

EAST FALLS COMMUNITY COUNCIL

April 1st, 2021

Jack Conviser, Senior City Planner
Philadelphia City Planning Commission
One Parkway Building
1515 Arch Street, 13th Floor
Phila. PA. 19102

Re: RCO letter for Civic Design Review April 6th at 1.00 pm - 4401 Ridge Avenue.

Dear Jack

East Falls Community Council has held 3 virtual meetings to review proposals for 4401 Ridge Avenue. Each meeting was well attended in some meetings with up to 60 attendees. This is part of our on-going process that strives to develop community consensus and engage with developers building in our neighborhood.

- January 20th 2021 – At the request of ATAPCO Properties to obtain feedback.
- February 17th 2021 – At the request of ATAPCO properties to obtain feedback prior to an anticipated CDR on March 2nd 2021 which did not take place.
- **An unofficial vote of meeting attendees which also included members of EFDC and businesses took place (officially only EFCC members can vote). Support as presented - 12, opposed to project - 7, support only with changes - 14. (21 oppose to 12 support)**
- March 17th 2021 – organized by EFCC to include residents of Falls Ridge Development (Phase I of Hope VI original project) and Hilltop (Phase II). These residents had not received notifications from ATAPCO. This meeting was attended by ATAPCO who presented the project a third time.

Below is the summary of feedback relating to the criteria outlined within the Civic Design Review:

- What is the existing Context of the proposal in the surrounding neighborhood.
- How will the proposal function in the neighborhood.
- Does the proposal enhance neighborhood qualities.
- Is the proposal compatible with the character of the neighborhood

What is the Existing Context and is the project compatible with the character of the neighborhood?:

The majority of the existing buildings are over 100 years old and remain in their original form. Diamonds in the rough with enormous potential in some instances for storefront improvements. The scale of Ridge Avenue is residentially scaled with dwellings above storefronts. There are many homes without retail still located on Ridge Avenue.



Dwellings above Retail - 4000 Block Variety of building forms – 4200 Block Homes and covered porches – 4100 Blk.
 Recently 13 new town homes were built and quickly sold at the Overlook Development. The residential streets that lead down to Ridge Avenue comprise of mostly owner occupied 2 and 3 story rowhomes with porches and stoops.



13 New Townhomes (at rear) fronting facing Ridge.

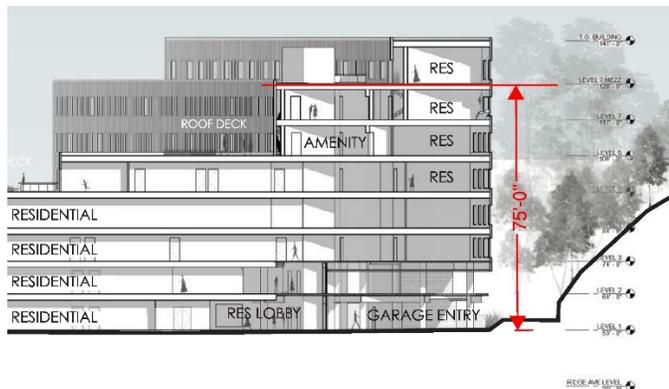


Stoops and porches on Eveline Street

Phase I homes on Merrick Road directly across from the proposal occupied by homeowners consist of 2 story gable roof attached dwellings.



Homes on Merrick Street opp. 75' tall proposal



Section height at corner on Merrick opp. Existing homes

- **Lack of Homeownership:** A large number of attendees are concerned that the large scale of the proposed development, and its exclusive focus on renters (predominantly one bedroom and lofts), rather than owners and families, is not consistent with East Falls as a neighborhood with a strong base of resident-owners who are invested in this community as a place to live long term.
- **Large Scale and deprivation of Light:** The heights of the development on Merrick at 75' above the sidewalk dwarf the owner-occupied two story homes opposite and present a hardship on light and shadow. The large scale of the Merrick Road elevations and the rear building is out of scale with the neighborhood.
- **Obstruction of views on Riverview at Hilltop:** It also appears that the development will block views from these homes. The site sections showing accurate representation of the 90' tall building at the bottom of the steep slope relative to the homes on Riverview are omitted from the presentations.
- **Neighbor/Resident understanding of this project :** during the development of the Falls Ridge development with resident stakeholders, PHA, HUD and Councilman's office, a plan

was developed for all three Phases of the former Schuylkill Falls site that controlled overall density and balanced the needs of all parties. The current high density people warehousing proposal and zoning is a complete reversal of former negotiations and agreements and brings with it all the endemic issues of congestion, high density and oversized buildings being reviewed here.

- It has not yet been legally determined if there is a breach of Phase III agreement limiting the scope of future development on the site.
- **Site Plan:** The site is comprised essentially of two level plateaus which the previous buildings in Schuylkill Falls occupied. The plateaus transition at the 25% steep slope portion of the site. Steep slope generally covers the remainder of the site. East falls homes comprise of street frontage and eyes on the sidewalk. The location of the majority of the dwellings are set at the rear of the site at a higher elevation meaning their occupants are isolated from the street - this is antithetical to the context of east Falls.
- Within the site plan if the density were lower and the parking reduced, the steep slope within the site could be utilized as green space and on-site storm water infiltration.

Function Of proposal in neighborhood:

- **Traffic, Congestion, Parking and need for comprehensive study:** Traffic, congestion and parking was of significant concern. It is believed that there will be increased and adverse impact on those residents needing access to arterial roads and highways as well as Ridge Avenue corridor retail and businesses that currently experience stalled or slow moving traffic and lack of parking. The traffic impact and required study for this project cannot be isolated from the existing realities of congestion at rush hours and the long term impacts of multiple other proposed and built developments in the area (projects both approved and under construction contributing 527 cars), the closure for reconstruction of Calumet Road bridge and potential sustained closure of MLK Drive.
- With one loading dock and 185 units there would be insufficient provision for package delivery trucks which have proliferated in the last 10 years and during the pandemic. Where will Amazon, UPS, grocery delivery trucks. Food delivery orders stack up – most likely on Merrick, adding congestion there.

