

**TOWN OF MANCHESTER  
MINUTES OF PUBLIC HEARING  
HELD BY THE PLANNING AND ZONING COMMISSION/  
INLAND WETLANDS AND WATERCOURSES AGENCY  
MARCH 4, 2024**

**MEMBERS PRESENT:**

In Person: Eric Prause, Chairman  
Patrick Kennedy, Vice Chairman  
Michael Stebe, Secretary  
Teresa Ike  
Chris Schoeneberger  
Michael Farina

**ALTERNATE MEMBERS SITTING:**

In Person: Zachary Schurin

**ALTERNATES PRESENT**

In Person: Bonnie Potocki  
Electronically: Maliha Ahsan

**ABSENT:**

Daniela Luna

**ALSO PRESENT:**

In Person: Megan Pilla, Principal Development Planner  
Gary Anderson, Director of Planning & Economic  
Development  
Electronically: David Laiuppa, Environmental Planner/Wetlands  
Agent  
Nancy Martel, Recording Secretary

The Chairman opened the Public Hearing at 7:00 P.M. The Secretary read the legal notice when the call was made.

TOWN OF MANCHESTER PLANNING & ZONING COMMISSION – Proposed regulation amendment at Art. II, Sec. 1 (General Requirements for Residential Zones) to allow the conversion of former school buildings to multi-family residential. – Zoning Regulation Amendment (REG-0001-2024)

Ms. Megan Pilla, Principal Development Planner, Town of Manchester, began the presentation by proposing a new section at Art. II, Sec. 1.00.03, multi-family school conversion special exception. The draft of the section is very similar to two other sections that exist in the regulations:

1. The multi-family historic mill conversion special exception.
2. The multi-family hotel/motel conversion special exception.

The proposed new section would apply to all residential zones: Rural Residence (RR), Residence AA (RAA), Residence A (RA), Residence B (RB), and Residence C (RC).

The differences between this proposed regulation and the above special exceptions are:

1. Minimum Floor Areas

- Minimum floor area for a studio or efficiency unit: 300 sq. ft.
- Minimum floor area for a one-bedroom: 500 sq. ft.
- Minimum floor area for a two-bedroom: 700 sq. ft.
- 150 sq. ft. for each bedroom in excess of two.

The reason for the difference:

- Manchester has seen a recent increase in demand for smaller housing units due to affordability and attainability.
- The structural limitations of retrofitting older, non-residential buildings.

2. Landscape Buffer Requirements – A combination of that which is required for other types of conversions to housing as well as the landscape buffer requirements for schools that are actively functioning as schools, to provide some level of buffering for adjacent residences to prevent any nuisance. The Commission may waive certain buffering requirements if the existing conditions are sufficient.

3. Recreation Areas – A minimum area equivalent to 30% of the gross floor area on the site is required to be usable recreation areas (50% outdoors). There is a provision that directly adjacent public parks and accessible open spaces count toward the minimum.

The reason for the difference: The lot sizes of former school buildings are generally larger than a hotel/motel or some of the mills.

4. Building Exterior - “Designs of exterior building rehabilitation shall recommend appropriate materials, colors, etc. intended to maintain or restore the integrity of the original architectural character of a given structure.” Many former school buildings have historically distinct architectural features that are worth preserving but are not in the historic district and are, therefore, not subject to the stringent criteria.

There are two very minor changes from the original draft proposed, based on staff review:

1. The proposed required lot or site area: Originally 2 acres, now reduced to 1.5 acres.
2. Required widths for driveways: At the recommendation of Engineering, Ms. Pilla is striking the minimum inside turning radius of 30 ft. for driveways. Engineering would rather review on a case-by-case basis.

## Consistency with the Plan of Conservation and Development Recommendations

1. Recommendation #3 under Educational Facilities – completing the Repurpose Schools project and moving forward.
2. Recommendation #1 from the Housing Changing Preferences – strengthening neighborhoods and expanding housing choices through an increased mix of uses, diversified housing choices, and concentration of more housing within mixed use areas.
3. Recommendation #2 under Housing Attainability – prioritize policies and programs that encourage higher density pedestrian-oriented neighborhoods with a range of housing choices.

