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**Memorandum**

To: Ken Schwartz  
Scott Schilt

Date: August 21, 2002

Project No.: 0815700

From: Robert Karn, AIA

Re: Symmes Hospital - Preliminary Urban  
Design Analysis

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The Symmes Hospital Site is a unique and extraordinary place, due to its prominent location at the top of one of the three hills in the Town of Arlington. Throughout history, physical features of this significance have played a central role in the civic life of towns and cities. As part of analyzing the context of what form redevelopment of the Symmes property should take, a key component should be to assess the relationship of the site's location on the top of the hill within the context of the Town of Arlington.

For the last hundred years the Symmes property has provided the Arlington community with medical services. Consequently, the site is often considered to be a community focal point. Recognizing this sentiment, and the site's significant location, it is important to develop and implement a reuse plan that will benefit the community at large, conceivably for all time. To maximize the community benefits that could be provided with redevelopment of the Symmes property, the overall development program should be *sustainable*, including elements such as:

- A mixed use program;
- Transit oriented development; and
- A final product that is environmentally sound.

Sustainability to a large degree depends on how the site relates to the surrounding environment and to the community. This memorandum provides a description of the relationship of the Symmes property within the following three contextual areas:

- A town-wide context
- A neighborhood context
- A site specific context

### **Town Wide Context**

The urban design framework of the Town of Arlington is comprised of a series of systems, including transportation, open space and land use development patterns.

#### Transportation

The major elements of the transportation system in Arlington are Route 2 on the southern border, the Alewife Brook Parkway on the eastern border and Massachusetts Avenue that cuts through the center

of Town. The remainder of the street system is primarily neighborhood serving, but, in some situations, also provides access for through- traffic.

### Open Space

The open space system in Arlington relates to bodies of water, including Spy Pond, the Arlington Reservoir and the Mystic Lakes in the Town of Winchester. Connecting these lakes is Mill Brook, which parallels Massachusetts Avenue approximately 200 feet to the north, running sometimes above grade and sometimes in channels below the ground. A significant amount of the active recreational open space in Arlington has been developed along the alignment of Mill Brook.

The open space system in Arlington is completed with active and passive recreational uses at the top of Turkey Hill and Robins Farm, including the Turkey Hill Reservation and Menotomy Rocks Park, each with significant water towers that signify their presence. The third hill in Arlington is the Symmes hospital site, which could be a great complement to the Town's open space system.

What is most remarkable is that the town of Arlington has a dedicated pedestrian and bikeway, the Minuteman Bikeway. The bikeway parallels Massachusetts Avenue and Mill Brook, all three of which are within a three-minute walk of each other. By paralleling Massachusetts Avenue and Mill Brook, the Minuteman Bikeway also provides connections to the open space system.

### Land Use

Massachusetts Avenue has evolved into the primary commercial corridor in Arlington. To the north and south of Massachusetts Avenue are Arlington's residential neighborhoods. A significant portion of the Arlington's commercial, recreational and pedestrian activity is congregated between Arlington Center and Arlington Heights, which is a reasonably compact mixed-use environment.

In addition, a majority of the public uses, including Town Hall, Arlington High School and Robbins Library, are either located adjacent to the Minuteman Bikeway or within a five-minute walk. Of all of the urban design framework elements, the Minuteman bikeway is the element that could become a significant centerpiece for Arlington. There is real potential for this pedestrian-bikeway armature to tie a community-wide pedestrian system together. However, in spite of it's popularity for recreational use, the Minuteman trail is not being utilized to its full potential in a town wide context. In spite of the fact that there's a viable mix and density of land-uses within a very manageable walking distance of the Minuteman Bikeway, there is not the infrastructure to support such a community-wide pedestrian system.

### **Neighborhood Context**

Its impossible to have an urban design discussion about the Symmes Hospital site without first accepting its unique physical characteristics. From the high point in the center of the site, the *entire* Boston Basin can be seen. The primary aspect of how reuse of the Symmes property will fit in with it's surroundings is dependent upon how the views from the site become a part of the public infrastructure within Arlington. The promontory/overlook provided by the high points of the site, and a portion of the site containing large outcroppings of ledge in a pristine, natural environment, conceptually divides the property into two distinct characters. One character could be defined as having a town center/public orientation, capturing the dramatic views from the overlook and the slope down to Summer Street, transitioning toward the commercial core along Massachusetts Avenue. The other site character could work with the relatively flat hill top, providing the opportunity to create an intimate neighborhood environment that transitions and integrates well with the abutting residential properties north of the overlook.

