



Assistant City Manager for
Community Development

CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

To: Planning Board

From: CDD Staff

Date: April 26, 2023

Re: **PB-179 – CX Parcel V Triangle Design Review**

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Chief of Administration

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Deputy Director
Chief of Planning

This memo contains an overview of the proposed project at Cambridge Crossing Parcel V Triangle, the relevant design guidelines, and related comments.

Design Process and Staff Review

Over the past several months, the Applicant has met with staff regarding the project's design. The submission package to the Planning Board includes design changes and updates that are made in direct response to the comments and issues raised by staff during these meetings.

Planning Board Action

North Point Planned Unit Development (PUD), now known as Cambridge Crossing (CX), was originally approved by the Planning Board in 2003, and has been amended several times through the PUD process (most recently in 2022).

DivcoWest, the developer for the project, is seeking design review approval for temporary site improvements on the Parcel V Triangle. CX's special permit requires that the Planning Board shall review and approve any associated parks, public spaces, street segment cross-sections, streetscape details, and other physical improvements directly tied to a site under review.

Parcel V is a Phase 2 Parcel, meaning no buildings can be constructed on it until the preceding Phases are complete. Previously submitted plans have shown a small retail building or kiosk on the Triangle portion of Parcel V. The Applicant is proposing a temporary open space condition at least until the Applicant undertakes the development of Parcel V in Phase 2. The Planning Board will need to determine whether to approve the proposal as a temporary or permanent condition, and set a timeline for final approval. Alternatively, if the Applicant is proposing a permanent condition on the Parcel V Triangle, then a Minor Amendment could be pursued to amend the Land Use Plan for Cambridge Crossing to indicate that the Parcel V Triangle will not contain a retail use.

The Planning Board’s review of the buildings and landscape design is guided by the conditions of the special permit ([PB-179](#)), which includes the goals and objectives of the *Eastern Cambridge Planning Study*, the guidelines established in the *Eastern Cambridge Design Guidelines*, and utilization of the *North Point Design Guidelines* as a design reference.

Relevant Design Objectives and Guidelines

As part of the original PUD approval in 2003, design guidelines specific to Cambridge Crossing were developed and amended as recently as 2016. The most relevant North Point Design Guidelines to Parcel V Triangle are summarized below:

District-Wide Goals:

- Create a lively new mixed-use district with strong visual, bicycle and pedestrian connections to East Cambridge. The new district should be a place to live, work, and enjoy a variety of parks and public spaces.
- Create a new east-west street through the center of North Point, connecting East Cambridge with the North Point park.
- Extend First Street into North Point to connect existing and new neighborhoods.
- Create a major new public park easily accessible from the relocated Lechmere T station, First Street, and O’Brien Highway.
- Create a new retail edge at the relocated Lechmere T station and at the intersection of First Street, Cambridge Street, and O’Brien Highway that will complement, not compete with, existing retail on Cambridge Street.

Open Space:

- The provision of open spaces of diverse sizes and use is encouraged.
- All open spaces at NorthPoint shall be designed to be public in nature, creating an open environment that the public can easily identify that is welcoming for everyone’s use.
- The provision of an interconnected series of open spaces is encouraged to provide connections both to neighborhoods and within NorthPoint so as to promote pedestrian movement.
- A large park is required by zoning, and NorthPoint Common will provide naturalistic, multi-use open space for both recreational and cultural activities.
- The major new park required by the zoning code should be located convenient to the Lechmere T station in order to link East Cambridge and future neighborhoods at NorthPoint.
- In addition to the large park, the creation of a series of smaller open spaces such as pocket parks, public plazas, active recreation areas, courtyards, play areas and gardens is encouraged. A second large park on Parcel I is located along the central main street, conveniently close to the neighborhood access from Water Street.
- These spaces shall be articulated throughout NorthPoint through wayfinding and signage measures including space types, themes and program.
- Open spaces shall be visible and accessible from public streets.

Staff Comments

The Parcel V open space is located on part of the former Lechmere Station site, immediately east of the First Street extension. It is a triangular parcel, surrounded by streets on all sides, including Monsignor O'Brien Highway to the north. Strategically, the parcel integrates Cambridge Crossing with the East Cambridge neighborhood. It also forms a gateway to the neighborhood and Cambridge Street.

Over the years, there have been many ideas floated for the parcel, including plaza space, retail, and residential use. Currently, the City's Economic Opportunity and Development Division staff do not think that retail can be supported. This is particularly the case due to the site's lack of parking, loading, and uninviting interfaces. The recently installed below-grade stormwater infrastructure also limits the ability to develop significant portions of the parcel. Despite these constraints, the Applicant has made provisions to accommodate a potential future retail pavilion and/or art sculpture.

Design Comments

Staff has worked closely with the Applicant to provide design guidance and suggest conceptual ideas for the site. Since this is a temporary condition, the project also presents a good opportunity to test some new and unique open space ideas.

The goal of the design is to create a less manicured landscape with a natural character, which is not commonly found within the City's open space network. The urban meadow will act as a pocket of nature in a sea of new development and loud horns, a didactic opportunity to show what nature would look like at the intersection of First and Cambridge Streets. As indicated on Sheet 27, the meadow will display a tapestry of colors and textures, with a mix of grasses and wildflowers proposed. Trees will provide a buffer against the highway and frame the sidewalks. Walking paths from each corner of the parcel will connect centrally where a swinging bench is proposed. While it is uncertain how attractive the meadow will be for people to linger, it seems that some additional seating opportunities could be provided.

In conjunction with the meadow, a sound installation is proposed as an audio artwork that attempts to disrupt the visual and acoustic cacophony of the busy intersection. Native bird songs will be projected from a series of speakers located along the walking paths. The intent is to create a natural ambience, and not to specifically attract native birds or other wildlife. The installation will provide an opportunity to reconnect city dwellers with the natural sounds of the area. Although the proposed audio is native bird songs, any number of nature-based sounds could be introduced. The soundtrack could also change over time as different needs arise. Staff suggest that further review be conducted to ensure that the sound installation and the selected audio does not negatively impact native fauna.

Suggested modifications:

1. Include at least one additional swinging bench, and if more demand arises in the future consider additional seating opportunities.
2. Consider providing a slight buffer between the cycle track on O'Brien Highway and the green space/tree planting area.
3. Review the soundtrack to be played to ensure that it does not disrupt or have a negative impact on native fauna, and consider alternative nature-based sounds, if necessary.
4. Review noise/sound levels in relation to nearby residential uses, including hours of operation for the sound installation.

Continuing Review

The following is a summary of issues that staff recommends should be further studied by the Applicant, either in preparing revised materials if the Planning Board continues the discussion to a future date, or as conditions for ongoing design review by staff if the Board decides to grant design approval:

1. Review of all proposed landscaping and streetscape design details, including plantings, furnishings, and hardscape.
2. Review of bicycle parking, access and egress, and sidewalk design by the TP&T and DPW.
3. DPW review of the ramps for the raised bicycle facility to ensure correct slope, angle, and curb line.