Yale New Haven Health Saint Raphael Campus

Bed Replacement and Neuroscience Center

Neighborhood Design Considerations – 02/14/2020

Yale Urban Design Workshop

for Dwight Central Management Team, Greater Dwight Development Corporation, and Friends of the Dwight Historic District

The proposed Neuroscience Center at the YNHH St. Raphael Campus will be a major economic asset for the City of New Haven and its neighborhoods, bringing jobs, economic activity, and enhancing New Haven’s position as a center of medical research and patient care. It will also have considerable impact on the immediately surrounding neighborhoods in terms of traffic, public health and safety, and neighborhood character and quality of life. However, a project of this scale and level of investment presents opportunities not only to mitigate those potentially adverse impacts, but also to actively advance the ongoing development of a safe, healthy, pedestrian and bicycle friendly, attractive and historic neighborhood in a way that will serve the long-term goals of both the neighborhood and YNHH. It is in that spirit that we offer the following comments, which are intended to call attention to immediate concerns, but also be the basis for a lasting and collaborative relationship.

The details of the Dwight Neighborhood’s concerns about the current situation and potentially negative of impact of the proposed project with respect to traffic, public health and safety have been presented elsewhere. The focus here is on the need and opportunity to improve significantly the network of local streets that knit the St. Raphael Campus and the neighborhood together: to make them safer, more attractive, and better-performing as multi-modal public streets and spaces. The current plans for the project indicate intentions along those lines, with new and improved traffic signals, reconstructed sidewalks, removal and relocation of overhead power lines, and additional street trees. However, given the scale of the project and its obvious need to connect safely to nearby transit and commercial corridors, not to mention the main YNHH Campus, the University, Downtown New Haven, and of course Union Station, there is an opportunity to implement far more intensively and extensively the kinds of measures that are being discussed and tested in New Haven and many other cities. These include:

* Complete streets, that coordinate vehicular traffic, bicycle lanes, pedestrian space, bus stops, landscaping, lighting, signage, and parking in one comprehensive design;
* Traffic calming and pedestrian safety measures, including corner bump-outs; well-marked and frequent, even raised crosswalks; raised traffic-tables at key intersections, coordinated timing of traffic signals to reduce both speeding through-traffic and unnecessary idling that increases automobile emissions;
* Green infrastructure and streetscape that manages storm water, and enhances the visual character, shade and public health of the neighborhood;
* Explore ways to reduce overall parking demand and plan for convertible parking structures;
* Bus stops with shelters that are attractive and safe, and located in convenient and safe locations with respect to crosswalks and major destinations;
* Sidewalks that are attractive and accessible, with coordinated lighting, signage and landscape that does not interfere with pedestrian flow or compromise visibility and safety;
* Bicycle lanes that are clearly marked and signed, appropriately located (removing lanes of on-street parking where necessary), and provided with strategically located bike racks

This is the place to emphasize that pedestrian and bicycle friendly design and policies will be a key to successful, sustainable and livable cities going forward, as well as for large, high-skill employers. Already, millennials are making decisions about place of work and place of residence with reference to walkability and accommodation of bicycles, not to mention attractive, affordable housing within with a convenient radius and within a lively neighborhood with real character. Dwight and surrounding neighborhoods are almost ideal in many respects, but every new project now needs to send a clear signal about coordinated improvements in the critical areas of housing and mobility, not only with amenities like lockable bike storage for employees, but highly visible bike facilities for the neighborhood, including a bike share program and rack, that links with similar nodes at the YNHH main campus, downtown, and Union Station, by clearly delineated and safe routes that should be designated in plans. Existing programs aimed at mobility and housing affordability, such as the current YNHH HOME program, need to be highlighted and extended to help create the kind of neighborhood that residents and employees will increasingly demand.

Chapel Street, as a main neighborhood and city-wide corridor, is an obvious focus for these sorts of improvements, but also George Street, which will be the front door of the new Neuroscience Center, and even Edgewood Avenue, which is effectively the neighborhood’s “Main Street.” In addition, the cross streets, which tie these east-west corridors together, and link them to the regional corridors of Whalley and Legion Avenues, notably Orchard Street, should be developed as part of this multi-modal street network. Along the way, multiple opportunities should be developed for enhanced commercial activity and associated small public spaces, including space for the sort of food truck activity that always accompanies major medical centers, and is already present to some extent. The picture painted here is of a lively, safe and healthy neighborhood for residents and YNHH, not just of large new buildings.

These large new buildings point to a challenge that New Haven, and many cities like it have faced in recent decades. As large institutions and facilities, like YNHH, develop and expand in dense, historic urban neighborhoods, like Dwight, there are inevitable conflicts between the scale, massing and building typology of state-of-the-art new facilities, such as those for research and medical care, and the characteristic fabric and character of centuries-old neighborhoods. In the case of the proposed project, the direct impact would seem to be limited to two fine historic residential structures on Sherman Avenue, which have been proposed for relocation, ideally within the neighborhood, and the mixed-use structure at the corner of Chapel and Orchard Streets which buffers the existing Orchard Street garage and provides commercial frontage at a critical neighborhood intersection. However, this direct impact is symptomatic, and points to the overall visual and spatial impact of a large, and enlarging, monolithic and introverted use in the midst of a mainly residential neighborhood, with its more variegated and finer-grained urban fabric.

