



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

To: Planning Board

From: CDD Staff

Date: November 14, 2023

Re: Special Permit **PB-400, 8 Thingvalla Avenue**

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Community Development

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Overview

Submission Type: Special Permit Application

Applicant: Gregory Matteosian

Zoning District(s): Residence B

Proposal Summary: Construct a single-family residence greater than 75 feet from the front line and to the rear of an existing single-family residence. The existing single-family structure will be replaced with a new-single family structure.

Special Permits Requested: Special Permit for more than one structure containing a principal residential use (Section 5.53.2)

Other City Permits Needed: None

Planning Board Action: Grant or deny requested special permits.

Memo Contents: CDD Zoning Report & Urban Design Report

Other Staff Reports: Department of Public Works (DPW) in separate documents.

Zoning Section	Required Planning Board Findings <i>(Summary - see appendix for zoning text excerpts)</i>
Special Permit for more than one structure containing a principal residential use (Section 5.53.2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The development of two structures on the lot will not significantly increase the impact of the new construction should it occur in a single structure, <u>OR</u> • The development of two structures will provide identifiable benefits beyond that provided by construction in a single structure, considering the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Extent to which preservation of a large contiguous open space in the rear of the lot or series of adjacent lots is achieved ○ Incentives to locate buildings and parking in the front half of a lot per the prevailing development pattern in the neighborhood ○ Providing an enhanced living environment for residents on the lot ○ Incentives to retain existing structures, particularly structures that are preferably preserved ○ Opportunities to reduce visual impact of parking from the public street and adjacent lots ○ Opportunities to reduce height and bulk of new construction is deeper into a lot or closer to structures on abutting lots • Conforms to general criteria for issuance of a special permit.
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: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) It appears that requirements of this Ordinance cannot or will not be met, or (b) traffic generated or patterns of access or egress would cause congestion, hazard, or substantial change in established neighborhood character, or (c) the continued operation of or the development of adjacent uses as permitted in the Zoning Ordinance would be adversely affected by the nature of the proposed use, or

Zoning Section	Required Planning Board Findings <i>(Summary - see appendix for zoning text excerpts)</i>
	(d) nuisance or hazard would be created to the detriment of the health, safety and/or welfare of the occupant of the proposed use or the citizens of the City, or (e) for other reasons, the proposed use would impair the integrity of the district or adjoining district, or otherwise derogate from the intent and purpose of this Ordinance, and (f) the new use or building construction is inconsistent with the Urban Design Objectives set forth in Section 19.30.

