

GCA Report Card

Spine Road Development -- BVCP Consistency and Reviewer Concerns

Overall grade: C- or D+

The Spine Road proposal gets an above average grade for design and a good grade on the number of housing units that would move Boulder towards meeting its aggressive housing goals. However, the Planning Board must ask whether these benefits are outweighed by average, below-average or failing grades on the BVCP vision, core values, 2020 BVCP Update priorities, BVCP guidance on appropriate locations for ultra-high density residential developments, and compliance with annexation and PUD requirements in the original plat for Celestial and neighboring properties.

By contrast, a report card for Holiday would be an A; and SMWS and Silver Saddle would get at least A- or B+ for similar-sized parcels with analogous issues.

In a community renowned for planning, Gunbarrel Community Alliance believes that only projects that get at least a B overall grade are entitled to approval, especially where Gunbarrel is on the verge of subcommunity planning and is desperately in need of improved planning rooted in a coherent vision. On balance, too many aspects of this project fall short on meaningful BVCP and related metrics.

Real estate is all about “location, location and location”. This is the wrong project for this location at this time.

Issue/Source	Grade	Notes
BVCP Vision (BVCP)	D	Proposal is inconsistent with current BVCP policies; analysis hasn't "evaluated changes" against continued lack of amenities in Gunbarrel, vacant land inventory, or industrial zoning land base and needs; and questions about high density residential directly adjacent to industrial land use
City Housing Goals	B+	Based strictly on the number of new units, the project gets a good grade. Under that same criteria, the original proposal for 270 units on 10 acres would be an A.
BVCP Update Criteria (BVCP)	D	
BVCP Vision	C-	Gunbarrel is poorly planned and this proposal would contribute to past mistakes; residents are looking to Subcommunity Planning to achieve the goals in the BVCP and our own unique vision <i>before</i> new projects are approved.
BVCP Core Values (BVCP)		

1. Sustainability	D	“Sustainability” comes from more 15 Minute and Holiday-style neighborhoods, not more automobile dependent communities in food deserts without ready access to services, mixed use, transit, schools or public amenities. Sustainability depends on <i>smart growth</i> , rather than just adding housing on undeveloped wildlife habitat.
2. Welcoming and diverse	C	Overall, Coburn’s architectural design is highly professional, and somewhat improved from the initial proposal. However, “welcoming and diverse” communities start with the right projects in the right places, consistent with community visions and plans developed through meaningful engagement and robust public participation. Top-down planning by outsiders and developers doesn’t promote an especially welcoming and diverse community.
3. A culture of creativity and innovation	D	Creativity and innovation result in thriving, model developments like the award-winning Holiday Neighborhood, or the Shining Mountain site and the Silver Saddle hotel. Spine has little or anything in common with those successes that earned community support.
4. Strong city and county cooperation	D	Cooperation is important. On Spine Road, the County approved projects of one type east of Spine 40 years ago, and the City approved very different developments on the West side. Now, <i>the City Land Use and Planning Department</i> is pointing to County land use to justify more high density projects where they don’t belong under the BVCP west of Spine. City planners are paid by the developer to review the proposals. <i>GCA proposes that subcommunity planning be a joint city-county effort including all of Gunbarrel.</i>
5. Our unique community identity and sense of place	F	The BVCP describes Gunbarrel as not unique, today. However, the fact is that Gunbarrel is unique and it deserves thoughtful subcommunity planning and implementation. Today’s “sense of place” on Spine connects with the thriving prairie dog colony on the remnant grasslands ecosystem that Celestial pledged to preserve, in perpetuity. The project would bulldoze and pave this piece of nature, offering no significant benefit to the community in return.
6. “Compact, contiguous development and infill that supports evolution to a more sustainable urban form”	C-	The proposal is compact but it is not infill. It sprawls into undeveloped land. Quality compact development directs high density residential pursuant to BVCP guidance and direction. Automobile dependent neighborhoods are less sustainable than ever in 2021, and they are anathema to our resilience goals. Urban heat islands like the proposed project? Not so much.

