



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

To: Planning Board

From: CDD Staff

Date: April 20, 2021

Re: Special Permit **PB #361, 711-727 Mass Ave - Continued Hearing**

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This memo contains an overview of the proposed project at 711-727 Massachusetts Avenue, the special permits being requested, and related comments.

Update

Since the last Planning Board meeting on December 15, 2020, the Applicant has worked with staff to respond to comments and questions raised in the prior review of the application. The Applicant's recent submission provides a revised set of plans and dimensions with additional information about the project in narrative and graphic form. This memo comments on the additional information and proposed changes and is supplementary to CDD's prior memos on this proposal.

The proposal is also subject to the Green Building Requirements in Section 22.20. Staff has reviewed the required submissions to certify compliance with the Green Building Requirement. Compliance with the Incentive Zoning Requirements will be reviewed at the time of issuance of a building permit.

Planning Board Action

The current Application (as revised) is proposing to renovate and rehabilitate the historic building with an addition behind and partially above the existing building. The proposed uses include ground-floor retail, office space, and a 36-room hotel. The renovated building plus addition will result in a total FAR of 3.86 – which excludes areas exempt from gross floor area (GFA) calculations either as-of-right or by special permit – and a total of six stories above grade.

The Applicant is seeking Special Permits allowed in the Central Square Overlay District for building height (Section 20.304.2) and FAR (20.304.3), to exempt rooftop spaces from the calculation of GFA (20.304.3.), to establish a Formula Business (20.304.5) and to modify limitations on bank frontage (20.304.5.3.b), and to waive parking and loading requirements (20.304.6). The Applicant also seeks an exemption of basement area from the calculation of GFA (Article 2.000).

Applicable sections of the zoning are provided in an appendix.

Requested Special Permits	Summarized Findings <i>(detailed zoning text in appendix)</i>
<p>Central Square Overlay District: Standards for Issuance of Special Permits (Section 20.305)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proposed development is consistent with the goals and objectives of the Central Square Action Plan: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ encourage responsible and orderly development; ○ strengthen the retail base to more completely serve the needs of the neighborhoods; ○ preserve the Square’s cultural diversity; ○ create active people oriented spaces; ○ improve the physical, and visual environment; ○ provide retail establishments that serve people of diverse economic and social groups who live in the surrounding neighborhoods. • Building and site designs are consistent with “Urban Design Plan for Central Square” as outlined in the “Central Square Action Plan” and the “Central Square Development Guidelines” (see summary on following pages). • Building and site designs adequately screen the parking provided and are sensitive to the contributing buildings in the vicinity. • No National Register or contributing building is demolished or so altered as to terminate or preclude its designation (either now or within the past 5 years).
<p>Central Square Overlay District: Building height up to 80 feet and combined residential and non-residential FAR up to 4.00 (Sections 20.304.2 & 20.304.3)</p>	<p><i>Central Square Overlay District findings set forth above</i></p>
<p>Central Square Overlay District: Exemption of rooftop spaces from calculation of Gross Floor Area (GFA) in Central Square Overlay District (Section 20.304.3.6)</p>	<p>The rooftop spaces are located and designed to minimize impacts on neighboring uses, including but not limited to light trespass, noise or other nuisance, and may place further requirements or conditions on the design or operational aspects of rooftop space, including but not limited to hours of operation, range of activities permitted, signage and lighting fixtures, visual screening devices, sound mitigation, and other measures to ensure ongoing compliance with the findings.</p>

Requested Special Permits	Summarized Findings <i>(detailed zoning text in appendix)</i>
Central Square Overlay District: Reduction of parking and loading requirement (Sections 20.304.6 & 6.35.1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Total development authorized on the site is reduced to 90% of the maximum permitted on the lot or a cash contribution is made to the Central Square Improvement Fund in an amount equal to fifty (50) percent of the cost of construction of the parking spaces not provided. • Subject lot is sufficiently small in size as to contribute to a development pattern of diverse, small scale, new structures and the retention of existing structures. • Exemption from parking and loading requirements will result in a building design that is more appropriate to its location and the fabric of its neighborhood. • <i>Other Central Square Overlay District findings set forth above</i>
Central Square Overlay District: Special Permit for Formula Business (Sections 20.304.5.4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The design reflects, amplifies and strengthens the established historical character of existing buildings and storefronts in Central Square. • The particulars of the building or storefront design is varied from the formula or standard design of the chain in order to reflect the unique character and conditions of Central Square generally or the specific location in particular. • Standard elements of the enterprise defining it as a Formula Business are modified to respect and provide unique expressions of Central Square history and traditions as well as innovation in physical design and marketing that will distinguish the Central Square location from other locations of the Formula Business.
Central Square Overlay District: Bank frontage occupying more than 25 feet of building frontage facing Massachusetts Avenue or more than 30% of a lot's aggregate building frontage (Section 20.304.5.3.b)	<i>Central Square Overlay District findings set forth above</i>
Special Permit for exemption of basement area in the calculation of Gross Floor Area (GFA)	The uses occupying such exempted GFA support the character of the neighborhood or district in which the applicable lot is located.
General Special Permit Criteria (Section 10.43)	Special permits will be normally granted if the zoning requirements are met, unless it is found not to be in the public interest due to one of the criteria enumerated in Section 10.43.

