



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

PLANNING BOARD

CITY HALL ANNEX, 344 BROADWAY, CAMBRIDGE, MA 02139

Date:	December 16, 2014
Subject:	Whitehead Institute Rezoning Petition
Recommendation:	The Planning Board recommends ADOPTION, with comments.

To the Honorable, the City Council,

The Planning Board heard the proposal by the Whitehead Institute for Biomedical Research to amend the zoning regulations of the MXD District to allow, by special permit, 60,000 square feet of additional Gross Floor Area to be added to the site. The Board also received written and oral comments from members of the public and Community Development Department staff.

The Board is generally supportive of the proposed rezoning. The Whitehead Institute has long been an integral part of the character and vitality of Kendall Square, contributing to the culture of scientific research shared by institutions and businesses in the area. Given the Whitehead's current need to expand its research operations, the Board believes it is in the City's interest and consistent with Cambridge's planning policies to allow such expansion to be accommodated within the current site.

Moreover, expanding capacity for the growth of office and laboratory uses is one of the objectives of the City's Kendall Square ("K2") Planning Study. Although the K2 study recommended a more substantial amount of new development throughout the MXD District, the Board believes that authorizing this specific expansion is appropriate at this time given the substantial time and effort that will be required to complete a larger rezoning. It should also be noted that this proposal will require further review and approvals by the Cambridge Redevelopment Authority (CRA), which oversees development throughout the MXD District, as well as the Planning Board (to grant special permits) and City Council (to amend the open space covenant for the plaza, as discussed below).

Within the smaller scope of the Whitehead's proposal, the zoning petition is in many ways consistent with the recommendations of the K2 study. However, the Board would like to note several items to be addressed by the City Council prior to taking a final vote on this petition.

Public Space

One of the most significant implications of the proposal is that the expansion would build on top of the existing plaza at the corner of Main Street and Galileo Galilei Way. Although this location is not specifically called out in the zoning text, the Board understands that it is the only feasible option because adding floors above the existing building would be prohibitively disruptive to the

current Whitehead operation. Construction on the plaza would require action by the City Council in addition to the zoning change because it is subject to a public use covenant.

Despite acknowledging that the existing plaza does not always feel welcoming to the public, the Board believes that this corner is an important location for public space, given the prominence of the intersection, its role as a “gateway” into the heart of Kendall Square, its interface with entrances to the MIT campus, and its southern exposure providing good access to sunlight. If the plaza is to be built on, it will be important to preserve high-quality space that is accessible and useful to the public at the ground level, even if that space might be covered, or partially or fully enclosed. It is expected that the property owner would explore best practices in the design and activation of that corner; for example, looking at examples of successful “winter gardens” and similar indoor/outdoor public spaces around the world. There is also the risk that an enclosed space would have more strictly limited access than an outdoor space, or would simply feel less accessible, and measures would need to be taken to mitigate that risk.

According to the zoning petition, the proposed expansion would require special permits from the Planning Board. Because issues concerning the quality, accessibility and usability of the ground-level space cannot be fully resolved through zoning, the Planning Board would be expected to scrutinize the design in detail during the special permit review phase. Characteristics such as the scale and height of the ground floor, façade design, means of access and activation strategies would need to be carefully considered to ensure that it meets the public’s expectations.

Other options that might be considered to mitigate changes to the existing plaza space include strengthening open space connections elsewhere around the block or introducing open space in new places such as the rooftop. The feasibility of such options would need to be explored by the property owner and the CRA, and discussed with the Planning Board and City Council during the review process.

Parking and Bicycle Parking

As reflected in the City’s recently adopted zoning policies for bicycle parking, an expansion of this scale should be required to provide enough bicycle parking to serve the entire Whitehead complex rather than just the new portion of the building. This is especially important in Kendall Square, where bicycling is a strong part of the work culture and there is a growing demand for bicycle parking spaces.

Regarding automobile parking, while the proposal to accommodate parking needs in existing facilities is consistent with the City’s planning goals, the petitioner will need to demonstrate to the City Council that the need can functionally be met.

Green Building Standards

As recommended in the K2 study, development authorized by new zoning in Kendall Square should be expected to meet the City’s Green Building Requirements at a level of LEED Gold or better, more than the citywide requirement of LEED Silver. The Board understands that it may

be complicated to apply the LEED standards in the case of an addition to an existing building, and it would not be reasonable to require the entire existing building to be retrofitted to meet LEED Gold standards. However, it is important to provide assurance that construction will strive to achieve the City's environmental goals to the extent feasible in the new portions of the building.

General Provisions on Public Benefits

The final section of the proposed zoning text (14.72.12, "Public Benefits") suggests that the development authorized by the proposed rezoning would be generally exempt from future requirements that might be included in future zoning changes. The Board does not see a compelling reason to grant such a general exemption in this case, as it would unnecessarily confuse development policies that the City Council might adopt in the future.

However, it is acknowledged that some recommended requirements in the K2 study might not be reasonable or beneficial to apply to a proposed expansion of this relatively modest size, such as requiring housing to be constructed as part of the project or requiring a small percentage of the office space to be available to small commercial enterprises. The Council may consider language that makes the intent clear regarding these provisions, but the Board would not suggest a generalized exemption as proposed. The petitioner would also have to be conscious of these issues at a future time if a broader rezoning of the MXD is considered.

Respectfully submitted for the Planning Board,



Hugh Russell, Chair.