Walkable Laurel

The proposal consists of a 73-unit multi-family rental project with associated mixed uses to be located in the Revitalization Overlay area, Patuxent River Transit-Oriented Development Overlay area, the Arts & Entertainment Overlay area, and Historic District #4 of Laurel, MD. It is bounded by B and C Streets (to the west and east), Tolson Alley (to the south), and the existing C Street Flats development (to the north). Historic Main Street is a half block south of the project site and accessible via a mid-block public alley.

Project Goals

The Project Team’s overall approach is one of Strategic Placemaking – creating places that are uniquely attractive to people who want to live in the Historic Main Street neighborhood and by doing so, create the circumstances for economic growth, improved livability downtown, and sustainability. Project goals include:

- to bring more residents to Main Street and help create a critical mass of people who choose to live in town;
- to connect new development to Main Street so both new and existing development benefit and are activated;
- to create a place that is unique in Old Town but also unique to Old Town – the kind of place that cannot be replicated in a shopping mall.

Project Description

Uses: the proposed mixed-use project will include 73 upscale multi-family rental units in 3 different building types: an elevator building, 2 walk-up buildings, and 2 mews buildings. Residential units will include a mix of unit types: 1 and 2 bedroom flats, lofts, and townhouse-like mews homes. Non-residential uses will include space for a restaurant/café, fitness facility, a co-working facility, and 2 live/work units designed to accommodate artists, galleries, or home occupations.

The non-residential uses in the project – all pedestrian-oriented - have been carefully located on the site to activate public spaces and to create connections to the Main Street commercial district. Residential uses have also been used to activate public space – all ground floor residential units have direct access to the public space. This creates more front doors, which enliven the streetscape and enhance neighborhood security by providing more ‘eyes on the street.’
**Urban Context:** the site is located on vacant and/or under-utilized parcels between the existing Main Street commercial area, existing residential development, and the Riverfront Park. The proposed **mixed-use development project** will provide attractive public space, new activity, and a physical and symbolic **reconnection of the Main Street business community with its Patuxent River origins**. The new project achieves this by enhancing walkability between Main Street and the Riverfront Park, providing attractive, well-located public spaces and activity generators, and through its architecture and massing which recalls the mill buildings and similar industrial uses once common in the area. The new community will be home to new downtown residents, just steps away from both the commercial activity of Main Street and the recreational opportunities of the Riverfront Park.

**Main Street:** the proposed project will reinforce Main Street businesses by bringing new residents – new customers for Main Street businesses – to this walkable neighborhood. Urbanistically, the proposed development will serve as a **complement to Main Street**. Where Main Street is a very particular kind of urban experience – roadway busy with vehicles, parked cars, relatively narrow sidewalks with people coming and going to adjacent shopfronts – the proposed project creates different and complementary kinds of urban spaces adjacent to Main Street – quieter, greener, more intimate in scale, spaces where pedestrians outnumber vehicles, and residential uses outnumber commercial. Retail spaces are smaller and **appropriate for artisans and craftsmen, artists, or galleries, or home occupations and limited professional uses**.

**Public Spaces:** the proposed project includes four distinct but interconnected types of places in an **innovative mix of public spaces** – traditional sidewalks, central courtyard, charming pedestrian walkways, and re-purposed, reinvigorated alleys.

**Sidewalks:** B and C Street sidewalks will be treated as pedestrian connectors between the Riverfront Park and Main Street. They will be tree-lined wherever practicable. Residential and Live/Work uses fronting B and C Street will have entrances to the street, consistent with traditional urban patterns.

**Courtyard:** The heart of the project will be a triangular public open space shaped by the surrounding buildings, and feature sloped lawns, planting areas, trees, special paving, and lighting. The ground floor uses of the buildings that form the space will include residential building elevator Lobby and Rental Office, package rooms, Co-Working space, Fitness Center, and Café to provide activity throughout the day. Seating will be informal and include low planter walls, flexible seating, and café tables. A community bbq area will be located off the main courtyard. This is envisioned as a sometimes active, but always quiet, pedestrian-only respite from the busier, noisier options in the Main St area. The Central Courtyard will connect to the Main Street street grid by Tolson Alley,
the north-south alley connection to Main Street, and the pedestrian walkways to B and C Street.

