



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

To: Planning Board

From: CDD Staff

Date: August 10, 2021

Re: Special Permit PB #369, 600 Massachusetts Avenue, (parcel address: 596 Massachusetts Avenue) – Continued Hearing

Submission Type: Special Permit Application

Applicant: Cifrino Mass Ave Realty LLC

Zoning District(s): Business B (BB); Central Square Overlay District

Proposal Summary: Partial demolition of existing building to add additional floors resulting in a six-story building with 46 dwelling units and commercial use with a total of 71,196 square feet of gross floor area (GFA) excluding basement and including 60 long-term bicycle parking spaces.

Special Permits Requested: Project Review Special Permit (Section 19.20), Special Permit for exemption of basement area in calculation of Gross Floor Area (Article 2), Special Permit for reduction of Green Roofs requirement (Section 22.35.3), and Central Square Overlay District Special Permits for additional building height, additional combined FAR, waiver of setback and open space requirements, and reduction of parking and loading requirements (Section 20.300). *A summary of the applicable special permit findings is listed on the following page. Applicable sections of the zoning are provided in an appendix.*

Other City Permits Needed: Historic Commission Review

Planning Board Action: Grant or deny requested special permits.

Memo Contents: Review of area planning and zoning, comments on proposal addressing planning, zoning, and urban design.

Other Reports: Staff memos from Traffic, Parking and Transportation Dept. (TP+T) and Department of Public Works (DPW), Central Square Advisory Committee report (all previously submitted).

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Requested Special Permits	Summarized Findings <i>(detailed zoning text on following pages)</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: Waiver of setback and open space requirements (Sections 20.304.4.1 & 20.304.4.2)</p>	<p><i>Central Square Overlay District findings set forth above</i></p>
<p>Central Square Overlay District: Reduction of parking and loading requirement (Sections 20.304.6 & 6.35.1)</p>	<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.

Requested Special Permits	Summarized Findings <i>(detailed zoning text on following pages)</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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>
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.
Reduction of Green Roofs Requirement (Section 22.35.3)	The Planning Board may grant a special permit to reduce the required Green Roof Area, Biosolar Green Roof Area, or Solar Energy System below the area required by Section 22.35.2, provided that each square foot so reduced be compensated by a unit price contribution to the Cambridge Affordable Housing Trust.
Project Review Special Permit (Section 19.20)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The project will have no substantial adverse impact on city traffic within the study area, upon review of the traffic impact indicators analyzed in the Transportation Impact Study and mitigation efforts proposed. • The project is consistent with the urban design objectives of the City as set forth in Section 19.30 (see following page).
General Special Permit Criteria (Section 10.43)	<p>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:</p> <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 (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 <p>the new use or building construction is inconsistent with the Urban Design Objectives set forth in Section 19.30.</p>

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

Update

Since the last Planning Board meeting on December 8, 2020, the Applicant has worked with staff to respond to comments and questions raised in the initial review of the application. The Applicant's recent submission provides a revised set of plans and 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 initial memo on this proposal.

Planning Board Action

The current Application (as revised) is proposing to demolish a portion of the existing 57,915-square-foot building at 600 Massachusetts Avenue from the Massachusetts Avenue elevation through to Green Street in order to construct a building containing 46 residential dwelling units and ground story commercial spaces. The project will add 35,909 square feet to the site for a total of 93,824 square feet.

The Applicant is seeking many Special Permits from the Planning Board as noted in the table above. Applicable sections of the zoning are provided in an appendix.

Planning Board Comments from the First Hearing

The following summarizes some of the key comments made by the Planning Board at the hearing on 12/8/2020 in addition to comments from staff memos:

- Many Planning Board members saw the initial proposal as a lost opportunity to fully develop the entire site and voiced an opinion that the project was not ambitious enough;
- Several members were concerned that parking would not be provided on-site for residents, especially given that some of the units were intended for families, while other members were comfortable allowing no parking on the site;
- Some Planning Board members urged the Applicant to consider an increased number of affordable housing units, including an increased number of affordable family-sized units.
- Several members made detailed comments about the architectural design of the Massachusetts Avenue façade of the building and suggested that it be revised to match the civic scale of the neighborhood context;
- Many Planning Board members supported the concept of providing future access to the MBTA Red Line through a stairwell inside of the proposed building.

CDD Staff Comments on New Materials

Planning and Zoning

Overall

The following comments reflect changes made by the Applicant to the original project as presented at the December 8, 2020 Planning Board hearing. Please refer to the memo from the Community Development Department dated December 2, 2020 for greater context and background information.