With the Minuteman Bikeway within a five-minute walk from the site's promontory, connections are possible to the Town's open space system, including play areas at local schools and public parks adjacent to the Bikeway. The open space system could also provide important linkages to other public and open space elements, including Arlington Cemetery, Arlington Reservoir and other active and passive recreational areas, and the potential for natural stream environments along Mill Brook.

Additionally, within a fifteen-minute walk from the site, there is a great mix of land use densities, including a wide variety of commercial and public uses located along Massachusetts Avenue and in Arlington Center. Redevelopment of the Symmes property provides the opportunity to promote a sustainable mixed-use environment in the truest sense, the site is surrounded on three sides primarily by single-family residential, while on the fourth side there is a transition to shopping and employment opportunities along Dudley Street and Massachusetts Avenue.

Similar to the town-wide pedestrian system, the neighborhood pedestrian environment doesn't function adequately. In spite of the close proximity to a mix of land uses, the street system and the lack of sidewalks creates an environment that is automobile rather than pedestrian oriented. This is especially significant when considering the benefits of any public uses that might occur on this site and their day-to-day function. For example, if there were to be a community center located on the Symmes property, related to the two elementary schools within a five-minute walk of the site, then its success would be based on the ability for those children to get to and from the site safely on foot.

### **Site Context**

The Symmes property is an 18.5 acre parcel situated on a hill rising 150 feet above Summer Street. Of the 18.5 acres, 9.2 acres is net open space, subtracting out all impervious surfaces and surplus rubble used to support parking areas. On the southern corner of the site is a beautiful and pristine rock outcropping of dramatic proportion. Approximately 7 acres of the property has remained reasonably untouched over the decades.

It is extremely important that this planning process develop a theme for the on-site open space to fit into the overall town-wide open space concept, but also to recognize the interpretive and connective possibilities that can be found within. The site is not conducive to large-scale recreational open space, but is ideally suited for passive interpretation of the natural and geological history of Arlington. The promontory and overlook is the ultimate public open space amenity on the site.

### Land Use

The Symmes site contains approximately 200,000 square feet of building space in two buildings: the main hospital and the former Nurses Building. There are approximately 560 surface parking spaces. The site has been heavily modified over time, primarily for new building additions and required roadway and parking. On the site, there are three potential areas for redevelopment:

- The top of the hill in the area of the upper parking lot;
- The hospital and nurses buildings; and
- The Summer Street frontage.

With the exception of the Summer Street frontage, these potential development areas have been levelled and are currently impervious surfaces.

As discussed earlier, the Symmes property is surrounded by a mix of land uses. If the site is to retain its public character, then it must provide a mixed-use development program. In order to develop a mixed-use character, an appropriate zoning designation must be implemented. The site is presently zoned for Hospital use, which restricts many residential and public uses.

On three sides the Symmes property is surrounded by properties zoned R-1 (Single Family residential). If R-1 were to be used as zoning for the site, it would allow development for as many as 150 single family residential units. Such density is equivalent to the existing population density in Arlington of 8,000 residents per square mile. Another possibility for site zoning would be the Town's Planned-Unit Development district, which allows greater flexibility for a mix of uses. In addition to these zoning designations, the Zoning Bylaw states use-exclusions for floor area ratio (FAR) calculations. Those exclusions are for affordable housing, additional open space above the minimum required, home-work places, etc.

For example, using the PUD zoning and the exclusions, it would be possible to construct up to 750,000 square feet of development on this site. Its difficult to imagine 750,000 square feet of density in Arlington, but it is important to understand that the reason the zoning allows this additional development potential is to support the cost of public improvements and maintenance.

### **Conclusion**

It is clear that the natural beauty of the site will play a central role in the site's redevelopment. It is especially critical for the open space to be part of the town-wide system and a center point for the neighborhood, and opportunities to complete this integration must be detailed in this planning process. In order to achieve the public purpose aims of the redevelopment goals, reasonable private investment must be made. The next phase of the planning process will look at the physical and fiscal ramifications of the various identified alternatives, and the competition between the public and private uses for the promontory will be weighed. At this juncture it is conceivable that both fiscal responsibility and public largess can be achieved on the site.