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CITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

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To: Planning Board  
From: Jeff Roberts, Land Use and Zoning Planner  
Suzannah Bigolin, Urban Design Planner  
Date: May 31, 2016  
Re: **HYM North Point Major Amendment – Second Hearing**

**Background**

On Tuesday, the Board will hold the first of two required public hearings on a proposed Major Amendment to the North Point Planned Unit Development (PUD) Special Permit, PB #179. North Point is the largest approved PUD in Cambridge, authorizing about 3 million square feet of residential development and 2 million square feet of commercial development over twenty building sites. The PUD special permit was granted in 2003 and has been amended five times, most recently in 2015. The most recent amendments were proposed by an ownership consortium led by the HYM Group, and the project is now controlled by DivcoWest in collaboration with HYM.

The amendment currently proposed would not change the aggregate development characteristics of the project, such as the total amount of development, mix of uses or amount of open space. However, the proposal makes some significant spatial changes to the master plan, including the following:

- Realignment of the proposed street grid, resulting in changes to the shape, size and orientation of several building sites.
- Some redistribution of the height and massing proposed on different building sites, as well as some adjustments in proposed uses and phasing of different sites.
- Creation of a grouping of smaller-scale retail buildings on First Street.
- Rearrangement of proposed open space, including the consolidation of some open space into a ¼-acre park west of the First Street retail grouping.

**Major Amendment Review**

Approval of a Major Amendment requires two public hearings and the issuance of a new special permit following the procedures applicable to a new PUD special permit application. However, instead of reviewing the project as a whole, the Planning Board applies the special permit criteria (summarized on the following page) only to the elements of the Final Development Plan that are proposed to be changed.

The first public hearing allows the Board to assess whether the proposal, in concept, conforms to the applicable PUD zoning requirements and guidelines for the area. The Board may then issue a Preliminary Determination authorizing the applicant to submit a Final Development Plan, which the Board would hear and decide at a second public hearing. The Preliminary Determination allows the Board to specify what modifications or additional information should be included in the Final Development Plan.

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Requested Actions	Summarized Findings (see appendix for zoning text excerpts)
Major Amendment to PUD Special Permit (Section 12.37) – <i>Preliminary Determination Findings</i>	The proposed amendment to the PUD: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conforms with general PUD development controls and district development controls.</li> <li>• Conforms with adopted policy plans or development guidelines for that portion of the city.</li> <li>• Provides benefits to the city which outweigh its adverse effects, considering:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ quality of site design</li> <li>○ traffic flow and safety</li> <li>○ adequacy of utilities and other public works</li> <li>○ impact on existing public facilities</li> <li>○ potential fiscal impact</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Major Amendment to Project Review Special Permit (Section 19.20)  <i>Note: Findings required for Final Decision, not necessary for Preliminary Determination.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proposed amendment will not have substantial adverse impacts on traffic. (See <a href="#">TPT Memo</a>)</li> <li>• Proposed amendment remains consistent with Citywide Urban Design Objectives. (See <a href="#">Section 19.30</a>)</li> </ul>

**CDD Staff Comments**

The proposed changes continue to adhere to the limitations on FAR, mix of uses, heights of buildings, amount of parking, and amount of open space as they are set forth in the PUD zoning requirements and prior special permit approvals. The major changes relate to the arrangement of uses, building volumes, circulation patterns and open spaces within the PUD.

While the overall concept of the PUD remains very similar to what has been previously approved, there are a few areas where the proposed changes are more significant and warrant further attention. These issues may be addressed further in a Final Development Plan submission.

**Urban Design**

At this stage of review, the primary focus is on the master plan as a whole, and some of the key considerations include overall site layout, circulation, open space, and building massing. More detailed review of the design of the public realm and built form will occur at the second hearing. Given the proposal constitutes a major amendment, it is also important to revisit the goals established for North Point through the *Eastern Cambridge Planning Study, 2003*. These are:

1. Create a lively new mixed-use district with strong visual 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.

2. Create a new east-west main street through the center of North Point, connecting East Cambridge with the future MDC Park.
3. Extend First Street into North Point to connect existing and new neighborhoods.
4. Create a major new public park easily accessible from the relocated Lechmere T station, First Street, and O'Brien Highway.
5. 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.

As mentioned above, the proposed major amendment is generally consistent with earlier approvals. The revised layout maintains the structure of a contiguous public realm, which is well integrated with the neighborhoods. North Point Common, the green fingers, West Boulevard and the tight city block structure remain strong unifying elements of the master plan. In addition, several enhancements are proposed, which include:

- The strengthening of West Boulevard as the primary east-west connection through the site.
- Maintenance of block sizes that area reflective of the historic block pattern of East Cambridge and creating space between buildings along the northern edge of the site, which also moves access to parking and loading away from Dawes Street.
- The double-sided retail spine, along the extension of First St, is more legible in the new plan and has the potential to create a traditional main street experience, which might help to integrate North Point with the neighborhoods.
- Creation of a fine grain, pedestrian-scaled retail experience with high levels of permeability focused around the T-Station and First Street. It is hoped that the retail square becomes a thriving destination for local independent retailers and the heart of the North Point community.
- Enhanced opportunities for programming and differentiation of open space areas, as well as the integration of built form with open space in creative and new ways.

While staff understands that further details will be presented at the second hearing, the following is a summary of staff comments and questions relating to the proposed changes. It is noted that staff has met with the Applicant on several occasions to discuss these matters and is confident that these issues can be addressed in the Final Development Plan submission.

