



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

PLANNING BOARD

CITY HALL ANNEX, 344 BROADWAY, CAMBRIDGE, MA 02139

Date:	November 12, 2021
Subject:	Initial Report of Affordable Housing Overlay (AHO) Design Consultation
Project Location:	52 New Street
Date of Planning Board Meeting:	October 26, 2021

Overview

The Planning Board (the “Board”) met on Tuesday, October 26th to review and comment on the design for 52 New Street, a residential building being developed by Just A Start under the Affordable Housing Overlay ([Section 11.207](#) of the Zoning Ordinance). The Board reviewed a plan set submitted by Just A Start dated September 10, 2021 and presentation dated October 26, 2021, which contained some revisions to the design. They also reviewed memos from the Community Development Department (CDD) and the Department of Public Works (DPW), which are attached.

Proposal Description

The proposed building will have 129,230 square feet of Gross Floor Area (GFA) containing 107 permanently affordable rental apartments and approximately 3,000 square feet of retail space at the ground story. The existing building, which was last used as a fitness center, will be demolished. The new building will be six stories above grade with a height of 70 feet. The development will include 43 on-site parking spaces along with 112 long-term bicycle parking spaces and 12 short-term bicycle parking spaces. The project is pursuing Passive House Institute (PHI) certification for environmental sustainability.

Board Comments

Board members were generally supportive of the proposed building, so their feedback focused on opportunities for improvement. Overall, Board members encouraged Just A Start to design a building that would be a statement that would provide an attractive edge to frame Danehy Park. Board comments are as follows:

- **Building Design.** Board members provided several suggestions for reconsidering various design elements:
 - Break up the parapet on the north elevation to de-emphasize the length of the horizontal line;

- Provide more variation in the building design on the north elevation to break up the solid wall;
 - Replace the louvers in the bicycle parking room with windows;
 - Extend the New Street façade along the full length of the lot frontage, perhaps locating the drive aisle under the building;
 - Refine the articulation of the roof line;
 - Provide renderings of the building design as viewed from Danehy Park and across New Street;
 - Rethink the design of the retail space as it interacts with New Street.
- **Materials.** Many Board members were disappointed with the proposed building materials, which they called “drab.” Board members disagreed on the appropriateness of the wood veneer, but most would like to see a bolder and more playful color scheme.
 - **Amenity Spaces.** Many Board members commented that the interior and exterior amenity spaces, especially the roof deck on Level 2 seemed too small. Given the presence of Danehy Park to the north of the site and the opportunity for future development to the south, they thought that it could turn out to be short-sighted for the roof deck to be oriented to the south. Some Board members suggested that adding balconies to the building would help provide more open space to residents and would make the building look more residential, though a few cautioned that Juliet balconies could be less functional than regularly sized balconies. Some Board members were also concerned that the interior amenity spaces were too small to accommodate the number of residents in the building.
 - **Open Space.** There was some discussion from Board members about the size, quality, and location of open space on the site. Some Board members were concerned that there should be more play areas for children, while others believed that there was already ample children’s play space in the area. Another Board member suggested revisiting the design for the open space and considering options other than a climbing structure.
 - **Unit Size.** There was some discussion on the Board about the size of the units, with some Board members concerned that the units were undersized and others commenting that the size was appropriate given market demands, and that increasing unit sizes would result in fewer units. These Board members asked to know more information about the unit sizes and rent price points of other Just A Start residential properties.
 - **Flood Resilience.** Several Board members were concerned that some parts of the building, including spaces used for entrance lobbies, parking, and bicycle parking, were located below the projected 2070 long-term flood elevation. Board members asked how potential flooding would be managed in those spaces.
 - **Building Plan.** One Board member noted that the front door is a long way from the street but appreciated that the location of the door prevented residents from having to walk down a long corridor. Another Board member suggested that the building should be

shorter in length, that a shorter building would leave more open space at the southeast end of the site.

- **Site Plan.** One Board member raised a concern that pedestrians coming from the south would cut through the driveway and drop-off area to enter the building, creating potential traffic and safety concerns, and asked if that area could be designed to be safer. Another Board member requested that Just A Start improve its lighting plan for the covered entry route in order to feel safer at night. A Board member suggested that a covered route be provided across the entry plaza to the Lobby.
- **Landscape.** Board members suggested increasing the caliper of new trees planted on the site.
- **Roof:** Several Board members noted a preference for prioritizing usable green roof area over solar photovoltaic arrays on the roof of the building. They requested that Just A Start explain their decision to install a photovoltaic system. A Board member suggested that all rooftop equipment be screened.
- **Parking and Loading.** Board members would like more details on how the loading works. A Board member expressed concern about the impact of the parking garage on future development to the south of the building.
- **Uses.** Board members agreed with CDD staff that it would be helpful to learn more about what range of use types might be envisioned in the Level 1 space that is designated as “retail.”

Additionally, Board members endorsed the comments made in the memos provided by CDD and DPW and asked that they be considered when refining the design. Board members also asked the developer to consider the suggestions made in written public comments, calling specific attention to those submitted by Jan Devereux. Finally, Board members advised that it would have been helpful to have received the design refinements shown in the October 26, 2021 presentation further ahead of time.

Submitted for the Planning Board,

Swaathi Joseph

Representative to the Planning Board, authorized by Catherine Preston Connolly, Chair.