As it has expanded over time, the St. Raphael campus continued the material palette of mainly brick, if not always the scale and character, of its older buildings. Along Chapel Street, architectural details like arcades and ornamental bands were incorporated into new construction to mitigate the impact of the new scale and massing, and as a nod to local context and history. Where this was not attempted, primarily in the massive parking structures that were built along George and Orchard Streets, the effect on the street was deadening. Nevertheless, most would agree that the Chapel Street frontage blended well with the mixed scale and character of that corridor, certainly compared to the garages along George and Orchard.

Now the proposed project would add two new 700+ car garages along those same two streets, with one of them replacing the current Orchard Street garage and the mixed-use building at Orchard and Chapel. That, together with 200 new underground spaces will bring the total parking capacity of the St. Raphael Campus, upon completion of the project, to 2,437. That is over 500 more spaces than the City requires and is, in part, due to the perceived need to accommodate overlap during shift changes. In addition, the construction of the two new garages will bring the total length of neighborhood street frontage totally dominated by single-use parking structures to roughly 1300 feet – nearly a quarter mile. This at a time when around the world, cities are seeking to reduce auto-dependency by actually reducing parking supply in critical areas, relying on a combination of off-site parking, shuttles, public transit, and of course bicycles and walking. New Haven is already a city with a reputation for a downtown and medical area dominated by massive, even monumental, parking structures, and now this unfortunate landscape is threatening historic neighborhoods as well.

The first line of defense would surely be to seek ways of reducing parking demand through a broad range of policies, incentives and programs. Increasing housing supply within walking distance should be both a short-term and long-term goal, especially given the upzoning of the Whalley Avenue corridor to encourage denser mixed-use development. Only Wednesday, a consultant to the project highlighted the importance of attractive, walkable connections between Union Station, the YNHH main campus, and the St. Raphael Campus, as crucial to the success of this project and to the long-term success of New Haven as hub for medical research and patient care. This should obviously be combined with other forms of non-automobile dependent mobility, and be a central goal of neighborhood and city planning going forward whatever the configuration of the current project.

YNHH and its consultants have embraced some of the features of so-called green garage design, incorporating solar panels on the roofs and screening elements with planting for mitigation of noise, emissions, and visual impact associated with the garages. However, one important component of the necessary evil of new garage construction that is increasingly employed now, is designing all or parts of a new garage for eventual conversion to other uses, as we gradually wean ourselves from auto-dependency. In addition to working to reduce overall parking demand and designing for garage reuse, more consideration should be given to a design approach and contextual material palette that will break down the monolithic scale and massing of the garages from key points of public view. This includes not only the facades along George and Chapel Street, but especially the treatment of highly visible and currently sheer corners. In particular, the northeast corner of the proposed Chapel Street garage will loom over anyone approaching from the east along Chapel because of the setback of the Grimes Center.

Finally, the critical Chapel Street frontage of the proposed garage will replace a neighborhood scale mixed use building that currently houses the Hospital Thrift Shop. The current design replaces that street-level activity and transparency with the screened and locked bicycle storage room for YNHH employees. While that is certainly a desirable new facility, it could go elsewhere, freeing the most visible frontage along Chapel street for ground floor uses that both serve and symbolize a commitment to interact openly and constructively with the neighborhood, precisely as the consultant referenced above suggested in his remarks. This would be a significant first step, much like Yale University’s decision to include ground floor retail in the British Art Center’s own Chapel Street frontage in the 1970s, in building the basis for an ongoing collaborative relationship with the neighborhoods and their residents that are, after all, the neighbors for the St. Raphael Campus and its employees and patients. The next step would then be to support and participate in a long overdue update of the neighborhood plan that takes account of both the impact and opportunities of exciting new developments like the rezoning of Whalley Avenue and of course the new YNHH Neuroscience Center, with the shared goals of ensuring a sustainable, diverse, walkable, affordable and vibrant neighborhood for all stakeholders.

The areas of concern and suggestions with respect to the garages therefore include:

* A good faith attempt to reduce the overall parking demand through a range of measures such as off-site parking, increased reliance on public transit, bicycle and pedestrian use, and work force housing in the immediate neighborhoods;
* Green parking garage design, including measures to reduce idling time entering and exiting the garages and incentives to encourage employee use of electric and hybrid vehicles;
* Massing, façade design and materials and details which mitigate the visual impact of new parking structures on the surrounding neighborhood;
* Garage design that anticipates future adaptation to alternate uses;
* Ground floor design and programming for street oriented uses, especially along Chapel and George Streets.

And, most importantly, a commitment to an ongoing process of neighborhood-based assessment and planning.

We look forward to your response to these comments, and to working with you to make this project a win for all concerned and part of a continuing process of inclusive neighborhood planning.