Zoning & Development Staff Report

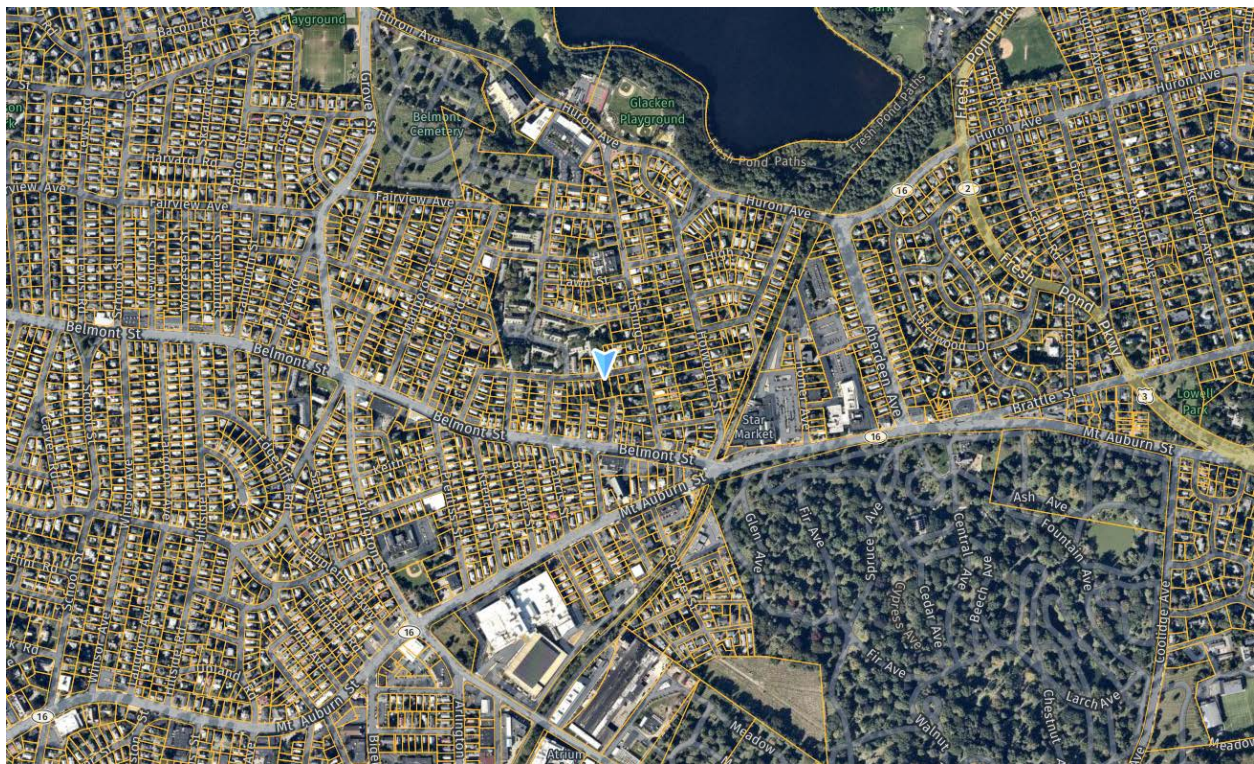
Area Planning and Zoning

Site Context

Neighborhood/Area: Strawberry Hill

Development Patterns: Predominantly residential development consisting of single, two- and multifamily structures and a few apartment buildings.

Nearby Features: The area is generally located between Fresh Pond to the north, Belmont to the west and Watertown to the south. Site is located within 1 mile of Fresh Pond Reservation and approx. ½ mile of Fresh Pond Golf Course to the north, and approx. ½ mile of Watertown- Cambridge Greenway hiking trail and Cambridge Public Library- Collins branch to the east.

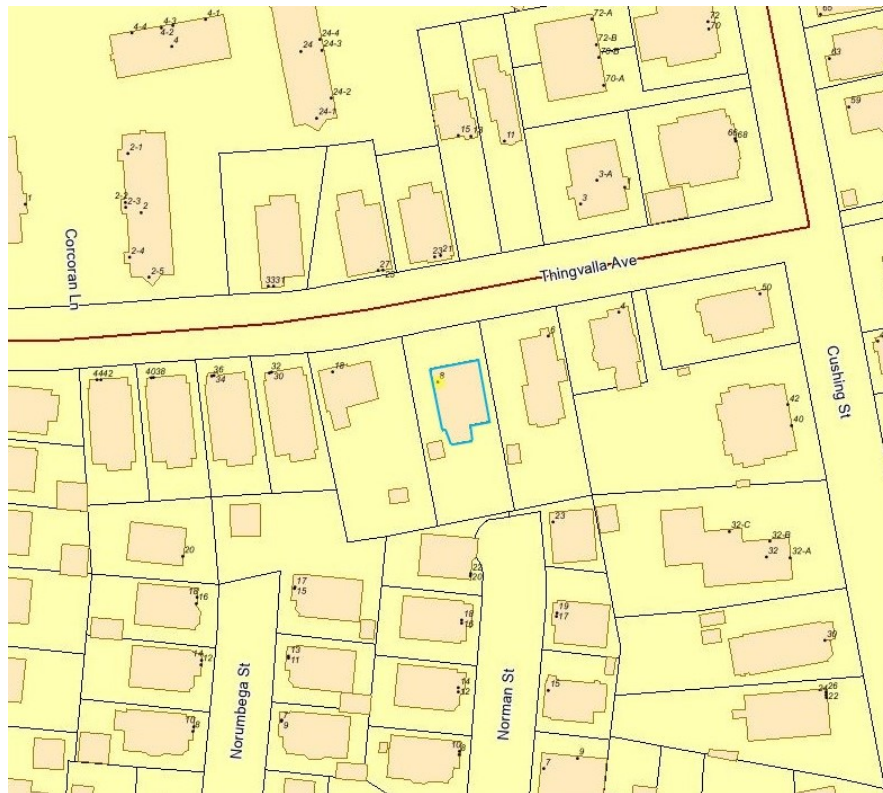


Aerial Context Map showing 8 Thingvalla Avenue. Source: Nearmap, 2023.

Site Zoning

General description: Residence B is a low intensity residential district which permits one and two-family dwellings by-right, and townhouse dwellings (with Planning Board approval for developments of 6 or more units).

	Base District
District(s):	Residence B
Allowed Uses:	Single, Two-Family and Townhouse Dwellings.
Max. Building Height	35'
Max. FAR/GFA	0.5 (reduced to 0.35 for portions of the lot over 5,000 SF)
Max. Unit Density	1 unit per 2,500 SF lot area (reduced to 1 unit per 4,000 SF for portions of the lot over 5,000 SF)
Required Setbacks	Front – 15'; Side 7'6" (sum of 20); Rear 25'
Required Open Space	40%
Other District Standards or Requirements	N/A



Zoning Map of Thingvalla Avenue section. Source: Cambridge Cityviewer, 2023.

Comments on Development Proposal

Overview

The proposal involves the demolition of an existing 1-story, single-family structure, and the construction of two new, detached 2-story single-family structures on the property. The proposed project is on Thingvalla Avenue, which is a one-way residential street off of Cushing Street near Mount Auburn Cemetery and south of Fresh Pond. The Planning Board has previously granted similar special permits in the vicinity of the proposed Project, including several along nearby Holworthy Street.

The Application notes that the Cambridge Historical Commission reviewed the existing structure on the lot and deemed it ‘not significant’ and no public hearing is required if the Applicant were to submit a demolition permit.

The proposed rear structure is proposed to be offset from the front structure and rotated 90 degrees so that the front entry can be seen and accessed directly from Thingvalla Avenue. The rear structure is similar in massing and scale as the front structure and both structures are proposed to have private open space areas around the structures. The proposal utilizes an existing curb cut to the northwest side of the front structure for off-street parking and includes 2 parking spaces. The roof plan proposes to provide conduit to electrical panel in both structures for potential solar array in the future.

Consistency with Development Plans and Guidelines

Infill rear yard residential development in Residence B neighborhoods helps to implement broader City planning goals of increasing housing production without disrupting the overall prevailing development pattern of the neighborhood.

Consistency with Zoning Requirements

The proposal has the following dimensional characteristics:

Dimension	Requirement	Proposal	Relief Sought?
Lot Area	5,000 SF	6,276 SF	None
Gross Floor Area (GFA)	2,850 SF max	2,947 SF	None
Floor Area Ratio (FAR)	0.47 max	0.47	None
Height	35'	Building 1 (Front) 33' Building 2 (Rear) 31'-2.5"	None
Setbacks	15' front; 7-6" (sum of 20) side; 25' rear	Building 1 (Front): 14'-1.74" front*; 22' (left side); 7-6" (right side)	None

		Building 2 (Rear): 7'-6" (left side); 12'-6" (right side); 25' + 6'-4.5" rear	
Open Space	40%	51%	None
Off-Street Parking	0 spaces	2 spaces	None

* In a Residence B district, a dwelling’s front yard setback may be reduced to the average setbacks of the adjacent buildings on the same side of the street. The Applicant has identified adjacent building setbacks as 13’-3.5” and 17’-6” (considered as 15’ based on setback exceptions as per Table 5-1 Footnote 3(b)).

Special Permits

In a Residence B district, the Zoning Ordinance permits more than one structure containing a principal residential use on a lot. However, if the second structure is located more than seventy-five feet from the street line, a Planning Board Special Permit is required.

The criteria for approval of the special permit include: whether the development of two or more structures will reduce the potential impact of new construction should it occur in a single structure; whether two or more structures provide additional benefits beyond the construction of a single structure; whether the development of two or more structures helps to maintain a pattern of development that is compatible with the existing development pattern in the neighborhood; whether the development of two or more structures enhances the living environment for residents; and whether the visual impact of parking and the structure’s height and bulk can be minimized in the development of more than one structure.

The Application notes that the development of two structures at this location will continue to allow for continuous open space on all sides of the structures and will ensure a development scale that is of similar height and bulk to other structures on Thingvalla Avenue. Further, the development of two structures will allow for both structures to maximize natural light, air and privacy for residents and existing abutters, enhance views and ensure both the developments are of a similarly modest scale and bulk to existing structures in the immediate neighborhood. The Application states that the proposed siting of the front structure is consistent with the siting of adjacent residential structures fronting the street.

