CHAPTER 8: COMMUNITY CHARACTER

Introduction

Community character is a term used to describe the various elements that contribute to a neighborhood — such as land use, design, visual resources, historic resources, socioeconomics, traffic and noise — from which an area derives its distinct “personality.” A community character assessment considers how a project may affect the context and feeling of a neighborhood by collectively accounting for its effects on the contributing elements. A community character assessment is typically warranted for a project that has the potential to result in significant adverse impacts in one of the EIS technical areas mentioned above, or if it may affect several of these areas in a more moderate way. A community character evaluation has been completed for the Proposed Project because it has the potential to moderately affect several of these technical areas. However, as presented below, the combination of the effects of the Proposed Project on the contributing elements would not result in a significant adverse impact on community character.

Methodology

The study area for the community character assessment, approximately 3.5 square miles in size, matches the secondary land use study area. The study area is bordered by North Country Road/NYS Route 25A and Sheep Pasture Road to the north, Pond Path to the east, Sycamore Circle, Sycamore Drive and Oxhead Road to the south, and Stony Brook Road to the west.

The various elements that collectively define the character of the study area are presented in the Existing Conditions section of this chapter. The Future No Build Condition section discusses the community character of the area in the future without implementation of the Proposed Project, while the potential effects of the Proposed Project on community character are evaluated in the Future Build Condition section.

Existing Conditions

The study area comprises a mix of institutional, residential and community facility uses, with a few commercial uses located in the northernmost portion along North Country Road and in close proximity to the LIRR. The University and the Medical Center are the predominant community facility uses found in the study area; when combined, they comprise almost half of the study area land. In 2011, the SBU study body population was greater than 24,000, with almost 9,500 students residing on campus in student housing facilities. As Long Island’s sole university-based medical center, SBUMC offers the latest advances in medicine; continuously augments medical knowledge through basic science and clinical research; serves as an
educational resource for SBU healthcare students, the community, patients and their families; and provides many support and educational services at the Center and out in the community.

Low-density, single-family, residential neighborhoods surround the University and Medical Center to the east, south and west. A few relatively large open spaces are also scattered throughout the study area, including the St. George’s Golf and Country Club, Kettle Hole Park, and undeveloped portions of the expansive SBU campus. Additional community facilities are located throughout the study area, including the Long Island State Veterans Home, located east of the Project Site at the end of Patriots Road; and a Setauket Fire Department station and the Robert Cushman Murphy Junior High School along Nicolls Road in the southern reaches of the study area.

The socioeconomic conditions of the study area reflect the presence of the University and Medical Center, and the fact that SBU is the predominant economic force in the area. Demographic attributes of the study area that reflect the presence of the University include a lower median age relative to town and county, relatively greater ethnic diversity that is often associated with a large University, and relatively greater shares of both higher-income and lower-income households (likely reflective of a substantial number of households composed of SBU/ SBUMC professionals, as well as households composed of students with limited incomes). SBU and SBUMC are the largest employers in the study area; health care and education account for more than 92 percent of study area employment.

The salient feature of the study area is SBU, including the SBUMC. The overall SBU campus is vast and accommodates large student and employee populations. The SBUMC campus is generally defined by three building characteristics — the large, modern, interconnected towers of the Hospital and the HSC that dominate the skyline, the multi-level parking garages surrounding the complex, and several single-purpose buildings located on the periphery (e.g., the sprawling, two-story medical structure associated with the Cancer Center; the single-story Ambulatory Surgery Center; the central utility plant situated in a wooded area between the Hospital towers and Health Sciences Drive). Activity on the campus focuses centrally around the Hospital towers and the HSC, as these modern buildings with predominately concrete and glass facades compose the core of the Medical Center campus.

The street with the strongest presence within the study area is Nicolls Road (CR 347), which provides a major north-south connection for the area and also divides the overall SBU campus, separating the Medical Center campus from the Main campus. Other arteries of note include North Country Road (NYS Route 25A) and South Drive, which turns into Health Sciences Drive east of Nicolls Road. Health Sciences Drive primarily services the Medical Center campus, while North Country Road provides an important east-west link for the area.