**Pedestrian Walkway:** Connecting B Street and C Street, a narrow pedestrian space, reminiscent perhaps of a traditional European street, will feature special paving, planters, and rain gardens. Ground floor homes and entrances to the multi-family buildings will front on the walkway. Where the walkway crosses the Courtyard, the paving widens to accommodate tables and chairs associated with the Co-Working space.

**Alleys:** Downtown Laurel’s alleys present a unique opportunity to encourage innovative designs for mixed-use development including additional business and housing opportunities to reinforce Main Street. Alleys can become spaces shared by vehicles and pedestrians, providing more walkable, bike-friendly, and intimately-scaled public spaces in a city. Improved alleys create ideal spaces for festivals, food trucks, and the like, with less disruption than closing vehicle streets. In the case of Tolson Alley, improvements would create redevelopment opportunities by establishing new retail frontage and lease-able space for future Main Street redevelopment. Such retail opportunities are often for smaller, ‘mom and pop’ uses such as artisans or galleries.

Key alley improvements typically include paving, lighting, establishment of an identity, planting, openings (doors and windows) in facades, and street furniture.

At Tolson Alley, the proposed project features front doors to mews homes including the live/work units facing the alley, planting, entrances and seating for the café/restaurant, and access to the Courtyard and entrance to the 9-unit multi-family building on the north side of the alley. Although Tolson Alley would be ‘shared space’ – pedestrians, bikes, some service vehicles – resident auto access to Tolson Alley units will be from dedicated auto courts in the rear of the buildings, not on the re-invigorated Tolson Alley.

At the north-south alley connection to Main Street, we recommend employing tactical urbanism techniques – modest improvements such as paint, some overhead lighting, some benches, etc. – to improve this connection between Main Street and Tolson Alley development.

**Transit Oriented Development/Walkability:** These ideas are intertwined. TOD requires transit - obviously – and the MARC train is nearby the project site. Denser development is best built at transit but, to also be walkable, it must be permeable, not gated off, and it must be interesting and active at the ground level. The proposed project is very intentionally designed to achieve this – it manages block size, ground floor building design, public space design, and vehicle/pedestrian interaction to create a new place that will attract new residents to Historic Main Street Laurel.
Parking will be provided on-site at a 1:1 space per unit ratio as required by zoning in the Parking Modification Zone. Parking areas and driveway access have been carefully designed to minimize the visual impact of vehicles and to maximize pedestrian-only - i.e., walkable - spaces. The proposed project is particularly well suited to be subject to the Parking Modification Zone:

- Publicly owned parking areas are located within 500 ft of the site, on the Main Street lot near the intersection with B St.;
- Land is not available for development of more off-street parking on this tight urban site without significantly reducing the public open space allocated for pedestrians; and,
- Public transportation - the commuter rail - is readily accessible as well as a walkable urban environment.

In addition, the project will be marketed to people with a preference for urban, walkable, environment - people who prefer a ‘car-lite’ lifestyle and are enthusiastic users of car-sharing and ride-sharing services such as Uber and Lyft. This will be underscored by the pedestrian orientation of the project design and its clear connections to Main Street, but also by its accommodation of bicycles, scooters, and other forms of micro-transit. The project will provide ample bike storage for residents, and will host a bike-share program for residents who do not own a bike. Making it easier to live in a walkable and bike-able place is an effective way of managing demand for parking in a TOD neighborhood.

As the Main Street area revitalizes, between the public parking lot and hourly parking on Main Street, and the generally quite adequate curb-side parking throughout the area, it is likely that parking will get more urban, but will still be adequate to meet the needs of residents who are primarily attracted by the walkability of the Main Street neighborhood.

The Project Goals and the proposed design concept are consistent in every respect with the statement of Purpose and Intent for Revitalization Overlay areas (Sec. 20-13.1 (a) through (p)) and the resulting project will contribute significantly to the economic development of the Main Street core of the City of Laurel. (See below.)

Section 20-13. – Revitalization Overlay Areas.

Sec. 20-13.1. - Purpose and intent.

It shall be the purpose and intent of Revitalization Overlay (RO) to be an alternative form of development or redevelopment designed to:
. (a) Create additional economic development opportunities for property owners within the City of Laurel to upgrade, enhance, demolish or revitalize their properties using additional flexibility offered the overlay zone, by, among others, offering superior amenities, land uses, or achieving superior land design to warrant intensification or increased density of properties in areas that are targeted for their potential for economic development.