<p>7. “Open space preservation”</p>	<p>F</p>	<p>Open space preservation is furthered by directly high-density project to re-development existing areas like Diagonal Plaza, 29th Street, some of East Boulder, the Hill, etc. <i>Not</i> bulldozing and paving open space for the maximum number of buildings a developer can stuff on to a 10-acre lot, regardless of how big the ornamental tree canopy might look on the architect’s renditions.</p>
<p>8. “Great neighborhoods and public spaces”.</p>	<p>D</p>	<p>Great neighborhoods and public spaces stem from the hard work and collaborative effort of subcommunity planning, especially where the original plats failed to promote those core values. That planning must also address the lack of public spaces or amenities in Gunbarrel, disparities with “Boulder proper”, and planning to ensure there is land available to locate future amenities. Where developers promised public spaces that weren’t built (like the 4-5 acres of playing fields in the Celestial annexation PUD) — that needs to be corrected. Glowing descriptions of a “central park” with park benches in the developer’s pitch might fall somewhat short of what the BVCP has in mind. A few pieces of art in an otherwise congested apartment complex does not represent a public space that creates a great neighborhood. Powderhorn and other developments east of Spine offer significant amenities including contiguous open space, community gardens, gas grills and fire pits, trails, outdoor workstations, a pool, tennis courts, clubhouse and gym.</p>
<p>9. “Environmental stewardship and climate action”</p>	<p>D</p>	<p>Achieving environmental and climate action plan goals depends on not permitting automobile dependent communities that look like urban heat islands. Paving prairie dog colonies is anathema to stewardship. Density can be good environmental stewardship if directed to appropriate locations consistent with the BVCP. Ripping out the mature trees on the site is the opposite of environmental stewardship.</p>
<p>10. “A vibrant economy based on Boulder’s quality of life and economic strengths”.</p>	<p>C</p>	<p>The BVCP Update identified industrial zoning and uses as important to vibrancy, livability and a diverse economy. This project would ignore that priority without analyzing the issue for Gunbarrel. Does it make more sense to locate new industrial uses next to existing uses that are less conducive to residential quality of life? Will the Planning Board walk the intelligent talk from past discussions of the value of industrial uses, or ignore that BVCP Update priority?</p>

<p>11. “diversity of housing types”</p>	<p>D+</p>	<p>This value isn’t significantly advanced. The proposal would add another 230 rental apartments analogous to Hunter Creek and Powderhorn right across Spine, when smaller ownership units and the “missing middle” are what’s lacking from Gunbarrel. The affordable housing component is a plus, as is the set of six townhouses by Habitat for Humanity, but the developer’s insistence on segregating affordable units will result in a stigma for AH residents contrary to best practices.</p>
<p>12. An all-mode transportation system to make getting around without a car easy and accessible to everyone</p>	<p>D</p>	<p>This location is too far from everything people need to be anything but car-dependent. Transit is acknowledged to be lacking, even worse post-pandemic. Per GCA comments, data and studies establish that the proposed “mobility hub” will significantly increase total vehicle miles traveled and traffic congestion. The location is a 30-minute walk from the Gunbarrel center and miles from public amenities in “Boulder proper”. This development would be automobile-dependent.</p>
<p>13. Physical health, safety and well-being</p>	<p>C</p>	<p>Physical health of residents would suffer from the lack of playing fields or other active recreation amenities near the development – including those required by the original PUD plat. Well-being is better advanced by vibrant 15-Minute neighborhoods.</p>
<p>BVCP Direction and Guidance on Density for Residential Development (BVCP)</p>	<p>F</p>	<p>Most of Gunbarrel is currently zoned “low density residential” and none “high density residential”. The application proposes density that is 65% higher than the BVCP’s threshold high density intensity of 14 units per acre. That could change, and is an appropriate issue for Subcommunity Planning.</p>
<p>- Characteristics and Locations: The HR areas are generally located close to the University of Colorado, in areas planned for transit-oriented redevelopment and near major corridors and services</p>	<p>F</p>	<p>The Spine Road location is nowhere near CU or near an area planned for transit-oriented development, and is far from all services. The application lacks a meaningful mixed use component. It fails on all counts to qualify for the proposed ultra-high density proposed by the applicant. The only high density residential referenced in the BVCP are on the Hill and the Transit Center location. BVCP at 118 and 42, respectively. High density needs to be taken off the table for this rural Gunbarrel location that currently provides important wildlife habitat and ecosystem services, where multiple material PUD amenities were ignored by Celestial.</p>

