



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

PLANNING BOARD

CITY HALL ANNEX, 344 BROADWAY, CAMBRIDGE, MA 02139

Date:	December 14, 2022
Subject:	Blier, et al., Zoning Petition
Recommendation:	The Planning Board recommends ADOPTION, with additional considerations.

To the Honorable, the City Council,

On December 6, 2022, the Planning Board (the “Board”) held a public hearing to discuss a Zoning Petition by Suzanne Blier, et al., to amend Section 20.54.9 of the Zoning Ordinance (the “Petition”). The Petition would modify the current limitations on the street frontage of banks, trust companies, or similar financial institutions in the Harvard Square Overlay District. The Board heard a presentation from Suzanne Blier, representing the petitioners, and received written materials from staff in the City’s Community Development Department (CDD).

Following the presentation, public comment, and discussion among Board members, the Planning Board voted to transmit a favorable recommendation on this Petition to the City Council, with some additional suggestions.

The Board was generally supportive of limiting the frontage of banks in the Harvard Square Overlay District and agreed that some recent as-of-right bank proposals had outcomes that did not reflect the intent of the current zoning (see the attached Planning Board staff memo for additional context). Board members agreed that the limitations in zoning should promote the following outcomes:

- The frontage of a bank should be limited across all streets on which it has frontage. For example, a corner bank location should count its total frontage across both streets. Likewise, if a bank has multiple entrances on different sides of a building fronting different streets, the total frontage should be counted across all streets.
- Frontage should include space occupied by a bank that is blocked by a sort of “vener” or other design that superficially blocks the frontage of the bank. For example, if a bank use is behind a blank brick wall or a narrow buffer space, then that length should count towards total frontage. The Board agreed that the goal is to promote transparency and activation at the ground level, consistent with the unique character of Harvard Square. Board members acknowledged that if there are site-specific scenarios where it would be acceptable to have a bank use located behind a “blank wall” or similar screening treatment, that proposal could seek a special permit from the Planning Board so that it does not lead to unintended outcomes.

- The limitation should apply to the cumulative frontage of banks along an entire building, and not just to each individual bank establishment. Some Board Members noted that it might be acceptable to have multiple banks within a building so long as each bank is limited in frontage. However, Board members also recognized that there might be too many opportunities for unintended outcomes if a single bank entity attempts to differentiate its functions to be considered separate “establishments” in order to occupy more frontage than desired.

Board members acknowledged that it will be difficult to draft zoning language that minimizes unanticipated workarounds, and therefore recommends that CDD and Law Department staff be asked to review the Petition text and suggest changes that will ensure the intended outcomes as much as possible. Board members also acknowledged that because it is difficult to apply uniform requirements to many different types of conditions, making the rules more restrictive might prompt a large number of special permit applications from proposed bank uses in the future.

The Planning Board voted with 8 members in favor of transmitting the above recommendation.

Respectfully submitted for the Planning Board,

Catherine Preston Connolly

Catherine Preston Connolly, Chair.