

Modular Project Update – March 27th 2020

Quite a bit has happened since the last written project update in January (Attached at the end of this for reference).

City of Richmond

I was contacted by our City Planning representative (Steven De Sousa) on Feb 26th and requested to schedule a meeting with him to discuss an important update. Due to some scheduling constraints between him, John Keen and myself were not able to meet until March 6th. He had wanted to let us know about an upcoming planning committee amendment that was being presented for consideration. However, because of the delay in scheduling our meeting, the planning council meeting in question had been held a few days prior to our meeting with Steven. The relevance to us is that the planning committee proposal had the intent of removing Education as a permissible use on all Assembly zoned properties in Richmond. If this amendment had been approved, it would mean that we would be unable to build our modular classroom. The proposed amendment had come about in response to a planning application from Pythagoras Academy to build a new 1,000 student school on No. 5 Road, 10 acre lot in the already established row of faith-based schools on the that road (located west of Highway 99). The road has become known as the Highway to Heaven.

The proposed zoning change and the related rejection of the Pythagoras planning application, resulted in an unprecedented number of 10,000 letters of opposition being received by the City prior to the committee meeting where it was discussed. The meeting was attended by a number of representatives and supporters of the existing schools and also Pythagoras. You may have read about this in the media <https://www.richmond-news.com/news/richmond-religious-schools-express-fear-over-highway-to-heaven-changes-1.24090195>

Although the above kerfuffle is all about No. 5 road, the proposed bylaw would affect all Assembly zoned properties in Richmond including ourselves. I learned from Steven that in addition to the schools on No. 5 road there are nine more Assembly zoned lots in Richmond, and 2 or 3 with schools on them.

As you will see from the above Richmond News article, the planning committee sent the bylaw back to staff and asked them to talk to all the institutions on the Highway to Heaven, and find out how to grandfather in existing schools and in-stream applications, to look at how existing schools can expand and to assess the infrastructure implications of building more on the Highway to Heaven.

In addition, Steven told us that staff have been told to continue processing existing applications like ours under the existing zoning regulations. So, for now we have escaped a problem. There is a risk that at some time in the future, a similar amendment proposal may come back and impact us in some way.

I asked Steven when we could expect the next step in our application and he said we should receive a list of comments and questions on our application within about a month of our meeting. I phoned him today (March 27th), he was working from home and he said this has slowed things down a bit but he was still processing our application and expected to get back to us with comments first/second week in April.

We also asked if the City would accept a building permit application while our NFU application was being processed in parallel. Steven referred us to talk to Paul Chiang (Permit & Plans) and after a lot of discussion he Paul went off to consult (with Steven we think) and came back to say yes they would.

John Keen Architect

I had backed off John doing any more work on our file while the NFU application was being processed but in light of the above I asked him to crank up his effort again to finalize the limiting distance calculations and fire requirements, etc. with Mark Roozbahani. This has been stalled somewhat by COVID-19 and their ability to meet face-to-face. John is attempting to communicate by email and phone but Mark has not been very responsive and this is still an open item. I just talked to John and encouraged him to ramp up his communication efforts. Also, John is now strongly suggesting that we should be looking at building a classroom annex to satisfy our needs, rather a modular unit. Obviously on the same footprint and he believes it will be not much more expensive than a modular. A building would have several benefits including: a customised layout exactly as we want it, a cheaper construction solution for fire protection than what a modular provider would have to include. One option he proposes is constructing a non-combustible, metal framed structure that can externally match the school, and because we have to build it seven feet above existing grade to meet flood regulations, he can design-in a huge secure, walled-in storage area within that seven feet space underneath. I asked him if he could do a quick and dirty drawing and a cost estimate for us which he agreed to do once he has the final information back from Mark Roozbahani. We continue to have the ability to delay the project given our flattening enrolment. But, assuming we get the NFU ruling, we now have the added risk of a potential zoning amendment that if it materialised would prevent us from ever adding to our current building space. That's where things stand right now!

Modular Project Update - January 18th 2020

In a follow-up to the ALC application, the Non-Farm Use Application to the City of Richmond was submitted on December 23rd, 2019. Nothing will have happened to it over the Christmas and New Year break, but the City's review clock will have started ticking. Apparently, they do have some internal process target times for reviewing and responding to applications. From earlier discussions, we know it's likely going to be about a six-month process. The next event will be at some point in their review process when we will receive a list of questions and concerns that we will need to address and respond to. The drawing package and the application is available for anyone that wants to review it.

It's now an appropriate time to begin planning to appraise the Mayor and Council about our application. At this point, solely on an informal information basis. Maureen and Phil are handling this process.

Just before Chirstmas, we fired up Mark Roozbahani (Building Code Consultant) again to complete his fire code analysis and report. Depending on what he recommends, we may have to make a decision whether to proceed with any fire compartment improvement work to the school now, or wait until we are further down the City and ALC review path before expending any more cash.

That's it for now.....