<p>- Uses: Consists of attached residential units and apartments. May include some complementary uses implemented through zoning.</p>	<p>D</p>	<p>Proposed “complimentary” mixed uses are insubstantial at best, totaling less than 3% of the total square footage. 6 townhomes are 2.6% of total units: the middle is still missing. Perhaps the developers’ profit margin is lower for a “livable” community and associated rents here? The “library annex” is likely DOA due to well-publicized library funding concerns already causing limited hours and extended closures at existing library locations.</p>
<p>- BVCP Density/ Intensity: More than 14 dwelling units per acre</p>	<p>D</p>	<p>By starting at 270 units, the developer tried to fool the City into concluding that 230 is reasonable. Approving this proposal will encourage such behavior. The proposed densities are anathema to BVCP guidance for this location, period. Gunbarrel deserves better. A healthy, dynamic site plan with vibrant mixed uses should be a pre-condition for this volume and intensity of ultra-high density residential. Alternatively, the Board might conclude that the BVCP applies, except in Gunbarrel.</p>
<p>2020 Planning Board and Council Feedback on Developer’s 270 unit proposal (Staff Memo)</p>	<p>D</p>	<p>The Board’s previously expressed comments and concerns still apply, and many are at least as apt and concerning today as in 2020. By failing to meaningfully engage the community or respond to Planning Board concerns, the developer forfeited any expectation of approval for the slightly modified proposal that fails to cure the root concerns with the original proposal.</p>
<p>1. encouraging the applicant to consider a mixed-use development</p>	<p>D+</p>	<p>Developer now proposes a token 3% “mixed use” component with 6 townhomes (less than 3% of units) to address the “missing middle” deficit and target market</p>
<p>2. segregating proposed AH units rather than dispersing throughout the project</p>	<p>F</p>	<p>Developer claims it’s not possible despite other developments having successfully integrating on-site AH. Segregated units convey a stigma on AH residents, sometimes called the “poor door.”</p>
<p>3. allowing a residential use in an IM district and “the loss of industrial space in the city”</p>	<p>D</p>	<p>Despite acknowledging the importance of IM zoning and industrial space, no inventories or mapping of such areas or acreage has been performed.</p>
<p>4. “intensity”</p>	<p>D</p>	<p>Intensity unsuited to location and violated BVCP; developers argument points to nearby apartments as reason to ignore BVCP and direct even more ultra-high density to an unsuitable location. Remember to adjust density calculations for the nearby condos by the acreage of the private community park that they all support!</p>