Ms. Potocki commented that, on a recent application, Ms. Pilla planned to research minimum floor areas of other municipalities and she inquired about the result. Ms. Pilla responded that staff has not done research specifically for that project because there has not been a formal application.

Ms. Potocki assumed this would prohibit any use other than housing or a combination of uses. Ms. Pilla commented that it creates housing as a possible use, but a former school could be repurposed for any use permitted in the zone. Combinations of uses would be allowed to the extent that the uses are allowed in the zone; most schools are in residential zones and, generally, retail is not a permitted use in a residential zone.

Ms. Potocki took exception to removing the turning radius of 30 ft. if the buildings are being repurposed due to trucks, etc., and said it would be a good idea to leave that in.

Mr. Stebe asked whether the intent is for the regulation to apply to any Town-owned school or any school in town. Ms. Pilla replied that it is written to apply to any school in town. However, it applies to school buildings and would not apply to a school occupying a tenant space within a multi-use building.

Noting that the POCD puts emphasis on mixed use, Mr. Stebe inquired whether there was any discussion among Town staff about incorporating mixed use into the regulation. They are all fairly large buildings and may be connected to other Town facilities.

Mr. Anderson stated that there was that conversation. In this case, there is a hole in the regulations regarding multi-family housing in older school buildings and residential zones. Referring to Mr. Stebe's comment, he said the concern would be how to incorporate a use that is not allowed now in the residential zone into a regulation. If retail is allowed by right, then retail would be allowed everywhere in the residential zone.

A discussion was held between Mr. Stebe and Mr. Anderson about this being a special exception.

Mr. Stebe noted that Nathan Hale is the only standalone building for conversion.

Mr. Farina noted that he was not inclined to support this because:

1. The square footage is too small.
2. Noting that this is in anticipation of a proposal for the redevelopment of one of the currently vacant school buildings, which he assumed is Nathan Hale, he stated that the PZC has not been directed by the Board of Directors, nor has the Repurposing Committee requested it.

He noted that, in the memo, it states that the results of the study indicate that housing is a viable option. However, the Repurposing Committee has not stated that is what they would like to do with any of the schools.

Mr. Kennedy noted that he does not share Mr. Farina's concerns. As far as other agencies' negotiations or actions are concerned, the PZC has no control over that. There are not many options for decommissioned school buildings currently. If the Repurposing Committee asks the PZC to make modifications, that could be considered. He added that the concern over the sizes is the functional equivalent of mandating. There is a need for smaller, more economical apartments.

Mr. Prause acknowledged that the Bennet Apartments was a conversion. He asked how that took place. Mr. Anderson was unaware of that process, though he added that Downtown has always been flexible with uses.

Noting that there is a small difference between the two existing conversion sections, Mr. Prause assumed the first one would have been the mill conversion regulations, and the hotel conversion was more recent. The proposal has sections missing from the hotel conversion:

1. Financial guarantee of the owner to ensure the public improvements happen. He asked whether that should be added or if it would be included in the public improvement standard revisions.
2. Affordable Housing. He was unsure whether there was success with the affordable housing clause imposed on the units in the mills.

Ms. Pilla stated that:

- Financial Guarantee – There was not much discussion, though it was included in the mill conversions because, at that time, the section was specifically written for the conversion of the Cheney Mills, though it applies to other historic mills.

Mr. Anderson added:

- Affordable Housing. There was thought given to this, as it is a focus of the POCD, a focus of the State, and a focus of the Town. It was not included to try to be as flexible as possible in terms of the reuse of the buildings. In his experience, the easier path is to make a project either 100% affordable or market rate. It is more challenging to make mixed income housing. To try to dictate that through zoning regulations can be tricky. There are very few units in the

Cheney Mills that are affordable at this point. Some of the units are still listed on the State's Affordable Housing Appeals list, primarily because FHA financing or other public financing was used.

