

Henry Stephenson
117 Midland Ave.
Vineyard Haven

October 4, 2013

Martha's Vineyard Commission
Re: Stop & Shop Building. Follow-up comments from the Public Hearing
Thursday Oct. 3

To the Commission:

Much of the discussion at last night's hearing centered on the overall size of the building which are substantial but, I think, left out an important factor related to the zoning in the B-1 District:

The zoning is designed to accommodate fairly large buildings on very small lots within an existing traditional New England village. Buildings on Main Street often go right to their lot lines. They are typically two and a half stories tall with a gable end facing the street that may rise over thirty feet. They usually have no on-site parking and rely on nearby municipal lots. Because of the variety of lot sizes and configurations, the result is a neighborhood of great variety within a consistent visual framework which is what the law is trying to preserve.

It is rare that any one building anywhere fills up the entire zoning envelope like a balloon. But that is what the designers of the Stop & Shop property have done. Moreover they have done it on a piece of property that is a hundred and ten feet wide and two hundred forty feet long (i.e. half a block wide and a block long, far larger than a typical lot). I would add that their property is a recent assembly of four different lots which, if developed separately, would, at least, have generated four different heights, widths and configurations.

Architects have become adept at accommodating large new buildings within a historical context such as this. The footprint of the building can be articulated to break up the overall mass of the structure. Corners and entries can be set back and widened. The ceiling heights can be varied without losing floor area. Public spaces and landscaping can be integrated into the plans making the surrounding streets more inviting.

But they need room to work. If the building footprint closely matches the property lines, and the height of the building is the maximum that the law will allow, the architect is left with little but the façades and materials to work with. The scale of the building cannot be hidden and the result is an image quite out of character with the neighborhood – something no amount of shingles, dormers and gables can correct.

So, it's not just the statistics that are a concern (i.e. plus or minus x square feet of floor area or a foot or two of height). Even if the overall boundaries of the property were twenty percent smaller, the designers would still be faced with the same limitations.

In their latest proposal, a small increase in the width of the sidewalk along Water St. results in a large improvement – room for bikes and pedestrians to pass, room for awnings & trees, a much nicer atmosphere.

I would hope that, in a review of their plans, the Stop & Shop will see fit to reduce the overall floor areas and dimensions of their proposal sufficiently to give their architect the latitude he needs to integrate their building into this very sensitive area.

Thank you,
Henry Stephenson