



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

To: Planning Board

From: Urban Design Staff

Date: May 10, 2019

Re: **PB #231A, First Street Assemblage PUD - Open Space Design Review,
Design Updates for Parcels A, B and C**

IRAM FAROOQ

*Assistant City Manager for
Community Development*

SANDRA CLARKE

*Deputy Director
Chief of Administration*

KHALIL MOGASSABI

*Deputy Director
Chief of Planning*

The Special Permit for this Planned Unit Development (PUD) on various sites along First Street was first approved by the Planning Board in 2010, and has been modified several times through the PUD amendment process. The most recent major amendment was granted by the Planning Board in 2015 to expand the PUD from a total of three building sites to a total of six sites. Minor Amendment 5, which changed the below grade parking on Parcel B from a single level to two levels was approved on July 31, 2018. Two buildings have been completed, at 159 First Street and 65 Bent Street. "Parcel A" (121-139 First Street) and "Parcel D" (85 First Street) are both nearing completion, and site work has begun on Parcels B and C for the parking garage and foundations.

The Applicant seeks design review approval for changes to the Parcel B open space plan and landscape design. The open space changes were initially presented to the Planning Board on July 31, 2018 as part of the Minor Amendment 5 request. However, at that time the design changes were not specifically approved by the Board.

The designs for the Parcels A, B and C buildings were approved by the Planning Board on December 15, 2015 at the same time as the Final Development Plan approval. All buildings are subject to continuing review by staff. The Applicant has recently submitted design update materials for these buildings, which show a range of design refinements.

These design materials are presented for the Board's review and comment. A summary of comments from staff is provided on the following pages.

Staff Comments

Open Space Design Review

The updated design is similar to the scheme presented to the Planning Board in July 2018 as part of Minor Amendment 5. The changes in the updated design are refinements, some in response to Planning Board and staff comments, rather than substantial changes.

The Planning Board's comments from July 31, 2018 included:

- The suggestion that the new trees on Charles Street be located on the parcel, rather than on the sidewalk, so as to allow bigger trees than would be possible under the power line.
- The preference to preserve the 18" diameter tree on Charles Street, which has been removed.
- Board members noted that the zone of pavers that had existed along the north side of Building B's west wing in the earlier scheme had been replaced by concrete. The zone of pavers had demarcated an area for truck loading and maneuvering, distinct from the scored concrete of the parking lot. On the June 26th drawings, the scored concrete parking lot paving comes closer to the building.
- Questions were raised about the delivery truck maneuvering for deliveries to Building B, and about potential interference with pedestrians.

The revised open space plan has been simplified in some ways, including the elimination of the low wall that had divided the south lawn, the extension of the north lawn closer to Building B, and a longer, more continuous, bench/wall along Charles Street.

Layout

- While the layout of the lawns, paths, and planting that constitute the mid-block passage seems more coherent, particularly at the central area where the north lawn and the south lawn meet, the sense of creating an interconnected ensemble of spaces could perhaps still be stronger.
- The new public patio on the north side of the headhouse reduces the amount of lawn area. A change in the curvature of the paved area could be considered, pulling it farther from the lawn.
- Additional benches in the area between the north lawn and Charles Street should be considered.

Parking Garage ramp screening

- The July 31, 2018 design had a bicycle shelter on the east side of the parking garage ramp, there is now planting there, perhaps intended to better screen the ramp from view.
- Planting climbing plants on the rear slat-wall of the headhouse seating area, which divides the seating area from the ramp, would improve the amenity of that area.
- Planting on the screen wall on the west side of the headhouse would also help create more separation between the seating area and the parking garage ramp.
- A view of looking east along Charles Street would be helpful to understand how the parking garage ramp, headhouse, and sidewalk-side planting will affect Charles Street.

Trees

- There are 17 trees, the same as on the June 26, 2018 drawings, although there is one more on Charles Street and one less on Hurley Street.
- If possible, additional street trees along Charles, Hurley, and First Streets should be considered to further enhance the landscaping around the site.
- On Hurley Street, the applicant notes that Eversource has agreed to relocate utilities below ground, which will allow the planting of canopy, rather than ornamental trees.
- The street trees shown in the perspectives appear to be species with a lower growth habit than those indicated on the Open Space/Plantings drawing (sheet 18).

Site design along Charles and Hurley Streets

- More consistent alignment of the various walls, planters, and fences along Charles and Hurley streets should be considered to help reinforce the character and identity of the sidewalk as a component of the public realm.
- The Charles and Hurley Street sidewalk widths should be reviewed to determine if more pedestrian space is needed, as such space could easily be accommodated within the revised landscape design.
- The fence around the Parcel C utility area on Hurley Street should be set back from the sidewalk to align with the façade of building C.
- On the north side of the bicycle racks on Charles Street, the plans show what appear to be blue shrubs, while in the perspectives this area is grass.
- More substantial planting should be provided around the surface parking lot so that a suitable buffer between the parking spaces and the open space is achieved.