Mr. Prause referred to the list of residential zones and asked whether that includes all the zones there are currently schools in at this time. Ms. Pilla confirmed that it does, with the exception of Bennet Academy.

Mr. Prause expressed his concern about the square footage and asked if that was based on specific floor plans, or if that is a general concern. Ms. Pilla responded that it is a general concern because the Planning Department has heard from a number of developers who are looking at various sites, seeking to develop smaller units, which are in demand. Also, there are a couple of sites around town where there are other older, non-residential buildings (not schools) that developers are attempting to retrofit and are finding themselves challenged.

Mr. Prause asked whether Manchester is more generous in square footage requirements, on par with, or on the low end of requirements. He felt that would be interesting to know, especially as there is no specific developer with specific plans.

Mr. Anderson stated that there is an upcoming proposal before the Board of Directors. He asked about the concern in terms of the minimum unit sizes, and said that comparing Manchester to other towns is reasonable.

Ms. Potocki felt there is a concern about minimum space because of Covid, multi-generational housing, and children visiting with grandparents with a smaller unit. She added that she and Mr. Stebe sit on the Capitol Region Council of Governments (CRCOG), and another town did a conversion of schools for housing. She would be interested in their minimum space requirements.

Mr. Stebe believed it was more than likely New Haven. He echoed the concern about square footage. In his opinion, it would not be difficult to structure a trigger in the regulation to allow developers and engineers the ability to request a change of size if they are not able to meet the size. As there has been no specific request for a 300 sq. ft. room, there is no need to add it into the regulation in the event it is requested at some point in the future.

Mr. Kennedy did not understand why the PZC should be dictating. The size of apartments should be determined in the marketplace.

Mr. Schoeneberger concurred that this should be market driven.

Mr. Schurin asked whether State law dictates a minimum occupancy square footage requirement. Mr. Anderson responded that it does not on the Zoning side, but does on the Building side.

There was no member of the public to speak on the application.

Mr. Stebe stated that the idea of modifying the regulations to allow housing in the school buildings is 100% the correct idea. However, to create a regulation knowing that there are other activities in other corners of town that would need to be included in the discussion of how this is worded is ahead of the game. He added that, if a historical building, in order to maintain its structure, requires a wall in a certain space and it creates a hardship, that is the purview of the Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA). Because some of the buildings have historical significance, requesting a financial guarantee makes sense.

**MOTION:** Mr. Kennedy moved to close the public hearing. Mr. Schoeneberger seconded the motion. The motion failed, and the public hearing was not closed.

Mr. Prause asked whether staff should research language about criteria so the PZC could allow a smaller square footage plan if limited by construction.

**MOTION:** Mr. Farina moved to continue the public hearing to March 18, 2024. Ms. Ike seconded the motion. Mr. Prause, Mr. Stebe, Ms. Ike, Mr. Farina, and Mr. Schurin voted in favor of the motion. Mr. Kennedy and Mr. Schoeneberger voted against the motion. The motion passed five to two.

HILLIARD MILLS LLC – Changes to previously approved PZC plans at 640 & 642 Hilliard Street and 370 Adams Street for renovation of buildings 5 & 6 and various site improvements. – Inland Wetland Permit (IWP-0054-2023)

Mr. Peter Bonzani, 640 & 642 Hilliard Street, introduced himself. Mr. Bonzani reported that there have been two stormy summers, 2021 and 2023, which have badly scoured the bank of the brook. There are large chunks of debris on the bank that they propose to break up with a handheld hammer and remove by hand. He noted that there are chunks of granite from the original dam, Manchester sandstone, loose brick and trash, which they plan to remove and replace with stone. The plan is to determine on a case-by-case basis what to remove to ensure that there is no increased turbidity or destruction of the bank. Scour since 2021 was pointed out and Mr. Bonzani noted that it did not exist a few years ago.

