

To: The Planning Board, Town of Hamilton, MA
From: Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary
Re: Our Response to Questions Raised at the Meeting of June 27, 2023
Date: July 10, 2023

Dear Friends,

As you know, several years ago, representatives of the Town of Hamilton, approached the Seminary, to see whether we would be interested in a Commercial Overlay District for our property at 130 Essex St. The purpose of the overture was in response to the findings of the Town's Master Plan Committee, which had identified the property as a potential site for future commercial development. Such development would generate significant tax revenue for the Town, and while the Seminary had no intention of selling the property, an overlay district could potentially fast-track any future sale, should the Seminary's circumstances change.

In early 2020 the Seminary began the process of locating a purchaser for under-utilized student apartments and in March of 2021, the Seminary entered into a Purchase and Sale Agreement with Harborlight Community Partners, Inc., for the sale of two apartment buildings, with options on the remaining four.

Harborlight proceeded to file petitions with the Hamilton Zoning Board of Appeals, seeking both a "change of use" from student accommodation to affordable housing units, and a density variance (as the buildings had originally been constructed under the provisions of the Dover Amendment).

It may safely be said that Harborlight's plan to convert all 209 student apartments into affordable housing units raised concern among some abutters to the Seminary property.

More recently, in early 2022, the Hamilton Master Plan Steering Committee approached the Seminary again to inquire as to its interest in the Overlay District. The Seminary's Board agreed to enter into discussions about the rezoning.

As with all of higher education, the Seminary has experienced serious disruptions caused by an array of external influences. They include changing demographics, increased costs, the proliferation of online learning, and the COVID19 pandemic. The impact has been unprecedented in terms of both speed and breadth of change, with the demand for traditional, residential theological education being most affected. By last spring of 2022, the Seminary began exploring potential changes to its campus including selling some or all of its Hamilton property and relocating some or all of its functions elsewhere, including Boston.

It was at this point, that representatives of the Hamilton Select Board and the Hamilton Planning Board, along with several abutters, approached the Seminary with an idea. The idea

was to address the concerns of some abutters, while avoiding the uncertainties of the appeals process, by entering into a cooperative process, whereby:

- 1.) The Seminary voluntarily abandoned its Purchase and Sale Agreement with Harborlight Community Partners, and Harborlight withdrew its application before the Zoning Board of Appeals.
- 2.) The Select Board and the Seminary engaged and paid for the services of two consultancies (Abramson Associates and Gamble Associates), for the purpose of determining the “best uses” of the property going forward. Their study included multiple public meetings with all stakeholders after which they produced a “final report” for the consideration of the Seminary, the Select Board and the Planning Board (completed April of 2023).
- 3.) The Planning Board, then began consideration of an overlay district for the property (which it has been doing to the present).
- 4.) The Seminary and the Select Board have been discussing a “development agreement” to accompany the overlay district, both for consideration at a future Town Meeting (which we have been doing).

Since the commencement of this process, however, there have been two significant developments that have brought us to this juncture. They are:

- 1.) The Seminary having completed its due diligence on the possible move to Boston has determined that those plans are not feasible. The implication is that now it is highly likely that we will REMAIN on a good deal of the property for the foreseeable future.
- 2.) The Planning Board has taken a “Form-based” approach to the zoning of the property, which while interesting and worthy of consideration, has significantly complicated the process, and by the Chair’s own admission at the June 27th meeting, may be too complicated for the citizenry to digest at the Fall Town Meeting and too difficult to complete within that timeframe.

The Chair then proposed a dual-track approach for the current interregnum. 1.) The Chair has continued to refine the current draft of the bylaw and 2.) the Seminary has been invited to share its thoughts at the July 11th meeting.

These are our thoughts:

The process to date has considerably advanced the conversation about how best to rezone the Seminary’s property. While we do not have complete agreement on the details, there appears to be important common ground including that conceptually the seminary property readily breaks into three separate districts (or “campuses”), that beneficial potential uses include 55+ housing, commercial/professional, biotech, multi-family/apartment, senior assisted complexes etc., and that the tax revenues will be meaningful and beneficial.

Having discussed the current situation internally, we are of the opinion, that the best way forward, would be for the Planning Board to draft an Overlay District ONLY for the existing 209 Student Apartments, allowing for their sale and use as market-rate residences (with a yet to be determined set-aside for affordable housing).

This approach would have several benefits:

1. It would allow the people of the Town to vote on a very simple and easy to understand bylaw at the Town Meeting.
2. Essentially nothing would change vis a vis the use of the buildings, except:
 - A. The property and the roads would almost certainly be improved by the developer, and
 - B. The income level of the residents would increase (even among the affordable units).
3. The property would go onto the tax rolls, generating an estimate \$1.6M in revenue for the Town in the near future.
4. The Town would meet its 40B requirements.
5. The Seminary would monetize its under-utilized asset, securing its financial future and buying us all time to deal with a possible Phase II development.
6. The Seminary would remain on the current site for the foreseeable future.
7. There would no longer be the need for a Development Agreement.
8. The Planning Board would have much more time to draft an overlay district, should it still wish to do so.
9. The abutters would retain their ability to participate in future development discussions.

We would like to emphasize one additional point. Most of the complexity (and one may even say angst) regarding the redevelopment of the campus has involved what the consultants referred to as the "Central Campus". The assumption has been that the Seminary would prefer to sell that portion of the property and remain on Brown's Hill. That is not necessarily the case. Selling the buildings on Brown's Hill and moving to the tranquil setting and historic buildings of the Central Campus is a viable option that is currently under consideration.

Lastly, we want to sincerely thank the Select Board, the Planning Board, and the abutters for inviting us to participate in this process. We especially want to recognize the immense work that the Planning Board and the consultants have done, none of which is wasted. While we continue to maintain that the task of drafting the overlay district does not require a concrete proposed development, the above approach would give all the parties sufficient time so that it may be possible for the seminary or a potential purchaser to bring forward such a proposed development for the Town's consideration. In that event, the work everyone has done to date will help inform the rezoning process such a proposal would necessarily require. That being said, the above approach will also give everyone the additional time to draft a zoning bylaw for the remainder of the property should we decide to continue this process in the nearer term.

We have all learned a great deal during this process, and we will no doubt learn more as we seek the best pathway forward. At the end of the day however, the final decision will rest with

the people of Hamilton, and we are confident that this simple, low-impact solution is worthy of their consideration.

Sincerely,

Rev. Dr. Kenneth J. Barnes, FRSA

On behalf of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary