



---

CITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

---

IRAM FAROOQ  
Assistant City Manager for  
Community Development

To: Planning Board  
From: Swathi Joseph, Associate Zoning Planner  
Jeff Roberts, Land Use and Zoning Planner  
Suzannah Bigolin, Urban Design Planner  
Date: April 27, 2016  
Re: **Requested Amendment to PB #198 (Discovery Park)**

This memo is intended to provide some background information to aid the Board in its consideration of the requested amendment to Special Permit #198.

### **Major/Minor Amendments**

Special Permit #198 is not a PUD special permit. However, as authorized in the zoning for Special District 4, the project was approved as a phased, master-planned development under one special permit. Each building is subject to design review and approval by the Planning Board.

The special permit allows amendments to the approved master plan using the same standards that apply to PUD amendments. Amendments may be major or minor, and the Planning Board must first make a determination of whether a proposed amendment is major or minor based on this guidance in Section 12.37 of the zoning:

- 12.37.2** Minor amendments are changes which do not alter the concept of the PUD in terms of density, floor area ratio, land usage, height, provision of open space, or the physical relationship of elements of the development. Minor amendments shall include, but not be limited to, small changes in the location of buildings, open space, or parking; or realignment of minor streets.
- 12.37.3** Major amendments represent substantial deviations from the PUD concept approved by the Planning Board. Major amendments shall include, but not be limited to, large changes in floor space, mix of uses, density, lot coverage, height, setbacks, lot sizes, open space; changes in the location of buildings, open space, or parking; or changes in the circulation system.

If the Planning Board determines that the proposed connection between the buildings, along with the change in the building footprints, is a minor amendment, then the Board could vote to approve the amendment and proceed to review the building design. If the Board determines that it is a major amendment, then the Permittee would need to submit a special permit application for a major amendment, and a public hearing would be scheduled.

## Background

The Special District 4 rezoning envisioned a three-phased redevelopment of the district with specific benchmarks for site restoration and building construction. The intent of the zoning was to facilitate the redevelopment of the former Arthur D. Little complex, which had been characterized by low-scale buildings and parking lots, into a new development area with more compact building footprints and structured parking garages, while restoring natural areas alongside the Little River and Alewife Reservation. In total, the district allows an aggregate gross floor area (GFA) of up to 900,000 square feet, plus up to 400,000 square feet of structured parking with the requirement to completely restore the Little River Area.

The Board issued Special Permit #198 for this project, the Cambridge Discovery Park Master Plan, in October, 2004. The final master plan included six commercial office/lab building sites (100, 200, 300, 400, 500 and 600), totaling up to 819,916 square feet of GFA and two above-ground structured parking garages (A and B). In March, 2005, the Board granted Amendment No. 1 (minor) to adjust certain elements of the timing and phasing of the project. In October, 2009, the Board granted Amendment No. 2 (minor) to adjust the footprints of several buildings, separating some (100 & 200) while connecting some others (200 & 300), and to shift the location of the internal connection between Acorn Park Drive and the internal roadway (Discovery Way). By 2013, Buildings 100, 200 and 300, along with Garage A, were completed along with the required landscape restoration along the Little River.

In October, 2014, the Board granted Amendment No. 3 (major) to replace the 120,000 square foot office/research building (600) with an 82,000 square foot hotel, which in turn resulted in the separation of Buildings 500 & 600, which were previously connected. At that same time, the Board also granted Amendment No. 4 (minor) to approve adjustments to the footprints of two buildings (400 & 500), and approved conceptual designs of the remaining buildings and garage (B). Construction of the hotel site is currently underway.

The applicant is at present requesting a minor amendment to allow Buildings 400 & 500 to be connected at the third, fourth, and fifth stories. In addition to changing the massing of those buildings at the upper levels, the proposed change would increase the combined Gross Floor Area (GFA) of those two building sites by approximately 49,000 square feet, although the aggregate GFA remains significantly below the maximum GFA authorized by the original special permit amendment.

## Design Review

The design principles established in the *Cambridge Discovery Park Master Plan Design Guidelines* are a primary consideration in the Board's review of proposed Building 400-500. These guidelines seek to create a distinguished urban campus with new buildings and landscapes that "convey a sense of timelessness and elegance that will feel comfortable and inviting to all who work there, while respecting and enhancing the experience of visitors to the adjoining reservation."