Will the proposal enhance neighborhood qualities?:

East Falls is known for its **walkability** with **safe and well used pathways** connecting between the Library, Coffee Shops, parks and tree lined streets down to the river and the **recreational opportunities of the drives**. Houses front onto streets with **many porches, yards and stoops where neighbors may be interacting**. On Ridge avenue several art projects reflect the riverside location.



- **The proposal does not apparently contain any elements that foster community in the wider community context at the neighborhood level. A project with invested Home owners, families and buildings that front the streets more comprehensively would be able to be part of these characteristic qualities.**

Is the proposal compatible with the character of the neighborhood?

Building materials: Existing buildings in east falls comprise mostly of brick, stone and stucco with metal or wood detailing at cornices and bay windows. Bases of buildings are often differentiated with either a wood glass storefront of stucco facing material.

- **The proposal covers the upper levels of the building in one metal skin material. The monoculture of applied material is not compatible in a context that uses many materials, colors, scales, textures and sizes.**

Building Scale: All buildings on Ridge Avenue form smaller discreet blocks and clusters. Dwellings in Falls Ridge adjacent to the development comprise of homes set in landscaped gardens with trees.

- **The proposal creates the largest length of a single residential building in East Falls and at 90' in height from grade. One longtime resident has stated this proposal is reminiscent of the blighted towers imploded and questioned why the developer would be building back a structure similar to the ones that the community and city worked so hard to remove.**
- **The proposal can be articulated into smaller blocks with a diversity of materials and colors better reflecting its context.**

Connection with the Schuylkill River: East Falls is a city neighborhood community with direct Schuylkill waterfront. East Falls river front edge is defined along Ridge Avenue & Kelly Drive. The site overlooks the upriver Boat Clubs of Undine at Castle Ringstetten (Frank Furness) and Bachelors at the Button. Yet there is little aesthetic reference to the river and historical location. It is suggested that the development capitalizes on this unique waterfront overlook and proximity through its site layout and design by considering consistent approach to the following:

- **Introduce consistent elements such as balconies or sliding doors with railings that will take advantage of River views at higher levels and will make this building completely distinct from a building that has no adjacency with waterfront.**



Castle Ringstetten – on Kelly backing on Ridge



The Button – at west end



Dobson Mills on Ridge – provides Balconies

Pedestrian connectivity, safety and walkability:

This section of Ridge Avenue lacks sidewalks, eyes on the street, building frontage and therefore pedestrian safety and walkability. The project location is directly opposite 3 existing properties with no building frontage. It is the concern of stakeholders that the project as proposed does not address this critical aspect.

- **This is one of the few unbuilt opportunities along Ridge to increase and enhance the pedestrian experience. Projects on Ridge avenue should as a starting point seek to develop and enliven Ridge Avenue and in this proposal, the least level of development is allocated to Ridge.**
- **The development as proposed ends abruptly 118’ from the Merrick/Ridge corner. The property continues about another 290’. The remainder of the Ridge Avenue frontage consists of a view into an elevated parking lot through a potentially unmanicured green buffer. The new side walk ends at the property line and so effectively leads nowhere.**
- **To put eyes on the street it is proposed that the development continue building frontage along Ridge Avenue to the far extent of the western property line. This could be retail per the current Neighborhood Commercial Area Overlay or entrances to dwellings not unlike the majority of entrances to homes on the Ridge.**
- **This would effectively connect to the retail space planned at 4440-2 on the other side of Ridge which would otherwise be completely isolated and disconnected.**
- **This would strengthen the pedestrian connection between East falls and the Wissahickon transfer station, a major mass transit hub and destination for residents.**
- **Building safety - A single point of entry with only 2 elevators to provide access to 185 units is not an applicable model to ensure safe and distanced circulation in the potential reality of a continued pandemic. A development with multiple points of entry matching the context of the neighborhood is inherently safer.**



Extend building frontage along Ridge – stitch across to retail at 4440-2 Ridge – puts eyes on street

Sustainability:

The city has made a commitment to green design and development; encouraging transit centered development, protected bike lanes & paths and pedestrian access to city services and amenities. East Falls is at the forefront of this movement with pedestrian and bicycle access to transit, neighboring regions, parks, the river and the drives. In addition, most of the houses and apartments in the community have some access to private exterior green space – porch, stoop, deck, yard, garden.

- **The proposal has failed to include green development strategies to the extent that are expected in a development of this size and at this time of global warming.**
- **PCPC comment – no excuse in this time for a project of this size that there are no green strategies for this building.**

Recent large-scale development in the neighborhood has shown a commitment to green and sustainable design:

- **4300-26 Ridge – bicycle storage, covered parking, private exterior space for units, expansive green roof with access for all residents.**
- **4440-42 Ridge – bicycle storage (50), no surface parking, all roof is green, half green roof is accessible to residents.**

There is community support for development that brings businesses and amenities to East falls that strengthen and improve the neighborhood along with recognition that an adequate residential base is needed to support commercial enterprises.

We strive to support development consistent with neighborhood values and culture that enhances and not detracts from quality of life, and succeeds in attracting businesses, services and other amenities that enhance East Falls and neighboring communities. It is in this spirit that we submit these concerns registered from feedback received at our meetings.

Regards

Hilary J. Langer

Chair East Falls Zoning
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