

Planning Board Special Permit Review Process

This webpage has information about the review process for a project that requires a special permit from the Planning Board. The review process has three phases. Click each section under Phase for more details:

Phase	Components
Pre-Application	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Review, meetings with City staff• Community outreach and engagement
Application Public Hearings Decision	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Preparation and submission of application materials• Scheduling of public hearings before the Planning Board• On-site notifications panel requirements• Staff review and report(s) on application submission• Public hearings, Planning Board comment, possible continuation• Deliberation, findings, decision and conditions (if approved)• Filing of decision (with appeal period)
Construction and Occupancy	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Design review completed by CDD prior to application for building permit• Design review of materials and mock-up completed by CDD prior to ordering of any materials• Certification by CDD prior to issuance of building permit• Certification by CDD prior to issuance of certificate of occupancy

Pending Applications, Active Permits, and Completed Developments

Locations of all completed special permits and those active special permits either under construction or granted but not yet built can be found on the [Special Permits Map](#). Select a permit to learn more and find links to relevant documents.

Visit the [Special Permit Cases webpage](#) to search for special permit cases by address, keyword, or date; find the latest plans and documents for projects completed or under review; and learn when the Planning Board will next review a special permits case.

Locations of all granted Planning Board special permits not later withdrawn are found on the [Zoning Viewer](#) maintained by the City's [GIS staff](#).

Contact Information

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Pre-Application

The following steps are recommended prior to assembling a special permit application.

Consult with CDD staff

An initial discussion with staff is helpful to understand the zoning requirements of a particular site, the urban design guidelines that will inform the Planning Board's review, the materials that will be required for review, what other City staff should be consulted, and the review process itself. Applicants may continue to meet with CDD staff periodically to discuss the details of the project or to review draft application materials.

Determine what permits are needed for the project

Projects requiring Planning Board approval may also need approvals from other City boards or departments. A list of City agencies and their areas of jurisdiction are summarized on the next page. Note that the Planning Board can only grant special permits that are explicitly allowed in the Zoning Ordinance; general variances from zoning requirements can only be granted by the Board of Zoning Appeal (BZA). The Applicant is responsible for identifying all permits needed for a project, and the special permit application should identify any additional approvals that will be needed from other boards or commissions, such as BZA variances or Certificates of Appropriateness from the Historical Commission.

Review plans and guidelines for the area

A key part of the Planning Board's review is to determine how a proposal responds to the City's citywide and area-specific planning objectives and design guidelines. Unlike zoning requirements, guidelines are not strictly imposed, but are reviewed to determine if a proposal respects the intent of the policies as a whole, allowing for some variation given the particular characteristics of the site or the development proposal.

All projects are reviewed for general consistency with the **Citywide Urban Design Guidelines**, found in [Section 19.30 of the Zoning Ordinance](#). These are more foundational guidelines that are further refined through the guidelines and plans for particular areas of the city. All [guidelines and area plans](#) can be found on the CDD web site. Reviewing all applicable guidelines for the area of a project is an important early step in crafting a development proposal.

Consult with city departments.

Based on the Planning Board special permit criteria and other permits that will be required, applicants should arrange to discuss the proposal with different departments. These discussions should occur while the project is still at a conceptual design stage. Some items, such as Traffic Impact Studies (TIS) and green building review, may take significant lead time to complete prior to submitting an application. Departments that are most commonly consulted in development review include the following:

City Department	Areas of Review
Community Development Department (CDD)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Planning Board special permits• Urban design review• Green building review• Green roof requirements• Affordable housing requirements – inclusionary and incentive zoning (Housing Division)• Retail programs (Economic Development Division)• PTDM plan review, if required
Traffic, Parking and Transportation Department (TP&T)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Transportation Impact Studies (TIS), where required• Pedestrian, bicycle and vehicular access and egress (including curb cuts)• Review of parking and bicycle parking facilities
Department of Public Works (DPW)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Public utilities (in combination with Water Department)• Improvements to public streets, sidewalks and parks• Stormwater management• Development in flood plains• Tree study review, if required

Inspectional Services Department (ISD)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpretation of base zoning requirements • Building code requirements • Board of Zoning Appeal (BZA) special permits and variances
Historical Commission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demolition or alteration of buildings more than 50 years old • Development in Historic Districts or Neighborhood Conservation Districts
Conservation Commission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development in flood plains or wetlands