Uses

The prior memo noted that the application materials were unclear on whether the building would contain office uses in addition to retail and residential uses. The revised application states that there will be commercial/retail, office, and residential uses as part of the project, with offices located in an existing portion of the building. In addition, the main entrance to the renovated office spaces will be located on Green Street and shared by the secondary residential entry and the retail service entry.

GFA & FAR

The revised dimensional form shows that the Applicant has slightly increased the residential GFA and slightly reduced the non-residential GFA. The revised project is approximately 500 square feet larger than the initial proposal, which means that the FAR will be 4.41 instead of 4.39. However, if the basement GFA is exempted, the total amount of GFA on the site will be approximately the same, with an FAR of 3.72.

The overlay zoning allows an FAR of 4.0 as-of-right for all residential uses in the Business B base zoning district, but requires a special permit under Section 20.304.3 to allow a total FAR of 4.0 for non-residential and residential uses combined (not including the additional 30% GFA allowed for Inclusionary Housing projects, which would increase the total maximum FAR to 5.2). This special permit requires that the maximum FAR permitted for non-residential uses does not exceed the limitation on non-residential FAR applicable in the base zoning district and that the proposed FAR of all non-residential uses on the lot does not exceed the proposed FAR of all residential uses on the lot. In this case, the Applicant proposes 44,388 square feet of non-residential uses and 49,436 square feet of residential uses. This means that the nonresidential FAR is 2.09, which is below the Business B district FAR limit of 2.75 for non-residential uses and less than the proposed FAR for residential uses, 2.33.

Off-Street Parking

As with the original development proposal, the Applicant is requesting a Special Permit to waive the off-street parking requirement. However, the Applicant has determined that the number of required vehicular parking spaces is 36 instead of 48 due to a revised calculation. Section 20.304.6 sets a minimum required parking ratio of 0.50 spaces per dwelling unit and a maximum required parking ratio of 0.75 spaces per dwelling unit. The Applicant had previously calculated their parking requirement using the 0.75 figure, but has revised it using the 0.50 figure. The Applicant also notes that they would like to discuss with the Planning Board the possibility of exempting existing businesses from the parking requirement calculation, though there is no formal request in the application. In the Central Square Overlay District, parking requirements are waived for uses within existing buildings.

The letter from attorney Kevin P. Crane to the Planning Board on May 12, 2021 states that the Applicant contacted the owner of the commercial parking garage at 55 Franklin Street, who said that up to 15 spaces could be made available to tenants at the customary monthly parking fee, which may help to accommodate some parking demand from tenants. The implication is that tenants would seek off-site parking on their own from the various available options, and it does not appear that the Applicant is proposing to directly acquire or otherwise secure the use of those spaces.

Housing

The total number of dwelling units in the revised proposal is the same as in the original proposal, which is 46 dwelling units. Per the Inclusionary Housing section of the Zoning Ordinance ([Section 11.203](#)), 20% of the net square footage of the dwelling unit floor area must be devoted to inclusionary units. CDD will work with the Applicant to determine how to use that area to create an appropriate number and size of inclusionary units as the design progresses.

As noted above, no off-site parking is currently proposed, but if the Applicant were to secure off-site parking for tenants it could have implications for how the Inclusionary Housing requirements are applied. The requirements in Section 11.203.4 of the Zoning Ordinance state that, if there is an “optional parking fee” for tenants, then the parking fee for tenants of affordable units must be adjusted to be proportional to the unit rental cost or income of the resident. It is not clear how this might be applied if tenants were using commercial parking that is not required accessory parking, and which is not provided or controlled by the owner of the residential building. If off-site parking were provided, this issue would be considered prior to issuance of a building permit when certifying the Inclusionary Housing Requirements.

Green Roofs

The revised Application includes a request for a Special Permit from the Planning Board to reduce the green roof requirement per Section 22.35.3 of the Zoning Ordinance. On May 3, 2021, after the Planning Board held an initial hearing on this project, the City Council voted to amend the Zoning Ordinance to require Green Roof Area, Biosolar Green Roof Area, or Solar Energy Systems on at least 80% of the building roof area of new buildings that are 25,000 square feet or more, with some exceptions. Residential buildings may incorporate any of the three types of roof area mentioned above. The Planning Board may grant a Special Permit to provide less Green Roof Area, Biosolar Green Roof Area, or Solar Energy Systems than required in exchange for a contribution to the Affordable Housing Trust for any area not provided, based on an average cost of design, installation, and maintenance. The City is beginning a process to calculate the contribution rate.