Parcel A

- While not referenced in the Applicant's memo, the design update materials include the proposed screening of the Parcel A Office Building's cooling tower. The cooling tower is already installed and is visually obtrusive from several pedestrian vantage points.
- Various screening options have been proposed by staff; however, it is understood that due to constraints associated with the mechanical equipment, roof membrane, and wind and structural loads, screening solutions are limited. The proposal uses a vertical primary structure attached to the roof dunnage with horizontal slats screening the cooling tower.
- Staff preference would have been to screen the cooling tower with the corrugated perforated mesh already used on the mechanical penthouse. Given the constraints, the proposed slats seem to provide reasonable screening benefits, although a vertically-oriented design would better align with the other rooftop elements.

Parcel B

Change in floor-to-floor heights

- The increase in residential floor heights does change the visual character of the building. The retail ground floor height has been reduced, and it appears that the brick spandrel between residential floors is also taller.
- Citywide urban guidelines encourage taller ground floors to address retail needs, and to create a greater sense of height and scale at the pedestrian frontage. Economic Development staff have no concerns with the proposed retail floor-to-floor height of 14'2". Attempts have also been made by the architect to maximize the height of glass, and the successful two-story expression of the first and second floors remains in the revised scheme.

Eversource vault

- Several updates have been made to the south elevation regarding treatment of the Eversource vault. From the perspective views depicted on sheets 29, 32, and 33, these changes seem successful and staff appreciate the continued efforts to completely enclose the vault.
- An updated first floor plan should be provided to better understand all of the changes.

Standing seam metal panel

- The use of standing seam metal panel does provide more of a residential character and texture compared to the earlier flat metal panel.
- Given the scale of the building, staff had concerns that the standing seam is too finely grained and encouraged use of larger panels. It appears somewhat successful on First Street. However, on Charles Street, where there are larger expanses of metal panel, the standing seam appears less successful than the more random pattern and larger metal panels used in the earlier design.
- The height of the metal panel parapet has also increased to screen the rooftop mechanicals. Previously, the more random panel pattern helped diminish this vertical emphasis, which now seems exaggerated by the slender profile of the standing seam.
- It will be important to ensure careful color selection as part of the continuing design review process. Use of dark grey was raised by the Board as a concern during the original design review approval.

Other changes

- The removal of the cornice on Charles Street appears to give the southern wing more of an institutional feel.
- The quality of facade materials on Charles Street has also changed. Most notably, the finish and pattern of the fiber cement panels, with the exposed metal channels, is not consistent with the clean lines of the long, horizontal panels previously shown. Wood-clad balconies and window connections were also shown in the approved renderings, which added texture to the façades.
- Residential windows in the brick portions of the building previously had more of a traditional character, with two-over-two panes. This seemed to better relate to the more traditional nature

of the red brick. Additionally, the piers between windows were narrower and the same color as the window frames, which helped to group the windows and unify the façade.

- A blend of red and brown brick is proposed instead of the heritage red brick shown in the approved renderings. While some variation is supported, it will be important to ensure that a balanced color palette is achieved.
- Other character defining features, such as projecting cornices, and brick and window details, should be reinstated, where possible.

Parcel C

- While not referenced in the Applicant’s memo, the design update materials also include the Parcel C residential building.
- Relatively modest changes are proposed, including similar use of vertical standing seam cladding, which appears to work well on this scale of building. The amount of glazing has reduced, which does change some façade proportions; however the façade composition remains relatively balanced.
- Some of the changes are a little unclear in the renderings as the street trees obscure the views.
- Additionally, without revised floor plans, it is difficult to determine what changes have been made to the building’s modulation.

Continuing Review

The following is a summary of issues that staff recommends as items for ongoing design review if the Board decides to approve the designs:

- Revised floor plans and elevations with key dimensions and a graphic scale shown.
- Review of the internal ground floor layout of the Parcel B retail tenant space to ensure that the level of activation on First Street is maximized.
- Review of all exterior materials, colors, and details, including a materials wall mock-up on the site prior to any exterior materials being ordered. The mock-ups should be sited to match the orientation of predominant public façades, and in a location where varying light conditions can be experienced.
- Review of all proposed public realm, open space and streetscape design details.
- Provision of bicycle room plans at 1:10 scale.
- Review of details of the proposed bicycle racks, including type(s), dimensions and clarification that City standards are being met.
- Review of loading, parking, bicycle parking, access and egress, and sidewalk design details by the Traffic, Parking & Transportation Department and the Department of Public Works.