<p>5. “reducing the number of units and size of buildings to be compatible with the surrounding residential development”</p>	<p>D+</p>	<p>270 to 230 is a minor change, which developer probably anticipated all along in formulating their initial proposal. The <i>total</i> open space in the proposed development is less than the yards of five houses in low density residential across the fence.</p>
<p>6. inordinate amount of site dominated by surface parking</p>	<p>C</p>	<p>New site plan is an urban heat island. Even though most parking spaces are fair compact cars (not a realistic plan), parking spaces occupy much of the development footprint; thus, questions remain about adequacy of parking notwithstanding short-term commitment to dubious mobility hub. By reducing the number of units, the developer claims to have significantly increased open, community spaces. It follows that a medium-high density (15-16 units/acre) would allow tripling the currently proposed open spaces, but still far short of the playing fields Celestial committed to in the PUD.</p>
<p>7. lack of connectivity for vehicles and bicyclists/ pedestrians; “very limited” transit access;</p>	<p>C</p>	<p>Marginal connectivity to bike network, some parts of which have had fatal bike/vehicle accidents. Other than brewpubs and Twin Lakes Boulder County open space, nothing much worth walking to, especially with closure of Celestial Seasonings tasting room and store by Hain. No playing fields, no public parks or other amenities, no mixed uses.</p>
<p>8. Lack of improvements to Spine Road or providing a more walkable neighborhood;</p>	<p>D</p>	<p>See above: roadway “improvements” go to traffic; actual urban planning goes to walkability, vibrancy and welcoming residents.</p>
<p>9. lack of quality open space: “Active open space like a central park space is essential for the development”</p>	<p>F</p>	<p>Developer (and staff) ignored annexation and PUD commitments to playing fields and active recreation acreage; existing scenic easements lack any welcoming features or public use; Hain Celestial also reneged on PUD components including community garden and childcare facility which would have benefitted residents. Public amenities entirely lacking from Gunbarrel include a rec center, senior center, sports complex, developed public parks, neighborhood schools, public pool, arts or cultural facilities, etc.</p>

<p>10. Additional analysis needed on BVCP Policy 3.03 “Native Ecosystems” (healthy, thriving prairie dog colony)</p>	<p>F</p>	<p>The developer is open to attempting to relocating the active prairie dog colony, one of the healthiest and most-loved natural habitats for wildlife in all of Gunbarrel. Whether that is possible is uncertain; as would be the success of a relocation effort. Paving over natural grasses will increase storm runoff and require engineered solutions. Ripping out all the existing mature trees for the sake of the density (and the profit it brings) shows a complete lack of concern for ecosystems.</p>
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Teacher’s note to parents (GCA to Planning Board):

GCA is committed to a Gunbarrel community that is welcoming, diverse, inclusive, resilient and revitalized with a better geographic and overall mix of land uses. GCA envisions a future Gunbarrel community that is better planned, more livable, and with a better quality of life informed by BVCP core principles (which we support!) and community goals, objectives and values.

Intelligent, inclusive Subcommunity Planning is the only way to achieve Gunbarrel’s vision. The Planning Board and City Council committed to Gunbarrel Subcommunity Planning as a top priority for the 2020 BVCP Midterm Update. We thank you for that, and request that you meaningfully deliver on that pledge.

Discussions in the East Boulder Subcommunity Plan that could result in 4,500 or 5,400 units is a game changer for housing; as is the potential for the 500-acre planning reserve, which could host 5,000 new units at very conservative assumptions of 250 acres for residential housing at 20 units/acre (significantly lower than proposed for Spine).

Because decisions for significant acreage of undeveloped land in Gunbarrel will impact the imminent Subcommunity Plan, the Planning Board should require that the BVCP subcommunity planning update be completed before a decision on the Spine proposal. Temporarily deferring a decision is more than supported by numerous past decisions informed by the BVCP.

The Spine location is in a “food desert.” This fails BVCP criteria directing high density developments to “15 minute neighborhoods” with ready access to mixed uses, including service and retail businesses. It would be an automobile-dependent development for which the proposed “mobility hub” would worsen traffic, miles-traveled, and emissions/climate impacts.

This development design offers few if any of the intelligent land use or quality of life features of the thriving Holiday Neighborhood on North Broadway.

Please deny or table the current proposal until Gunbarrel Subcommunity Planning is completed. At a minimum, the City should require equivalent open space and amenities as those serving the condominium complexes east of Spine that were permitted by Boulder County.

Gunbarrel desperately needs subcommunity planning. Residents will be good partners with City officials and staff committed to meaningful collaboration, problem-solving and innovation.