#### *Site layout*

- The modifications to the street layout create some irregularly-shaped parcels, which was not evident in earlier plans. This creates some interesting new spaces, view corridors and landmark opportunities, which require careful study.
- Lack of a street frontage and clear pedestrian access for Parcel A, and the cul-de-sac turnaround between the two parcels, compromises the urban structure, and direct and convenient pedestrian access.

- What is the character and nature of the open space at the end of Parcel A if there is no street access? Staff would prefer to see West Boulevard extended as a street to create better physical and visual connections, as well as opportunities for passive surveillance.
- Are different street treatments needed to reflect the opportunities created by new retail corridor on First Street?

*Open space and the public realm*

- There is a need to ensure that North Point Common does not feel fragmented from other open space areas, particularly the Parcel I space. Thus, the PUD should describe how the east-west connection across Parcels W and I can create a gracious and green link between the two open spaces.
- The experience of leaving the T-station, and welcoming visual and physical connections to North Point Common and the “retail square,” are important aspects of the master plan. It is unclear how the new retail approach and porosity of connections will carry forward this idea, so conceptual renderings and images of some kind would be helpful to determine this.
- What is the role of the courtyard spaces between buildings that will be primarily dedicated to access, and how can the notion of the “green finger” concept be maintained and celebrated?
- What is the role of Baldwin Park, between Parcels JK and LM, and is there a need to maintain a street connection, or is an off-street pedestrian / bicyclist connection sufficient?

*Built form*

At this stage, limited information has been submitted that describes proposed changes to the built form; however, it is anticipated that this will be part of the submittal at the second hearing. With this in mind, staff have the following comments.

- The proposed low-scale, fine-grain retail buildings and square concept introduces a new building typology and a variety of new interfaces that were not part of the original plan. As such, conceptual renderings and images are needed to help understand this change, as are guidelines to ensure the new retail creates positive interfaces with North Point Common, the community pathway, and the open space on Parcel I.
- Changes to building heights and footprints should be mapped out across the site so that an understanding of the final development outcome can be visualized. It will be important to ensure that the proposed cluster of 220-foot buildings does not overwhelm the small-scale retail, and that the dimensions of combined parcels do not negatively impact the public realm.
- Changes in building height and street alignment may affect wind impacts. Additional design and massing strategies may be needed to ensure that the public realm is a comfortable pedestrian environment.
- Buildings and open spaces that terminate the view corridors of First Street and Water Street will become important markers within the urban environment and therefore require further review.

### *North Point Urban Design Guidelines*

It is anticipated that many of the issues described above can be refined and further addressed through an update of the *North Point Design Guidelines*, which were prepared for the PUD area in 2003. The design principles adopted in the guidelines emphasize a variety of scale and form to reflect a diversity of experience throughout the site. Each parcel is intended to relate to its immediate surroundings as well as the larger context. The larger context includes the overall image of North Point, legibility, cohesiveness, scale, character, connections and movement. Local context determinants include orientation, solar exposure, parking, views to the surroundings and North Point Common, definition of open spaces, public-private hierarchy, and the integration of multiple uses and interfaces with transit. Given the nature of the changes proposed and the age of the guidelines, staff and the Applicant recently began to review and update the document. A revised *North Point Design Guidelines* document will be presented to the Planning Board at the next hearing.

### **Retail**

The original North Point PUD master plan envisioned up to 150,000 square feet of retail distributed throughout the ground floors of building across the site. Amendments to the PUD that were approved in the last several years allowed the retail component to be increased up to 300,000 square feet and established the concept of a “retail square” within the site along the future extension of First Street, providing a critical mass of retail in one central place in addition to distributing other ground floor retail spaces throughout the development.

The changes currently proposed maintain the same amount of retail as before, but take the “retail square” notion a step further by introducing a grouping of smaller-scale retail buildings, thus concentrating more retail frontage along First Street and linking North Point Common on the east to a proposed new ¾-acre open space on the west. The Board was previously supportive of the “retail square” concept and staff believes that the proposal continues to improve on that concept.

Looking to the Final Development Plan and ongoing review of the project, it would be helpful to understand more about the strategies for cultivating a thriving mix of businesses within this newly envisioned context. The original special permit for North Point included a retail report from Deborah Byrnes of Resource, Inc., giving an indication of the mix of retailers that would be sought. Given the changes in retail strategy over the past several years, it would be helpful for the current developer’s retail consultant to provide an updated report that addresses the following types of questions:

- What are the types of retailers or personal services that will be sought, both for the “retail square” and peripheral retail spaces? The 2013 intercept survey conducted by CDD’s Economic Development Division (EDD) identifies some businesses that are desired by the area community and should serve as a reference.
- What other types of programming (e.g., outdoor activities, “pop-up” spaces) might be envisioned to help activate the retail square? How might these be implemented?

- How will the marketing and activation of retail spaces be managed over time? Where might there be opportunities for the owner to collaborate with EDD staff in the marketing of spaces, or in providing services to support small businesses?
- How will the retail plan support and complement other nearby retail, including existing and planned new retail spaces in the area, such as on Cambridge Street, First Street and Monsignor O'Brien Highway? What will be the relationship between North Point retail and the East Cambridge Business Association?

**Traffic and Circulation**

Comments on the proposed changes to the roadway and circulation network, along with other transportation considerations, are included in the accompanying memo from the Traffic, Parking and Transportation Department (TP&T).