



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

PLANNING BOARD

CITY HALL ANNEX, 344 BROADWAY, CAMBRIDGE, MA 02139

Date:	January 19, 2021
Subject:	Alewife Quadrangle Northwest Overlay District (Srinivasan, et al.) Zoning Petition
Recommendation:	The Planning Board recommends ADOPTION, with comments and suggested modifications.

To the Honorable, the City Council,

On December 8, 2020, the Planning Board (the “Board”) held a public hearing to discuss the Alewife Quadrangle Northwest Overlay District (Srinivasan, et al.) Zoning Petition (the “Petition”). The proposed changes include a new section, 20.95.5, that would allow increased building height to a maximum of 85 feet, enabling of a 0.25 FAR “infrastructure bonus” for construction or accommodation of a pedestrian/bicycle railroad crossing (currently available only in AOD-2, AOD-4, and AOD-6 Districts), and exemption of certain building floor area from Gross Floor Area (GFA) calculations in the AOD-1 District upon granting of a special permit from the Board. The proposed new section also sets forth procedures for Master Plan Special Permit review and approval of developments involving the redevelopment of three (3) or more acres of land and the construction of three (3) or more new buildings. The stated intent of the new section is, “To encourage landowners to create spaces suitable for light industrial tenants and other, consumer-facing tenants requiring increased floor-to-floor heights.” This is the fourth version of this Petition, in concept, referred by the City Council; the Board held hearings on prior versions on October 22, 2019, December 17, 2019, and September 8, 2020. Representatives of Cabot, Cabot and Forbes (CC&F), an owner of land in the affected district, have been the lead presenters of the Petition.

Following the hearing held on September 8, 2020, the Board directed staff from the Community Development Department (CDD), in consultation with the Law Department, to draft revised language that reflected the intent of the Petitioner as well as the goals and concerns of the Board. Language from City staff was included in the CDD memo dated December 2, 2020. In response to CDD’s memo, CC&F sent a communication to the Board dated December 4, 2020 suggesting modifications to the language from staff. The Board’s discussion focused on the language suggested by staff and the response from CC&F.

The majority of Board members expressed support for CDD staff’s version of the zoning petition, though Board members identified some sections in which the language could be better clarified.

Regarding the modifications suggested by CC&F, Board members expressed a range of views. In particular, some Board members raised concerns that CC&F's modifications would not guarantee the construction of a bridge over the MBTA railroad tracks, which Board members generally agreed is a crucial aspect of this proposal. The following summarizes some of the comments made by Board members:

- Regarding the request for a “Bridge Financial Backstop,” some members indicated that if development is allowed to proceed but the bridge is not constructed, it would not be a favorable outcome for the City even if a financial contribution is made. Others heard the concerns raised by CC&F about financial risk, but suggested that the alternative contribution, if permissible, should be substantial enough to make the construction of the bridge a more favorable option. One Board member suggested stronger language requiring that the Planning Board may approve an alternative to bridge construction only if it determines that construction of a bridge is infeasible and that equivalent public benefits are being provided.
- Regarding “Other Bridge Contributions,” Board members expressed concerns about the proposal to expand the 0.25 FAR bonus to sites that only make financial contributions to the construction of a bridge. The Alewife District Plan recommends that new development should make financial contributions for public infrastructure, but not for additional density bonuses above the current amounts.
- Regarding “Garage Heights,” Board members supported a maximum building height of 85 feet for structured parking without requiring light industrial uses at the ground story only if it is part of an otherwise predominantly residential building.
- Regarding “Ground Floor Activation,” Board members were generally supportive of CC&F's recommendation to allow restaurants, coffee shops, and similar neighborhood retail uses as a portion of ground-story spaces, though some members suggested a limit on the square footage based either on an absolute number or a ratio to retain the emphasis on light industrial space.

As demonstrated above, Board members agreed that the construction of a bridge across the MBTA railroad tracks is highly desirable and preferable to a financial contribution. The Board encourages the City Council to carefully consider to what extent a bridge may or may not be guaranteed as part of a Quadrangle Northwest Master Plan Special Permit and what types of alternatives would be acceptable to the City. **With these considerations in mind, the Board voted to recommend that the City Council adopt the Petition, after substituting the suggested zoning language from City staff and with consideration to the issues discussed above, with all eight members present voting in favor.**

Respectfully submitted for the Planning Board,

Catherine Preston Connolly

Catherine Preston Connolly, Chair.