For various reasons, and after a discussion with the Connecticut Department of Energy & Environmental Protection (DEEP) regarding floodproofing of buildings and requirements in the flood plain, Mr. Bonzani reported that they will remove any reference and approvals for work on Building 6 as it sits 17” within the flood plain. Building 5 is above the flood plain and includes the tiny addition for a bathroom and any other work.

After a comment from Mr. Kennedy, Ms. Pilla reported that a flood plain permit is necessary for the proposed site improvement. The applicant would return at a later date for another flood plain permit for Building 6.

After a request from Mr. Prause, Mr. Bonzani displayed a picture of the deck.

Ms. Potocki asked how many cubic yards of material are to be removed and how many cubic yards of rip rap will be placed. Mr. Bonzani stated that it will be done on a case-by-case basis, though, in terms of the surface, it is 350 sq. ft. of material. The depth averages between two and

six inches thick. He noted that they would like to avoid the stream bottom and stay close to the bank.

Mr. Andrew Bushnell, Professional Engineer and Licensed Land Surveyor, introduced himself. Mr. Bushnell reported that it is mostly an embankment issue, and there should not be any work on the channel.

Mr. Laiuppa reported that he met with the applicant in the field. The intent is to armor the bank to prevent further erosion. The applicant would like to manually remove some of the material already on the bank to prevent disturbance before bringing in new material. When considering the application, the area highlighted on the plans is the maximum allowable area of disturbance.

Ms. Pilla reported staff comments on the special exception modification portion of the application. There are a handful of outstanding comments, all of which could be modifications to an approval and several of which are not related to the wetlands or flood plain permit:

- Signage. One of the new proposed features in the plan is the introduction of planters with signs. Those are intended to be concrete planters that include directional signage. The Zoning Enforcement Officer is currently reviewing the design of the signs to determine what category of signage they would be considered and how many would be permitted.
- There were a couple of clarifying questions from staff that have been answered regarding the size of the concrete planters and the change of one area previously planned as a patio.
- The ZEO requested clarification on the proposed historical display area. Mr. Bonzani reported that it would be a display of old historical machinery to celebrate the history of the site.

Mr. Prause inquired about the historical display area. Mr. Bonzani described it as a permanent display of machinery to show the industrial history. He noted that he probably would not include signage on the display. The proposed planter signs are to enable individuals to find the businesses within the building. They have a previously approved historical area next to Building 6, which is the original turbine from the site, and he will add signage to that.

Mr. Prause asked how the decking will match the current décor by color or design. Mr. Bonzani explained that the proposed deck between the buildings will have square pickets. The main purpose of the deck is a ramp to allow people into the building if necessary. It connects the two buildings to allow access between them and connects down to the lower level. Mr. Bonzani reported that they have tried to keep the industrial design; the State Historic Preservation Office is sensitive to faking history.

Mr. Prause assumed that there was no utility work or detrimental impacts, which Ms. Pilla confirmed. He asked how the Town regulates historical features. Ms. Pilla replied that, in a case of this type, where there is a special exception, anything placed on the site would need to be approved as part of the site plan. Generally speaking, it is not signage and is considered a decoration, which is not regulated.

Mr. Christian Hubele, 368 Adams Street, introduced himself. Mr. Hubele was curious what the plans are for the lot next to his property, as he uses it for his business equipment.

Ms. Pilla had no information about the parcel, but she stated that she will look into it outside of this meeting. She stated that no part of the proposal will affect Mr. Hubele's property.

**MOTION:** Mr. Farina moved to close the public hearing. Mr. Kennedy seconded the motion and all members voted in favor.

The public hearing was closed at 8:35 P.M.

I certify these minutes were adopted on the following date:

March 18, 2024

Date

Eric Prause, Chairman

**NOTICE: A DIGITAL RECORDING OF THIS PUBLIC HEARING CAN BE HEARD IN THE PLANNING DEPARTMENT.**