Other built conditions that contribute to the character of the area include the organization, design and building placement of the Medical Center campus; roadways that follow the contours of the natural landscape; view corridors; the height of the Hospital and HSC towers; and roadbeds of various widths. Natural features also contribute to the character of the area, such as
wooded areas, gently rolling topography and water resources including wetland areas and ponds. Large portions of the overall University property are undeveloped and SBU maintains a 150-foot wooded/vegetated buffer along Nicolls Road; thus screening much of the activity and development associated with the University from Nicolls Road as well as surrounding residential areas. The wooded buffer areas also provide some visual cohesion.

The Hospital and HSC towers are distinctive landmark features that can be seen from miles away, depending on one’s location and vantage point. The impressive heights of the towers, which range from eight to approximately seventeen stories above grade, give them a dominating presence over the other medical facilities on the Project Site as well as buildings located on the SBU Main (West) and South campuses. No other important visual resources were identified within the study area.

The study area generally lacks historic architectural resources; only one property listed on the State and National Registers of Historic Places is located within one mile of the Development Parcel. The sole historic resource is the Nathaniel Longbotham House, situated southwest of the SBU Main (West) campus in the vicinity of Stony Brook Road and Nadworny Lane. No historic resources were identified on or within the immediate vicinity of the Project Site. The results of Phase IB archaeological investigations undertaken on behalf of the Proposed Project indicate that the Development Parcel is not likely to contain archaeological resources.

Traffic and noise levels in the study area are typical of suburban Long Island. Traffic on arterial and primary roadways is relatively high during morning, midday and peak hours, as reflected by the traffic study’s findings for existing conditions. For example, traffic analysis results indicate poor traffic level of service (“LOS”) grades during the PM Peak Hour (4:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m.) for two of the six traffic analysis intersections — the Nicolls Road at Route 25A intersection in the northernmost part of the study area with an LOS of E; and the Nicolls Road at Route 347 intersection, south of the community character study area, with an LOS of F.1 Residential areas that are not adjacent to main roadways are characterized by low ambient noise levels where traffic tends to be the predominant noise source. Residential areas in close proximity to Nicolls Road, on the other hand, are characterized by higher background noise levels due to elevated volumes of vehicular traffic. Noise levels at the SBUMC campus are slightly higher than the more quiet residential areas, in large part due to HVAC-related noise emanating from Hospital and HSC structures and other on-site activity. Vehicular traffic (including emergency vehicles) also contributes to the ambient noise levels at the SBUMC campus.

**Future No-Build Condition**

In the Future No-Build Condition, construction of the ABSL-3 Laboratory and the HSC and LIHTI Parking Lot Expansions and Improvements projects would occur on the Project Site.

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1 LOS E and F are generally considered “unacceptable” operating conditions. See Chapter 13, “Transportation,” for LOS definitions.
In addition, the three infrastructure projects also would be completed. The laboratory project, primarily situated below-grade with a maximum height of approximately 16 feet above grade, will be located adjacent to the northwestern portion of the HSC complex. The parking lot project would modify and slightly expand existing parking areas that are situated toward the northern end of the Project Site, proximate to the HSC and LIHTI buildings. As these planned projects will not result in a substantial number of new employees, they will not generate a substantial amount of vehicular trips. Community character will not be affected by these No-Build projects.

The Campus Hotel project will introduce a 135-room Hilton Garden Inn on the SBU Main (West) campus, south of Entrance Drive and west of Nicolls Road. As noted in the environmental documentation for that project, the hotel will not result in an adverse land use impact because it is integral to support the University, will fulfill demand for on-campus lodging, and will be part of the campus. While the hotel will generate new vehicle trips, the traffic assessment performed for that project ruled out the potential for significant adverse traffic impacts. Similarly, the noise analysis undertaken for that project did not identify significant adverse noise impacts. A 160-foot woodland buffer will serve to screen the hotel from Nicolls Road. The hotel will increase the number of University visitors, but will not substantially affect the community character of the study area.