The Applicant is proposing a Solar Energy System, but is requesting a Special Permit to reduce the area of the requirement because they are unsure if the current building design will provide 80% coverage of the eligible roof area. According to the Application, the project includes 11,274 square feet of total roof area (at different levels), approximately 7,013 square feet of which would be excluded from the required calculation because it contains mechanical equipment and usable roof decks. The resulting non-exempt area totals 4,261 square feet, and 2,682 square feet (or 63% of the eligible roof area) is proposed to have a photovoltaic Solar Energy System. The roof plan shows that non-exempt areas that are not proposed to have Solar Energy Systems include narrow sections of the roof outside of the mechanical enclosure and portions of the lower roof at the second floor level. The Application notes that they may be able to add Green Roof Area to make up the remaining 727 square feet, “pending final design of rooftop areas.”

Since there are no specific criteria for this Special Permit, the Board’s decision should be guided by the General Special Permit Criteria outlined in Section 10.43 of the Zoning Ordinance. It is unclear if alternative roof designs would accommodate a greater amount of Green Roof Area, Biosolar Green Roof Area, or Solar Energy Systems.

Urban Design

The project's siting and overall massing are the same as at the December 8, 2020 hearing. Numerous improvements have been made to the facades in response to Planning Board and staff comments, and a Green Roof is shown in response to the Green Roof Ordinance. The basement plan has been revised to allow the future construction of a public stair down to the subway platform. The metal cladding second to sixth floors is now a lighter color, which seems preferable.

North (Mass Ave) Façade:

The design of the façade's residential floors and the details of their fenestration now have a stronger relationship to the nearby facades on Mass Avenue: The joint pattern of the spandrels of the eastern and middle bays now relate to the mullions above and below, helping to vertically link these windows and relate them to the vertically grouped windows in the context. In addition, the windows of the easternmost bay are now grouped in a slightly recessed vertical band of differently colored brick. The fifth-floor windows have been adjusted to relate more strongly to the windows below.

At the ground floor façade, the entrance to the retail space is more prominent than in the previous version, separate from the residential entrance. The retail space's glazing is uninterrupted across the width of the space. The piers are considerably broader than before, and are given a small scaled joint pattern. The projecting canopy has been eliminated.

Consideration could be given to:

- Giving the brick spandrels between the easternmost group of the second to fifth floor windows a distinct brick pattern so as to further link these windows vertically and to break up the recessed field of brick in which these windows are situated.
- Providing a soldier course header in the outer plane of brick over sixth floor windows.
- Adjusting the joint pattern of the sixth-floor wall to more simply relate to the window openings.
- At the ground floor retail space, retaining the current location of the retail entrance, but revert to the two-bay shopfront design of the previous version, with its more slender piers.
- Using a simpler joint pattern on the first-floor piers.

West Façade:

At the sixth floor, the roof has been eliminated above the central recessed balcony, breaking the profile of the roof edge.

Consideration could be given to:

- Also eliminating the roofs over the other two sixth floor balconies.
- Vertically linking the central stack of balconies, similar to the eastern and western stacks.
- Extending the brick of the Mass Avenue façade farther south along the west façade.

South (Green Street) Façade:

The overhead door to the electrical vault has been reduced in width - a positive change, and an egress door from the basement electrical room has been added. But the amount of glazing for the first-floor retail space facing Green Street has been reduced.

Consideration could be given to arranging the stairs and lifts that serve the first floor Retail Space and basement Commercial Space so as to permit fenestration more similar to that of the December 8, 2020 scheme. (Perhaps by moving the steps in the courtyard farther north so as to allow the building entry to the basement from the south courtyard to move farther north.)

Roof Plan:

In response to the Green Roof Ordinance, Roof Plan sheet A1.7a designates areas for potential solar energy systems and provides square footage calculations. However, the relationship between the color-coded areas on the plan and on the tabulation of square feet is unclear and some questions remain. Is the yellow tone on the plan meant to depict the square footage listed in the yellow toned “Anticipated Green Roof Shortfall” portion of the tabulation? If so, there is a mismatch in the square footage shown. Could green roof be provided at second floor level along the east side of the building? Could solar panels be installed over the easternmost portion of the pink area designated for mechanical equipment? Should the walkway zone around the potential green roof area be excluded? Could the mechanical equipment be installed more compactly? Would solar energy panels be visible from Mass Avenue?

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:

- CHC staff review of the masonry of the replica façade of the one-story brick building on Green Street.
- Review of the building façades if further refinements are suggested.
- Review of dimensions and clearances in the bicycle storage area and on the route to it.
- Review of the height of rooftop screening for mechanical systems relative to the height of the equipment.
- Coordination of the design to allow for the potential future subway entrance.
- A materials/colors mock-up of all exterior wall assemblies for review before the purchase of materials.
- Review of the materials and joint system of the panelized cladding system.
- Review of rooftop mechanical equipment heights and the height of screening.
- Review of exterior lighting.
- Review of location, size, species, and planting standards of street trees if any can be added.