



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

To: Planning Board
From: Harvard Square Advisory Committee
Date: February 1, 2022
Re: **PB-386, 81-93 Mt. Auburn Street**

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Overview

The Harvard Square Advisory Committee (the “Committee”) met on Wednesday, January 19, 2022 to discuss the special permit application by Trinity Property Management for the property known as The Garage at 81-93 Mt. Auburn Street. The meeting was conducted pursuant to the provisions of Section 20.50 of the Cambridge Zoning Ordinance in advance of the applicant’s request for six special permits from the Planning Board. Committee members present were Allison Crosbie, Lauren Curry, Jemel Derbali, Kari Kuelzer, Sara Li, Steven Ng, Alexandra Offiong, Matt Simitis, and Nicola Williams. Committee member John DiGiovanni was also present at the meeting but recused himself from the discussion of this application. After discussion, the Committee decided to forward a report to the Planning Board with a positive recommendation and suggestions for special permit conditions.

Proposal Description

The applicant proposes to demolish most of the existing 78,300-square-foot building in order to construct a new building in its place, while retaining the portion of the existing historic building at the corner of Dunster Street and Mt. Auburn Street that was built as a stable in the 1860s. The proposed building will contain 87,494 square feet, thus increasing the site’s gross floor area (GFA) by 9,194 square feet.

The applicant proposes a building with a height of 80 feet and six stories above grade. The uses will include office and retail, including restaurant. The site will not include any off-street parking. 27 long-term bicycle parking spaces will be provided within the building and the applicant will make a contribution to the City’s Public Bicycle Parking Fund in lieu of providing short-term bicycle parking on-site.

Committee Comments

Members of the Committee were generally supportive of the applicant’s proposal. Many Committee members acknowledged that the building was well-designed and would have a positive impact on Harvard Square. They praised the applicant for committing to restore the historic stables building and for pursuing LEED Gold certification, notably by including all-electric sustainability measures. They also appreciated that the applicant

sought feedback from various community stakeholders, including the Harvard Square Neighborhood Association.

On the whole, Committee members did not have concerns with five of the requested special permits, though one Committee member expressed a belief that the proposed building design does not do enough to address the street level experience. The Committee’s discussion centered on the special permit for additional FAR through Section 20.54.7 of the Zoning Ordinance. Most members of the Committee were not opposed to allowing additional FAR on this site; however, they wanted the applicant to commit to specific public benefits that reflected the needs and priorities of the Square. They believed that the additional development would generate some negative impacts, and that commitments were necessary to account for those impacts and to satisfy the criteria of the special permit. Some members of the Committee wondered if the development itself could be considered a public benefit; others believed that more development potential on a site would not necessarily lead to a better project.

With one member voting in opposition, eight members of the Committee voted in favor of recommending that the special permit for additional FAR be granted only on the condition that the ground floor of the building be devoted to retail and active uses per Section 4.35 of the Zoning Ordinance, as contemplated by Section 20.54.7(1) of the Zoning Ordinance. There was considerable discussion amongst members about how to describe the nature of those uses. Some members preferred the term “active uses,” which has been used elsewhere in the Zoning Ordinance, because they were concerned that restricting ground floor uses to retail excluded other uses that would create pedestrian activity and draw people to the Square.

In addition to the commitment for retail and active uses on the ground level, one or more committee members suggested that the following would be appropriate public benefits:

- Design the building to include publicly accessible interior space.
- Make a reasonable effort to recruit and retain small and independent local businesses, including existing tenants, businesses run by people of color, and nonprofit organizations.
- Ensure that customer-facing businesses are open for most of the day.
- Provide housing as part of the development.
- Conduct a transportation impact analysis of the increase in GFA devoted to office uses.

Committee members understand that the total benefits package must be commensurate with the additional FAR that is granted. They encouraged the applicant to be creative in identifying appropriate public benefits. They also encouraged the Planning Board to account for the intrinsic benefits of the project in determining the final benefits package.

Respectfully submitted for the Committee,

Sarah Scott

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