The results of the traffic analysis for the No-Build Condition indicate that conditions will continue to decline at certain intersections during some of the peak-hour periods, including the Nicolls Road at NYS 25A intersection and the Nicolls Road at NYS 347 intersection (see Chapter 13, “Traffic and Transportation”).

**Future Build Condition**

The Proposed Project would be confined to the existing SBUMC campus and would occupy land that was previously underutilized. It would introduce new buildings and internal roadways and, thus, would result in an increase in the density of development on the Project Site. The Proposed Project would not introduce new land uses or result in changes to existing land use patterns; rather it would be a continuation and intensification of existing institutional (medical and research) land uses on the Project Site which are well established on-site already. The principal land use impact of the Proposed Project would be the removal of approximately 10 acres of upland forest in four locations of the Development Parcel (as discussed in Chapter 9, “Natural Resources”) and the construction of approximately 1,172,700 gross square feet of new development to be housed in three new buildings and a new parking garage; two new surface parking lots and the expansion of an existing parking lot; new internal roadways; and related roadway and streetscape improvements. In total, development of the Proposed Project would be expected to affect approximately 14 acres of the SBUMC campus.

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The Proposed Project would not add new housing or introduce a new residential population, nor would it result in an alteration of land use that could be expected to influence property values or rents in the study area and change community character. The Proposed Project would not displace existing business or residences nor would it result in indirect business or residential displacement; rather it would result in numerous, beneficial socioeconomic effects. It would generate 955 new jobs at the SBUMC and would further benefit the state and local economies through the multiplier effect and through spin-off effects supported by state-of-the-art medical and research facilities. In addition, the Proposed Project would produce temporary benefits to the local and state economies during the term of construction, resulting in increased employment and state and local tax revenues.

In terms of the scale of the proposed new buildings and their location adjacent to and in close proximity of the existing Hospital and HSC complex and towers, the construction of the Proposed Project would have a minimal effect on the design features and visual resources in the study area. The building type, size and mass of the proposed structures would not substantially differ from existing Project Site structures. Although the Proposed Project would disturb a small amount of existing wooded area on the western portion of the Project Site, it is expected that the 150-foot-wide vegetated/woodland buffer would be maintained along Nicolls Road. The Proposed Project would not substantially alter the characteristics of the visual setting nor alter the context of the surrounding area or important natural resources, views or landmarks. The potential for significant adverse shadow impacts has also been ruled out (see Chapter 7, “Design and Visual Resources”). Hence, the Proposed Project would not result in significant adverse effects with respect to design and visual character.

The Proposed Project would increase the number of vehicular trips to and from the Project Site due to increases in the number of employees and visitors. According to the traffic analysis presented in Chapter 13, “Traffic and Transportation,” the Proposed Project has the potential to result in significant adverse traffic impacts at three of the analyzed intersections: Nicolls Road at Route 25A, Nicolls Road at Route 347, and Nicolls Road at South Drive/Health Sciences Drive. However, the Proposed Project would incorporate measures to mitigate the potential for adverse traffic effects — such as lane restriping, signal phasing changes and the implementation of Transportation Demand Management (“TDM”) measures by SBUMC — significant traffic impacts are not expected.

Historic resources would not be adversely affected by the Proposed Project. Similarly, noise levels at and in the vicinity of the Project Site would not be substantially affected by the Proposed Project. As discussed in Chapter 15, “Noise,” significant adverse impacts attributable to mobile or stationary sources of noise, would not occur as a result of the Proposed Project.

Based on the results of the technical area assessments and screenings discussed in the other chapters of this EIS, the Proposed Project would not result in significant adverse impacts with respect to land use, socioeconomic conditions, historic resources, design and visual resources, noise or traffic. The Proposed Project’s moderate effects on the various contributing elements would not adversely impact the study area’s residential neighborhoods or the defining
features of the surrounding community. Therefore, the Proposed Project would not result in a significant adverse effect on the community character of the study area.