Other Zoning Requirements

The proposal is subject to the Green Factor Standard in the City’s Climate Resilience Zoning, which is proposed to be met primarily through the preservation of open space and the preservation of two existing trees and additional tree and landscape plantings. The Green Factor Certification is attached to this memo.

Community Engagement

The Applicant held two pre-application community engagement meetings on October 3rd, 2023 at the Russell Youth Community Center and a virtual meeting on October 4th, 2023. The Application notes that the proposed plan was generally well-received, with concerns raised regarding taking down of any existing trees, possibilities of neighborhood gentrification, rodent control, street access and construction timing.

Special Permit Conditions

If the Board decides to grant the special permit, the following list summarizes the general categories of conditions recommended for this development based on the requested special permits:

1. **Approved Development:** Authorized development would need to conform with the submitted application materials. An Approved Dimensional Form would be attached as an Appendix.
2. **Continuing Design Review:** CDD staff would review and approve design details at the construction documents phase, prior to issuance of a building permit, to certify that the plans conform to the Planning Board's approval. Board members may cite specific areas of focus for detailed review, based on the Urban Design Report and Board discussion.
3. **Non-Zoning Requirements:** The development would need to comply with all other applicable City Ordinances, such as the Noise Ordinance and Tree Protection Ordinance.

Appendix - Zoning Text Excerpts

Special Permit for More than One Structure Containing a Principal Residential Use

5.53 In Residence A-1 and Residence A-2 districts, only one structure containing a principal use shall be allowed on a lot.

In Residence B districts only one structure containing a principal residential use shall be allowed on a lot except as set forth below:

1. More than one structure containing a principal residential use shall be allowed on a lot provided all portions of all structures are located no farther than seventy-five (75) feet from any street line to which the lot abuts. However, those elements of a structure that are permitted to extend into required yards as set forth in Section 5.24.2, may extend in a similar manner beyond the seventy-five foot limit.
2. By special permit from the Planning Board provided the Board finds
 - (a) that development in the form of two or more structures on the lot will not significantly increase or may reduce the impact of the new construction should it occur in a single structure; or
 - (b) That two or more structures may provide identifiable benefits beyond that provided should all construction be in a single structure. In making its findings the Board shall consider the impact of the new construction on the following:
 - (1) the extent to which the preservation of a large contiguous open space in the rear of the lot or series of adjacent lots is achieved through the provision of a rear yard setback significantly greater than that required and through the dedication of that rear yard as Green Area, as defined in this Ordinance,
 - (2) incentives for the location of buildings and parking facilities in the front half of a lot in a pattern compatible with the development pattern prevailing in the neighborhood,
 - (3) the extent to which two or more structures provides an enhanced living environment for residents on the lot,
 - (4) incentives to retain existing structures on a lot, particularly any structure determined to be a Preferably Preserved Significant structure by the Cambridge Historical Commission,
 - (5) the opportunities presented to reduce the visual impact of parking from the public street and from adjacent lots,
 - (6) The increased opportunities to reduce the height and bulk as new construction is deeper into a lot or closer to structures on abutting lots.

In Residence A-1, A-2 and B districts there shall be no limit on the number of those structures on a lot that contain principal nonresidential uses exclusively, provided all other requirements of this Zoning Ordinance are met.

General Criteria for Issuance of a Special Permit

10.43 *Criteria.* Special permits will normally be granted where specific provisions of this Ordinance are met, except when particulars of the location or use, not generally true of the district or of the uses permitted in it, would cause granting of such permit to be to the detriment of the public interest because:

- (a) It appears that requirements of this Ordinance cannot or will not be met, or
- (b) traffic generated or patterns of access or egress would cause congestion, hazard, or substantial change in established neighborhood character, or
- (c) the continued operation of or the development of adjacent uses as permitted in the Zoning Ordinance would be adversely affected by the nature of the proposed use, or
- (d) nuisance or hazard would be created to the detriment of the health, safety and/or welfare of the occupant of the proposed use or the citizens of the City, or
- (g) for other reasons, the proposed use would impair the integrity of the district or adjoining district, or otherwise derogate from the intent and purpose of this Ordinance, and
- (h) the new use or building construction is inconsistent with the Urban Design Objectives set forth in Section 19.30.

