 Article 34. Fraternity Residence (R-F) Dimensions (Planning Board)

To see if the Town will amend Table 3, Dimensional Regulations, by adding Footnote a. to the following dimensions in the Fraternity Residence (R-F) District:

- Basic Minimum Lot Area (sq. ft.) $^h$ 40,000
- Additional Lot Area/Family (sq. ft.) ----- 
- Basic Minimum Lot Frontage (ft.) 150
- Basic Minimum Front Setback (ft.) $^a$ 25
- Basic Minimum Side and Rear Yards (ft.) $^g$ 20
- Maximum Building Coverage (%) 20$^a$ ←
- Maximum Lot Coverage (%) 45$^o$ ←
- Maximum Floors $^a$ 3
- Maximum Height (ft.) $^n$ 40$^a$ ←

[NOTE: The arrows serve only to highlight the dimensions being amended by adding Footnote a., which already exists and is not being amended. It is included below for informational purposes]

a. Requirement may be modified under a Special Permit, issued by the Special Permit Granting Authority authorized to act under the applicable section of this bylaw. In applying the criteria established in Section 10.395, the Special Permit Granting Authority shall consider the proposed modified dimensional requirement in the context of the pattern(s) of the same dimensions established by existing buildings and landscape features in the surrounding neighborhood.

Recommendation

The Planning Board voted unanimously 9-0 to recommend that Town Meeting adopt Article 34.

Background

The Fraternity Residence (R-F) District is the only zoning district in Amherst that allows fraternities and sororities, and the district also accommodates any “social dormitory, or similar

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use related to [the educational institutions].” Essentially, the R-F District is a district created to foster and accommodate student housing.

Article 34 proposes to expand the flexibility of building dimensions of the Fraternity Residence (R-F) District by amending Table 3, Dimensional Regulations, of the Zoning Bylaw. The proposed changes would add the existing Footnote a. to three R-F District dimensions—building coverage, lot coverage, and height.

Footnote a. allows dimensional requirements to be modified under a Special Permit, but requires that any proposed modification must be considered “in the context of the pattern(s) of the same dimensions established by existing buildings and landscape features in the surrounding neighborhood.” This would allow—and require—development in each distinct area of the R-F District to respond to and remain compatible with its own distinct context.

The R-F District exists in only two places—Olympia Drive (adopted by Town Meeting March 1969) and an area within the campus consisting of the Newman Center property and two adjacent fraternities (adopted by Town Meeting November 1991), as shown on the attached map. The two R-F District areas are very different from each. Olympia Drive has only two private properties. All the rest is owned by the Commonwealth (UMass) or by the Town of Amherst and is a predominantly residential area. Adjacent residential development includes the existing 200-unit Village Park Apartments and the 42-unit Olympia Oaks affordable rental development soon to be under construction. The Newman Center area includes three private properties that are within and surrounded by the UMass campus. This area may represent a significant opportunity to generate meaningful amounts of student housing. Neither R-F District site is directly adjacent to an established single family homeowner neighborhood.

The R-F District on Olympia Drive was created in 1969 in an attempt to encourage relocation of fraternities and sororities out of existing residential neighborhoods into an area created just for them. The effort was largely unsuccessful. The on-campus R-F District has been in place since 1991. Formerly zoned Educational (ED), it was established in recognition of the private ownership of the three properties and the presence of two existing fraternities.

The dimensional regulations of the R-F District represent an obstacle to both the relocation of fraternities/sororities, and to the development of other forms of student housing. The regulations assume buildings of strictly “house-like” residential proportions. At one time, this might have been appropriate for the Olympia Drive area, but it has never reflected the appropriate scale and potential of the on-campus properties. The nearest residential buildings are at an entirely different scale, and include the older 5-6 story dormitories on Clark Hill Road or in the Northeast Residential Area.
There are significant obstacles to the ability of UMass to build meaningful amounts of new student beds on campus in the foreseeable future. UMass has reached its bonding capacity for new construction. Current state laws obstruct the formation of public-private partnerships for the construction of housing on properties owned by the Commonwealth. Attempts are being made to address these obstacles, but they present challenges that will not quickly be resolved or overcome.

The Planning Board believes that reasonable and responsible efforts should be made to encourage new private student housing in appropriate areas. Development on the private properties in the R-F District would not require UMass participation. A “social dormitory, or similar use” is permitted under a Site Plan Review approval by the Planning Board in the R-F District. Given the strong demand generated by the student housing market and the numerous student housing developers exploring Amherst, new private student housing might occur relatively quickly on R-F District-zoned property, if the dimensional regulations for the R-F District were amended to allow such development to proceed in a manner appropriate to the setting.

Olympia Drive is surrounded by residential buildings of a range of scales, ranging from single family homes, other fraternities and sororities, the planned 42-unit Olympia Oaks affordable housing project, and the 200-unit Village Park development.

The Newman Center area is within the campus and is surrounded by large institutional buildings. Any student housing created there could be designed to be compatible not only with its setting, but would be consistent with the land use and architectural approaches UMass is pursuing under its own Master Plan, which specifically includes the strategy of “developing more graduate and undergraduate housing within the core of the campus.”

Public Hearing

The Planning Board held a public hearing on Article 34 on Wednesday, April 17. The Zoning Subcommittee presented its recommendations.

There was no public comment. It was noted that the on-campus Newman Center area was in the middle of the campus and would be an especially appropriate location for student housing.

After further discussion, the Planning Board voted unanimously 9-0 to recommend that Town Meeting adopt Article 34.
Campus Master Plan—Proposed Land Uses (Newman Center and Olympia Drive R-F District areas circled)
ARTICLE 34, FRATERNITY RESIDENCE (R-F) DIMENSIONS

UMASS AMHERST CAMPUS MASTER PLAN – Newman Center Area circled