Plan and undertake a community engagement process

Applicants are required by the Planning Board Rules to reach out to interested community members to discuss a proposal at a conceptual design stage, prior to submitting a special permit application. According to the rules, at least one community meeting must be hosted by the applicant at or near the project site. Other recommended actions include communicating with neighborhood groups and providing information on a web site. Information about the date, time and location of community meetings, along with other information, should be provided to CDD. [Guidelines for Early Community Engagement](#) contains a set of guidelines to help applicants conduct a successful community engagement process. Applicants are responsible for conducting the process, but CDD staff are available to provide information and advice.

Application

To learn about **Application Process** and **Application Materials** see [Application Instructions](#), which acts as a guide for applicants. Applicants are responsible for determining what permits are required, and for specifying all the special permits being requested in an application. Public hearings will not be scheduled until all required application materials are received. A public hearing is held within 65 days of the complete application submittal. The Planning Board decision is filed within 90 days of the public hearing unless an extension is mutually agreed upon by both the Planning Board and the applicant at a public meeting.

Green Building Requirements

The City uses green building requirements to promote environmentally sustainable and energy-efficient design and development practices. The requirement extends to both new construction and renovation projects. ***The Green Building Report must be submitted to the Community Development Department at least 30 days before an application is submitted.***

[Learn more about Green Building Requirements including required submissions.](#)

Parking & Traffic Demand Management (PTDM) Plan

Non-residential projects that propose a net increase in the number of parking spaces or a change in the use of such spaces based on specific categories of use may trigger requirements of the [PTDM Ordinance](#) (Chapter 10.18 of the Cambridge Municipal Code). ***The draft PTDM plan must be submitted to the PTDM Officer before an application is submitted.*** PTDM Officer has 60 days to issue a decision from the date of draft PTDM Plan submittal. All projects subject to the PTDM Ordinance must have an approved PTDM plan before they can obtain the necessary permits.

Historic Protections

Projects located within historic and neighborhood conservation districts as well as demolition or alteration of structures more than 50 years old may be subject to review by the [Cambridge Historical Commission \(CHC\)](#). CHC staff will assist in determining whether the project will be subject to review. ***Applicants should consult with CHC staff before an application is submitted.***

Public Hearings

Scheduling a public hearing

Within approximately one week after receiving a complete application, the Community Development Department (CDD) will schedule a public hearing at a Planning Board meeting no later than 65 days from the date of receiving the application. Typically, the date of the hearing is within 4-8 weeks of receiving the complete application. CDD staff will contact the Applicant with the hearing date and additional information about notification requirements.

On-Site Notification Panel Requirements

Posting of on-site notification panels is required for all Planning Board Special Permits. Applicants will receive blank panels from the Community Development Department, but are responsible for posting and maintaining the panels on-site according to the following standards ([Section 10.42.1](#)):

- Panels shall be installed not less than 14 days before the date of the public hearing, and shall be maintained in legible condition until a Notice of Decision has been filed with the City Clerk by the Planning Board.
- One panel shall be installed for lots having street frontage of 200 feet or less. One additional panel shall be installed for each additional 500 feet of street frontage.
- Panels shall be mounted at the street line or inside the lot within 20 feet of the street line, and shall be visible, easily identifiable, and legible to passersby from the public way.
- Panels that are stolen, destroyed, or rendered illegible shall be promptly replaced, and panels shall be promptly removed after the Notice of Decision has been filed.

Official notification

CDD will publish the hearing notice in the newspaper and mail notification letters to abutting property owners with legal standing. CDD will also provide the Applicant with notification panels, which the Applicant must post on the project site. See Notification Panel Requirements for details.

Posting of application materials

All application materials must be provided in digital format as well as hard copies (see [Application Instructions](#)). Digital application materials will be posted on the CDD web site. Any supplemental materials provided by the Applicant to the Planning Board at a later time will also be posted.

Staff comments

CDD staff (and possibly other departments) will provide a report to the Planning Board on the application approximately one week prior to the scheduled hearing date. The report will be sent to the Applicant and posted on the CDD web site.

