propose the change."

Conclusion

The members of the commission agree that there the proposed design does not conform to the Secretary's standards, primarily due to the height aspect of the structure's "massing," and the existing characteristics of the setting. The proposed location 'reads' more like part of the neighborhood of residential housing than a commercial lot on State Street. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that some of the neighboring structures were built so long ago, they are significantly smaller than more recent, but otherwise comparable, structures.

Several commissioners expressed disappointment that a solution that meets the bank's requirements while protecting the city's interests and the historic values of the neighborhood has so far eluded us; but we remain hopeful that a solution may yet be found.

Respectfully submitted, 29 October, 2020

Glenn Richards, Chair
Newburyport Historical Commission