Planning Board Comments from the Second Hearing

The following summarizes some of the key comments made by the Planning Board at the hearing on 12/15/2020 in addition to comments from staff memos:

- Provide additional information regarding safety of proposed loading and drop-offs on Temple Street.
- Consider further consolidation of rooftop mechanical area and provide more details of screening.
- Explore design improvements to reduce the impact of the height and proximity of the proposed addition on immediate abutters.
- Conduct more public outreach for input from immediate abutters.

Staff Comments on New Materials

Planning and Zoning

The revised proposal retains the numerous aspects of the original proposal that the Planning Board found positive, and includes changes in response to many of the comments from Planning Board members and staff. The use and scale of the project remain largely the same, but there are changes to the massing due to moving rooftop mechanical equipment and headhouses away from the abutting residential building (resulting in the elimination of usable rooftop space, but an overall increase in green roof area), and a step-back of the topmost story (resulting in the elimination of one guest room). The special permit for FAR exemption to rooftop spaces as proposed is no longer necessary because it would be accessed only for maintenance of the mechanical headhouses, via a roof hatch. The major focus of staff and the Applicant's team has been to reduce impacts on the abutting residential building and improve the proposal's overall conformance with Central Square Action Plan and Development Guidelines. Staff have also been in contact with representatives of the Cambridge Housing Authority to provide information to residents of the abutting residential building.

Urban Design

In response to the Planning Board's comments in the December 15, 2020 hearing, the applicant has modified the project's sixth floor and roof level, provided more information regarding loading and drop-off on Temple Street, and conducted additional public outreach. The changes to the design will reduce its shadow, noise, and light trespass impacts on the neighboring Temple Place Apartments building and increase the sky views from its south side units. With the exception of changes to the top of the building, the design remains the same as in the December 15, 2020 hearing. As in the previous submission, staff appreciates the project's contributions to the pedestrian experience made by its preservation and restoration of the existing building and its improvements to the ground floor retail spaces.

Highlights of changes to the design include:

- The extent of the sixth floor has been reduced, stepping back the majority of its north wall from the façade below: farther away from the alley on the north edge of the property and from the Temple Place Apartments building. The applicant investigated the Planning Board's suggestion

to try moving the bulk of the new upper floors farther south in addition to stepping away from the neighboring building. They found that doing so would require the insertion of additional structural columns through the existing building's vaulted ground floor spaces, thereby violating their integrity. CDD staff concurred with their decision to not pursue the suggestion.

- The HVAC condensing units that previously lined the northern edge of the roof and lacked acoustical and visual screening have been moved to a more centrally located enclosure, visually and acoustically screened.
- Rooftop penthouses have been eliminated or reduced in size.
- The headhouse for the stair has been eliminated.
- The elevator overrides have been reduced in height.

Together these changes result in a stepped section along the majority of the building's north side, opening the upper part of the alley to the sky and increasing the Temple Place Apartments building's exposure to sunlight and the sky views from its units. In addition, the changes will reduce noise impacts on residents of Temple Place Apartments.

The changes reduced the hotel's room count from 37 to 36.

Changes to the project's appearance as seen from Massachusetts Avenue and Temple Place are minor and positive:

- The rooftop penthouses are smaller and less visible.
- The occupiable roof terrace has been replaced by a green roof, increasing the vegetated area. As the roof level is no longer accessible to residents, the railing previously proposed along its west, south, and east edges has been eliminated.

Comments on the new materials:

- The stair tower at the building's northwest corner projects beyond the adjoining north wall of the building for its full height. Above the first floor, however, the stair's actual flights do not seem to use the northernmost part of the stair shaft. The possibility of reducing the shaft's northernmost extent above the second-floor level should be explored to further reduce afternoon shadows cast onto the Temple Place Apartments building.
- Consideration could be given to further increasing the amount of green roof.
- Several options are suggested to reduce light trespass from units on the building's north side to the Temple Place Apartments building: directionally shielded down lights, glazing designed to reduce transmission from the interior to exterior, and automated window shades. Could a more definitive commitment be made reduce light trespass by employing these or other systems?
- Traffic and Parking has reviewed the application and recommends that the project's street address be on Temple Street rather than Massachusetts Avenue. TP+T believes that brief stops by passenger vehicles are not likely to significantly block Temple Street and will revisit curb regulations if loading issues occur in the future.
- The application lists community outreach efforts since the December 15, 2020 hearing. Information regarding what input was received and on any changes that have been made to the design in response would be helpful.

Continuing Review

The following is a summary of issues that staff recommends as conditions for ongoing design review by staff if the Board decides to grant the special permit:

- Review of all exterior materials, colors, alterations, and details with the Cambridge Historical Commission, and review of a materials mock-up by city staff prior to any exterior materials being ordered. Coordination of the mockup's location with city staff.
- Review of changes to the adjoining sidewalks and their features, including any new trees and the removal of the existing curb cut.
- Review of exterior lighting.
- Review of Interior lighting and window treatment on the façade facing the Temple Place Apartments.
- Review of visual/acoustical screening of rooftop mechanical equipment.
- Coordination with Cambridge Arts Council on the removal of its upper portion of the mural on the west wall of the existing building when the existing rooftop penthouse is demolished, and on protection of the remaining portion during construction.