Preparation of hearing materials

The following materials may be required or provided to supplement the Applicant's presentation:

- **Illustrations:** Applicants should prepare a slideshow or a series of large-format presentation boards to accompany the presentation. **A digital copy of presentation materials should be provided to CDD no later than 10 a.m. Friday before the public hearing.** The applicant should plan to narrate the presentation materials within 30 minutes during the public hearing. Contact CDD with questions about technical requirements for presenting.
- **Physical 3D Model:** For new buildings or additions of at least 50,000 square feet, or buildings or additions of at least 25,000 square feet requiring special permits for increased height, a physical model of the project and surrounding context must be presented at the hearing. Consult with CDD staff for details.
- **Exterior Material Samples:** For projects involving new construction or substantial changes to a building façade, it is strongly recommended to bring samples of exterior building materials to demonstrate what will be visible from the public realm.

Initial public hearing

The public hearing will begin with a presentation of the project by the Applicant, which is recommended to be no longer than 30 minutes. Planning Board members may ask questions following the presentation. Then, members of the public will have an opportunity to comment. After public comment, Planning Board members will discuss the proposal. It is important to keep the presentation as concise as possible, because if there is not adequate time for presentation and

public comment, the Planning Board will not have time to discuss the case and the hearing is likely to continue to a future date.

Continuations

The Planning Board may continue the hearing to a future date, either to allow more time for Planning Board members to discuss the proposal, or to allow time for the Applicant to provide additional information or make revisions to the proposal in response to Board members' comments. Any new or revised materials from the Applicant must be submitted to CDD more than two weeks before the date of the continued hearing so that it can be posted on the web site. The public hearing will remain open so that members of the public can comment on any new or revised materials.

Planned Unit Development (PUD) Special Permits.

Unlike other special permits, the process for a PUD special permit requires two public hearings: an initial hearing at which the Board makes a Preliminary Determination of whether the proposal is generally consistent with the zoning and development guidelines for the area, and a second hearing at which the Board reviews the details of the proposal and decides to grant or deny the special permit. See [Article 12.000 of the Zoning Ordinance](#) for details.

Decision

Special Permit

A special permit may be granted by at least five (5) Planning Board members voting in the affirmative. In its Decision, the Board may grant the special permit with conditions as deemed appropriate, or deny the special permit. Unless a time extension is agreed to (see below), the Planning Board's Decision will be voted, recorded and filed at the City Clerk's office within 90 days of the public hearing. An original copy of the decision will be mailed to the applicant.

Any person aggrieved by a decision of the Board, may appeal to the Superior Court or the Land Court for Middlesex County; provided that such appeal is filed in said Court within twenty (20) days after such decision is filed with the City Clerk. At the end of appeal period the applicant has to get the original decision completed and signed by the city clerk. Following that the decision has to be filed with the Registry of Deeds. Kindly contact the [City Clerk's office](#) to know the current procedures in place for getting the decision certified.

A special permit shall lapse within two years, not including such time required to pursue or await the determination of an appeal, if a substantial use thereof has not sooner commenced except for good cause or, in the case of a permit for construction, if construction was not begun by such date except for good cause.

Extensions

If more time is needed for the Board to consider the project, or to record the Decision, then the 90-day period may be extended (in accordance with the zoning ordinance) by mutual agreement between the Applicant and the Planning Board. The Applicant must request the extension in writing and the Planning Board must vote to accept the extension at a regular business meeting prior to the end of the 90-day period.

Construction and Occupancy

Design Review

Any continuing design review delegated by the Planning Board to CDD staff should be completed prior to submitting the application for a building permit. The final design may need to be presented to the Planning Board if substantial changes are proposed to the original design approved under the special permit. The applicant should submit a cover letter and marked-up plans and illustrations to indicate all changes, including minor design refinements, to the approved original design.

Building Permit / Certificate of Occupancy Certification

Before a building permit is issued for a project that has received a special permit from the Planning Board, CDD will certify that the conditions of the special permit are being met. The Permittee should contact CDD prior to submitting a building permit application and submit any materials needed to demonstrate that the conditions are being met. Other departments may be involved in the certification process as well, depending on the exact conditions of the special permit. A similar certification process will occur prior to issuance of a certificate of occupancy when the project is completed.