

MEMORANDUM

From: Emil Dahlquist, Planning Board Member
To: Hamilton Planning Board
Date: October 17, 2022
Re: The Seminary Site Reuse Initiative and Code

The Seminary Site Reuse Initiative and Code is a unique opportunity for Hamilton to engage in a highly visible town planning process with rewarding potentials. The Initiative is built on a partnership between two entities: 1) representatives of the Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, the current property owner intending to relinquish that ownership soon and 2) the Town of Hamilton, charged with codifying the site for a mutually beneficial purpose. The Town has commissioned the Consulting team of Abramson and Associates and Gamble Associates to facilitate the design and coding process that is anticipated to conclude in January 2023. The Town has also formed a small group of officials to oversee the process along with representatives of the Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary. Many questions remain about how the process will unfold toward decisions that will take time to answer.

The Seminary Site is a well-defined property with specific historic and visual characteristics, however, the subject of the Initiative, the ultimate **Purpose** (Plan / Use) of the site, is yet to be established. The path to determining the Purpose will be an evolving process that will include several workshops with public and other stakeholder participation.

This Memorandum is addressed to the Planning Board for discussion and decision to use as an initial pre-design position paper. Since the process will be short and the Planning Board will have limited engagement, the intent here is to present a series of communiques to the Consultants to offer guidance / feedback periodically throughout the process as data and information become available. As the elected body that must make its eventual imprint on this process, the Planning Board has the obligation to take a pro-active role rather than a re-active role once the Code is written.

The following are three observations and comments for the Planning Board to share with the participants in this Initiative with respect to the Plan development process if approved:

The Goal

The overarching goal is to create a sustainable development for the Town and the Seminary in this place and at this time. Sustainability in its simplest form can be defined as follows:

“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Doing so must integrate and balance economic, environmental, and social goals”¹

¹ Footnote: 1987 Brundtland Report World Commission on Environment and Development; sponsored by the United Nations.

There are three variables or tools at the Town’s disposal for making community decisions that lead to sustainable development: social, environmental, and economic. The overall emphasis of this Initiative is to create a dynamic balance between social well-being, economic opportunity, and environmental quality and no specific topic that affects these variables may be thought of in isolation. Each must be integrated into a framework where it may be evaluated in context with all planning topics that will be discussed in this Plan. This Initiative provides an opportunity to think about how conservation and development relate to one another to create a successful Plan that will reflect a consensus among all participants. Success will be measured by more than square footage of commercial space.

The Site

A full appreciation the historical significance and visual importance of the site must guide the analysis of site and shape the design. The Hamilton Reconnaissance Report² contains a description of some of the attributes of the site in its inventory emphasizing the Seminary’s landscape characteristics, including scenic and sweeping vistas and mature ornamental and specimen plantings.

The existing site and the Purpose supported by it are two sources of design that are interrelated. Purpose depends on the limitations that the site will impose, and site analysis depends on Purpose. The site won’t necessarily define the Purpose but it should guide it. There is an obvious harmony and character in the land today and any future development must honor a continuance of that relationship to the greatest degree possible.

In fact, open space placement and size should be the principal design determinant as the Plan takes shape. Think of a campus model that organizes building placement around open space, or buildings that attain distinction through separation using open space, or that provides accessible open space for recreation or relaxation. Open space, as an invaluable amenity, should be the dominant feature in the Plan giving it its identity and determining whether this site retains its harmony and character. Only by retaining that character will a Purpose evolve that will elevate

² HAMILTON RECONNAISSANCE REPORT
ESSEX COUNTY LANDSCAPE INVENTORY
MASSACHUSETTS HERITAGE LANDSCAPE INVENTORY PROGRAM

“PRIORITY HERITAGE LANDSCAPES

Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary is located off Essex Street on the top of Brown's Hill, the highest point in Hamilton. It is the site of the former Mandell estate and was previously a Catholic high school, owned by the Carmelite Order. The seminary purchased the property in 1970. There are remnants of the estate landscape, with scenic drive, sweeping lawns, ornamental plantings, mature specimen trees and dramatic regional views. Some of the former estate buildings remain and additional buildings have been added since the 1960s to support the various activities of the seminary. There is also a town-owned underground concrete reservoir on top of the hill and panoramic views over the Miles River Valley that are highly valued by community residents.”

the site over competing acreage to attract potential development that will be sustainable and enable the Town and the Seminary to achieve maximum benefits.

Site Assessment

The first step in conservation development is to identify and delineate regulated (wetland) areas, and unprotected site features (steep slopes, historic / cultural resources, visible geologic features, wildlife corridors, etc.) to understand the ecological system and therefore any consequences to changes. This first step precedes design considerations because it is the interaction of human and habitat that shapes character and creates a “sense of place”.

The quality of a site analysis is dependent on the findings from a preliminary site assessment. In addition to the standard components of a site plan such as legal lines, existing building placements, circulation systems, and topography, a good site analysis identifies other features beyond those just mentioned. It is also useful to have an initial personal reconnaissance – notes, sketches, pictures – apparent character, problems and possibilities, viewpoints, vistas, and visual focal points to eventually inform the site design.