The guidelines relevant to the proposal are summarized below:

- Overall form and individual elevations should emphasize human scale and presence, particularly for lower floors.
- Break down the scale of buildings so that building facades do not appear monolithic, particularly where facing the reservation.
- Facades greater than 200' in length should be made permeable and visibly articulated as several smaller masses using different materials or colors, vertical breaks, bays or other architectural elements.
- Buildings should be of a tripartite architectural configuration consisting of base, middle and top.
- Bases should consist of the first or possibly the first 2 floors and give the appearance of greater height than any single floor in the middle.
- The top's architectural treatment should create a distinguished finish of the dominant architectural theme.
- The use of distinctive corners and entry treatment are encouraged to be different from, yet still coordinated with, the main building elevations and adjoining public and private exterior spaces.
- Multiple facade treatments, in which a particular architectural treatment would play a major and another a minor role in the facade design, are encouraged.
- Buildings should provide animated, varied silhouettes that create an appropriate identity and enrich views from the reservation, nearby areas, and thoroughfares.
- Development bordering the public domain should be rich in architectural details, paying special attention to the ground plane and silhouette, and convincingly incorporating appropriate imagery depending on project location, i.e. open space, parkway and building use imagery.
- Where possible communal, ground floor uses (cafeteria, day care, health club, etc.) should be designed to maximize visibility and transparency to animate the first floors of the structures.
- Use colors and materials that are inviting, complement the reservation, and that add warmth, richness and texture.
- Rooftop mechanicals and projections should be set back from the principal building façade facing the public way, or architecturally screened and integrated within the overall building.

The guidelines define the qualities of architecture, urban design and landscape design that make for a successful project in the sensitive context of the reservation. Design that reflects, harmonizes with or takes inspiration from the natural environment of the Alewife Reservation with respect to appropriate uses, scale, density, bulk, articulation, materials, and landscape design, is the overarching goal. At the same time, the guidelines also acknowledge that new buildings should relate to the campus context, and have a unique identity that expresses their innovative uses.

The proposal's interface with the reservation is therefore a key consideration. The new design, in part, maintains the existing palette of materials and architectural treatments, including use of textured precast concrete and changes in plane; however, there is a greater emphasis on curtain wall glazing and more streamlined form. The proposed modifications have also dealt with the site's grade change internally, thus creating a much more pedestrian-friendly environment off Discovery Way. There are several areas that staff suggest be carefully considered in order to implement the *Design Guidelines* more fully. These include:

- Review of the principal facade of Building 500 facing the reservation and opportunities to better respond to the urban wild context.
- Consideration of additional façade articulation and modulation, particularly along the long stretches of façade facing the reservation.
- More emphasis given to the ground floor, including active uses and programming that might help to animate the underpass, and a more generous floor height or the appearance of such.
- Design strategies to give to the tops of each building a more varied silhouette and visual interest.
- Further study of the rooftop mechanicals structure to investigate alternative design approaches that might lessen its visual impact from the reservation, as well as limit its presence across the connector, which as proposed, serves only to enhance bulk.

With regard to the concept of connecting the two buildings, such structures are generally not considered optimal urban design outcomes as they may create shadows, block views, reduce daylight, and internalize activity that is needed to animate the public realm. In this instance, there are some mitigating factors, including the fact that the street is not a public street, and that the connector provides for additional useable floor space beyond what is provided in the two separate buildings. Additionally, the connector maintains physical and visual permeability through the site, which would otherwise be impossible if one large, long building was proposed. Some matters pertinent to the Planning Board's design review of the proposed building connector therefore include:

- Transparency and lightness of the connector so as to minimize visual impact.
- Articulation of the connector (including rooftop mechanicals) so that it does not appear as one continuous mass (setbacks from principal facades, materials etc.)
- How the connector is expressed architecturally to minimize the appearance of simply being a building occupying space above the street.
- Maintenance of light and views of the sky.
- Height of the connector above the street, as well as the height of the connector itself.
- Amount of structure required to support the connector.
- Quality of the space under the connector, including the design of the underneath of the building.