. The proposed project will increase population density in the Main Street area, reinforcing a market for additional retail development. In particular, the proposed project will create new development opportunities along Tolson Alley.

. (b) Enhance the redevelopment of the business corridors within the City of Laurel, and to allow the upgrading of various housing opportunities, which, by their age or state of disrepair, have become obsolete, increasingly vacant, or become contributing to destabilizing property values within the City.

. The proposed project will provide a variety of housing types for new residents of the Main Street area – elevator building, walk-up apartments and lofts, and mews style units resembling townhouses in mixed-use development.

. (c) Enhance opportunities for improvements to the retail, housing, employment or entertainment offerings within the City limits, which are necessary to maintain economic balance and continued prosperity of the City.

. The proposed project will target prospective residents interested in an urban life style that includes retail and entertainment uses suited to the Main Street environment.

. (d) Allow for increased, consolidated, or integrated development in order to meet the need for certain targeted land uses, which may be deficient or missing within the current marketplace.

. The integrated and consolidated design of proposed project allows the creation of a variety of public spaces and housing types, and the activation/improvement of Tolson Alley. Without this integrated and consolidated approach, these new public spaces would not be possible.

. (e) Permit the development for a hierarchy of overlay types, which reflect the location and conditions contained within specific areas within the City.
. n/a

. (f) The conditions and restrictions of such an overlay is considered an optional form of development, which is in addition to the land uses and restrictions contained within the base zoning of any property located within a revitalization overlay.

. Acknowledged

. (g) Acknowledge that the development and approval of any revitalization overlay zone is a unique and specific approval to a unique parcel of groups of parcels, whose approval is conditioned upon meeting the objectives and specific goals of using such an overlay option.

. Acknowledged

. (h) Facilitate redevelopment and provisions of specific land uses, configurations, which are recommended for the continued development and economic health, well-being and stability of the neighborhoods of the City.

. The proposed project includes the types of urban residential buildings, retail uses, and public open spaces appropriate for the Old Town/Main Street neighborhood.

. (i) Allow intensification or changes in land uses, mixes of land uses, and access based on the ability of the provision of municipal and other public services, the general adequacy of transportation capacity to accomplish such development approvals as deemed necessary by the Mayor and City Council.

. The proposed project is consistent with existing capacities for all relevant facilities and services.

. (j) Retain the stability of the retail, restaurant, and entertainment establishments by providing development consistent with the demographics and income characteristics of City residents, and the reduce the exportation of the consumer spending potential of City residents by providing improved offerings to retain the spending by City residents for consumer products and services within City limits, where possible.

. The proposed project will be marketed intentionally to people who prefer the walkable character of Main Street and will benefit Main Street small businesses.
(k) Encourage integrated development, consolidation of properties, in order to reduce access points to major highways; reduce visual confusion inherent in older commercial highway corridors such as U.S. Route 1.

The proposed project maintains the urban character of the Main Street neighborhood. It minimizes the presence of the automobile by careful treatment of parking areas.

(l) Increase the attractiveness of the City for the potential of its potential in the areas of employment creation, tourism development, and improvements to its retail and restaurant offerings for business development, stabilization and improvement of its neighborhoods.

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(m) Create a stable redevelopment of the core area of the existing City limits, to make potential annexation of areas which may petition the City to compliment the core area by providing complimentary land uses to build on existing development.

The proposed project replaces vacant and under-used parcels with new development in the core area of the existing City.

(n) Revitalization overlays are not permitted by right, but reflect a negotiated development agreement that is unique to a specific proposal, or development that reflects the applicant's ability to achieve the goals and objectives of this alternative form of development. The Mayor and City Council is
not obligated to approve any form of optional development if it concludes that the proposal does not meet with the purpose and intent of these regulations. Approvals within any overlay do not usurp or diminish the jurisdiction of the City's Historic District Commission, if the overlay is located within their jurisdiction.

. Acknowledged

. (o) Setbacks of any type will not be waived, modified, or amended unless alternate methods will provide equal or superior protection to surrounding uses.

. Acknowledged

. (p) To conclude that the use of this overlay option does not diminish, modify, or in any way alter the applicant's right to development their property using the conventional base zone affixed to the property.

. Acknowledged