19.30 Citywide Urban Design Objectives [SUMMARIZED]

Objective	Indicators
New projects should be responsive to the existing or anticipated pattern of development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transition to lower-scale neighborhoods • Consistency with established streetscape • Compatibility with adjacent uses • Consideration of nearby historic buildings
Development should be pedestrian and bicycle-friendly, with a positive relationship to its surroundings.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inhabited ground floor spaces • Discouraged ground-floor parking • Windows on ground floor • Orienting entries to pedestrian pathways • Safe and convenient bicycle and pedestrian access
The building and site design should mitigate adverse environmental impacts of a development upon its neighbors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Location/impact of mechanical equipment • Location/impact of loading and trash handling • Stormwater management • Shadow impacts • Retaining walls, if provided • Building scale and wall treatment • Outdoor lighting • Tree protection (requires plan approved by City Arborist)
Projects should not overburden the City infrastructure services, including neighborhood roads, city water supply system, and sewer system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water-conserving plumbing, stormwater management • Capacity/condition of water and wastewater service • Efficient design (LEED standards)
New construction should reinforce and enhance the complex urban aspects of Cambridge as it has developed historically.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutional use focused on existing campuses • Mixed-use development (including retail) encouraged where allowed • Preservation of historic structures and environment • Provision of space for start-up companies, manufacturing activities
Expansion of the inventory of housing in the city is encouraged.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing as a component of large, multi-building development • Affordable units exceeding zoning requirements, targeting units for middle-income families
Enhancement and expansion of open space amenities in the city should be incorporated into new development in the city.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publicly beneficial open space provided in large-parcel commercial development • Enhance/expand existing open space, complement existing pedestrian/bicycle networks • Provide wider range of activities

Urban Design Staff Report

Urban Design Comments

Site Design and Landscaping

The design utilizes similar strategies to nearby infill rear yard projects. The generous rear yard setback required per the zoning ordinance results in the two dwellings being relatively close together; however, the building placement and staggered massing generally helps avoid privacy concerns by not directly aligning windows and maintains openness between the rear yards of the adjacent lots. The offset location of the building footprints allows both front doors to be visible from the street. The vehicular parking is wider than the existing tandem condition as a result of the need for independent access to both spaces. Despite the increased width, separate front paths are provided for both residences, which aids in distinguishing each address. The paths and driveway are all proposed as high-reflectance permeable pavers, which visually softens the hardscape.

Overall, the landscaping appears thoughtfully done; the use of permeable pavers for hardscape areas, and a variety of plantings helps soften the impacts of the project. The retention of two existing canopy trees and the introduction of a further three understory trees will visually shield the residences from adjacent properties while providing shade and habitat. Staff recommends consideration of the following:

- The permeable steppingstone path along the east side of the front house (Sheets A0.5, L1.0) appears unnecessary as the rear yard and patio can be accessed via the path along the west side of the parking. This area could instead be a continuation of the planting zone shown along the eastern side of #10's rear yard to soften this edge.
- There is a general preference in similar previous projects to locate trash and recycling adjacent to the proposed buildings as opposed to along the perimeter of the site out of deference to adjacent properties (Sheets A0.5, L1.0).

Building Design

The massing, siting, and proportions of the front residence are in keeping with the context and replicate a common typology along Thingvalla Avenue. The inclusion of bays on its east and west elevations adds depth and interest to the longer facades and provides opportunities for material transitions. The building's architectural language skews more traditional than the rear residence, which helps subtly differentiate the two. Staff notes there may be an opportunity to further emphasize this distinction in the detailing of the projecting second floor bay over the entry, which currently reads more contemporarily (Sheet A2.1).

The rear residence has a more contemporary expression in its detailing, window arrangement, and roof geometry. Corner glazing units, shiplap siding, and minimal trim lend it a modern design language distinct from the front residence. Staff notes that Bedroom 4 (basement level) may not receive a substantive amount of natural light given its single window that is partially below grade and tucked into a corner. The current design attempts to mitigate this by borrowing light through internal windows located in the wall between the Bedroom and adjacent TV Room (Sheet A1.0). An alternative approach the Applicant could consider would be to relocate the closet to the western wall of the bedroom, square off the Bedroom's southeast corner, and introduce a second window along an extended window well.

Continuing Review

The following are additional recommendations for ongoing design review by staff if the Board decides to grant the special permit:

- Relocation of the trash and recycling receptacles from the property perimeter to the interior of the site.
- Reduction in the amount of hardscape along the east side of the front building.
- Any necessary acoustic screening of air conditioning condensers.
- Proposed colors for the window sashes, frames and trim.