



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

To: Planning Board

From: CDD Staff

Date: March 23, 2023

Re: **PB-364, Lechmere Canal Park Improvements Design Review**

Update

In the Planning Board's January 31, 2023 hearing for Lechmere Canal Park, the Board provided comments regarding the proposed improvements to the Park. The developer and architect team subsequently met with staff to review revisions to the design in response to the Planning Board's and staff's comments.

Planning Board Action

As a reminder, the Special Permit for PB-364 Planned Unit Development (PUD) was granted by the Planning Board on February 17, 2021. The Planning Board's review of improvements of Lechmere Canal Park is guided by the conditions of the special permit, which reference the design standards specified in the Eastern Cambridge Planning Study dated October 2001, the guidance provided in the Eastern Cambridge Design Guidelines dated October 15, 2001, the East Cambridge Riverfront Plan dated May 1978, the East Cambridge Development Review Process and Guidelines dated June 1985, and the Cambridge Riverfront Plan dated Spring 2011, which were presented to the Board as a consolidated file at the prior review session.

According to condition 3.c of the Planning Board's Decision for PB-364, "The Permittee shall be responsible for completing improvements to Lechmere Canal Park and to other public spaces surrounding the PB-364 Development Parcel as set forth in the Final Development Plan. All off-site improvements to public spaces controlled by the City of Cambridge or other third parties shall be subject to obtaining all necessary permits and approvals, including, without limitation, final approval by the City."

Staff Comments on Proposed Revisions

Lechmere Canal Park was developed under a previous PUD special permit (PB-66) for the CambridgeSide Galleria. Carol Johnson's original design for the park created a major public space that connects with the surrounding buildings and provides a wide variety of spaces for a wide range of uses and users. The objective of this design review under PB-364 is not to redesign the park, but to improve the park's conditions by meeting current safety standards and accessibility requirements as well as to address deteriorated materials and surfaces. The proposed improvements address accessibility, pedestrian and bicycle connectivity, bicycle parking, landscape plantings, play facilities, drainage, improvements to lighting, the restoration of existing art, the incorporation of new art, and code provisions established subsequent to the original design. Surfaces, fixtures, equipment, and materials will be replaced, repaired, and refurbished as needed without altering the original 1983 design of the park.

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Planning Board Comments from January 31, 2023

Generally, the Planning Board was supportive of the proposed improvements. Key issues raised by Board members included:

- The material and color of the lower path around the canal
- The role of the park in district circulation
- Bicyclist/Pedestrian Safety
- The location of the Bluebike station
- The design of railings and the locations of their vertical posts
- Grading of the “Great Lawn”
- Protection of existing trees
- The Play Area
- Changes to the existing granite curbs and the importance that new construction matches them.
- Differences between the application provided in advance of the Planning Board meeting and the drawings presented at the meeting

Revisions to Proposed Improvements

The revised improvements to the park focus on the comments made by staff and Planning Board members.

Paths

- Staff supports the proposed integral colored, bituminous concrete for the lower path. The exact color should match the existing material as closely as possible and should be identified as a continuing review item for staff review.
- Permeable bituminous concrete of appropriate color could be considered, although it should be noted that maintenance would be required to retain its permeability over the long term.
- Granite curbing details have also been clarified in the updated materials. The curbs will match the existing in kind and detail.
- New England Development is to be responsible for clearing snow, maintenance, and patching should that be necessary at some point.

Bluebike Station

- The location of the proposed Bluebike station has been adjusted to reduce its visual impact. It is now closer to the Two Canal Park building and farther from the view axis of pedestrians on Otis Way.
- The application materials illustrate alternative locations that were investigated; staff agrees that the proposed location is preferable.

Accessibility

- Further information has been provided to illustrate modifications of the ramp and stair near the gazebo to improve accessibility. Staff are supportive of the proposed improvements.

Play Area

- Staff supports the improvements to the Play Area and the additional clarifications provided in the updated materials. The location of benches and the proposed fencing have been clarified.
- The city’s Healthy Parks and Playgrounds report requires movement based elements. More emphasis on movement based play should be considered.
- A wider range of elements, attractive to a wider range of age groups (toddlers and older children) should be provided.

Art

- Staff supports the project's efforts to restore the Gazebo, including the historic images originally applied to the glass, and to capitalize on the art opportunity under the Land Boulevard Bridge.
- The revised materials clarify the Applicant's intention to work with the Cambridge Arts Council.
- Staff recommends that additional locations for art be considered.

Plantings

- The existing trees will be preserved except for one tree that is in poor health and will be replaced.
- The existing low planting that frames the basin will be preserved. Infill planting will be added to areas that currently lack low planting.
- Staff encourages more diversity and native species for the proposed trees. Suggestions for trees include Black Tupelos or River Birches instead of Red Maples, and Kentucky Coffeetrees, Oaks, or fruitless Sweetgums instead of London Planetrees.

Lighting

- As in the previous submission, the lighting generally appears to be sensitively adapted to the design of the park.
- The removal of the existing tall mast lights is much appreciated, as are the efforts to provide consistent light levels throughout the park from low level sources.
- The LED lighting under the bridge will cast light both up and down the abutment wall, which is supported by staff.
- Staff would like to better understand the proposed "Seating/Planter Lighting": the multiple parallel lines of lights depicted at the benches on the "Proposed Lighting Plan" seem excessive.

Railings

- New railings will be provided at grade changes, and handrail extensions will be added at the stair rails. They will be similar in character to the existing ones, but code compliant.
- The revised materials clarify the Applicant's intention to reuse the existing post mounting locations and existing stair handrails where possible.

Great Lawn

- As suggested by staff, the ability to accommodate performances has been considered. An electric service box for A/V use will be installed within the Great Lawn area. Additionally, the existing railing that separates the "Great Lawn" from the brick paved area at the Two Canal building will be removed, allowing free access to the grass area from the north.

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 approve the park design:

1. Review of all landscape details, including proposed plantings, hardscape materials, railings, exterior lighting, etc.
2. Consideration of species diversity and native plantings
3. Color of material for the lower path
4. Public Art
5. Lighting design, including at the Bridge Walkway and art
6. Detailed regrading of the Great Lawn
7. Detailed design of the Play Area
8. Efforts to improve the health of existing trees
9. Detailed review of bicycle parking and the Bluebike station