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CITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

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Manager for Community  
Development

To: Planning Board  
From: Jeff Roberts, Land Use and Zoning Planner  
Date: May 12, 2015  
Re: **PB #298, Green Roof Application for 950 Massachusetts Ave**

### **Green Roofs**

Provisions related to “green roofs” were incorporated into the Zoning Ordinance in 2010 as part of the new Article 22.000 Sustainable Design and Development standards. Functional Green Roof Area, as defined in the Zoning Ordinance, must be surfaced with soil and living plant materials for the purpose of retaining rainwater and absorbing heat from sunlight.

### **Reason for Special Permit**

In general, Functional Green Roof Area is exempt from Gross Floor Area calculations if it is to be accessed only for maintenance purposes. However, the Ordinance also includes the following provision (Section 22.33.2):

*Spaces meeting the definition of Functional Green Roof Area as defined in Subsection 22.32 above, which are intended to be accessed for use by occupants of the building or others, and which are located above the third floor of the building, may be exempted from the calculation of Gross Floor Area of a building only after the granting of a special permit by the Planning Board. The proponent seeking such a special permit must demonstrate that the Functional Green Roof Area is designed such that the vegetation will withstand the foot traffic associated with its anticipated use. The Planning Board shall also consider the potential visual, noise and privacy impacts of the anticipated use on neighbors. Unless such a special permit is granted, any Functional Green Roof Area located above the third floor of a building that is intended to be accessed for use by building occupants or others shall be counted as Gross Floor Area.*

The intent of this provision is to prevent misuse of the ordinance by allowing a property owner to claim an exemption for recreational rooftop open space (which would ordinarily be included in Gross Floor Area) by providing a negligible amount of plant material that would not perform the function of a green roof. The special permit is required not necessarily to approve the green roof, but to authorize its exemption from Gross Floor Area.

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### **Comments on Proposal**

After reviewing the application, the proposed green roof appears to be appropriately designed for its setting and use. The area will be adjacent to existing deck spaces accessible by two dwelling units, therefore minimal foot traffic is anticipated. The proposed system is substantial, employing 4 inches of soil depth and hearty, drought-tolerant grasses, which require minimal maintenance. The plantings, and associated soil mass, are likely to assist with reducing energy consumption and managing stormwater flows.

The Applicant is a company with a track record of installing functional green roofs throughout the area, including at the Watermark Building, which also received a special permit from the Planning Board (PB #275). Representatives of that company have met with staff to describe some of the details of the design, installation and maintenance for an “intensive” green roof of the type that is proposed.

It is highly unlikely that this proposal is intended to make use of the Gross Floor Area exemption in a manner that is inconsistent with the intent of the Ordinance. However, it is worth noting that if owners of the dwelling units want to replace the planted green roof area with some other materials in the future for use as a deck or terrace space, it may require seeking a variance as it would fail to meet the definition of Functional Green Roof Area and therefore may increase the Gross Floor Area of the building.