



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

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To: Planning Board
From: Jeff Roberts, Land Use and Zoning Planner
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Date: November 26, 2014
Re: **PB #294 – 88 Ames Street Project Review**

Overview

Boston Properties has proposed to develop a residential building with 280 dwelling units and retail on the lower floors. In this memo, we provide some background on the planning and zoning for the area and comments on urban design aspects of the project. Separate memos from the Traffic, Parking and Transportation (TPT) Department and Department of Public Works (DPW) comment on transportation impacts and infrastructure, respectively.

Special Permits

Below is a summary of required special permits and applicable findings. The Planning Board must also find that the General Special Permit Criteria (Section 10.43) are met. Full zoning text is provided as an appendix.

Required Special Permit	Planning Board Must Find That:
Project Review Special Permit (Section 19.20)	<p>The project will have no substantial adverse impact on city traffic within the study area, upon review of the traffic impact indicators analyzed in the Transportation Impact Study and mitigation efforts proposed.</p> <p>The project is consistent with the urban design objectives of the City as set forth in Section 19.30.</p>
Modification of Bicycle Parking Requirements (Section 6.108)	<p>The Bicycle Parking Plan proposes a quantity, design and arrangement of bicycle parking that will serve bicycle users in a way that is sufficiently comparable, given the circumstances of the specific project, to the bicycle parking that would meet zoning requirements. The design or layout is durable and convenient for the users whom it is intended to serve.</p>

Planning and Zoning Background

The 88 Ames Street project is located in a unique special zoning district, the Mixed Use Development: Cambridge Center (MXD) district. The district was established in 1977 and its main purpose is to allow the implementation of the Kendall Square Urban Renewal Plan under the direction of the Cambridge Redevelopment Authority (CRA), a quasi-public agency that is independent from the City. Prior to 1977, the area was zoned for industrial use.

Brief History of the Kendall Square Urban Renewal Plan

In the 1960s, the CRA assembled a large area of industrial land in Kendall Square for redevelopment with the support of the City, the Federal Urban Renewal Program (which supported similar projects in cities around the country) and other interests. The original vision was to develop a large Federal complex to house NASA operations. Ultimately, only a portion of the land was developed as a NASA facility, and was soon replaced by the U.S. Department of Transportation and continues to operate today as the Volpe Transportation Systems Center.

For the larger, non-Federally owned portion of the Urban Renewal Area (now the MXD district), a plan was established to redevelop the land for private use and Boston Properties was selected by the CRA as its master developer. This development became known as “Cambridge Center” and Boston Properties, with some other private owners, currently owns or controls most of the land and buildings in the district. The CRA continues to oversee the Urban Renewal Plan.

Development Plan and MXD Zoning

The development envisioned in the Kendall Square Urban Renewal Plan, and codified in the MXD zoning (Article 14.000 of the Zoning Ordinance), included about 2.8 million square feet of development primarily for office and industrial uses, with allowances for smaller amounts of hotel, retail and residential development, and requirements for parking and public open space. So long as all the zoning requirements were met, projects could proceed without review by the Planning Board, although design review and approval by the CRA is required pursuant to the Urban Renewal Plan.

The MXD zoning requirements have been modified several times between 1977 and the present to reflect adjustments to the plan over time. For instance, in 1993, biotechnology uses were explicitly included as a component of allowed commercial development in the area. In 1997, the limit on hotel use was increased to permit construction of a second hotel. In 2001, the Eastern Cambridge Rezoning increased the total cap on development in the MXD district to permit an additional 200,000 square feet for residential development only, and in 2010 the cap on development was again increased to facilitate expansion of the Broad Institute. Today, the MXD district is developed to almost its full zoning capacity for commercial uses, but no housing has been developed.

Housing in Kendall Square

Over time, it has been an increasing priority of the City to promote housing development in Kendall Square, emphasized most recently in the City’s 2012 Kendall Square (“K2”) Planning Study. While the district has evolved into a strong regional economic center, it has followed an “office park” pattern of

development without much mix of use types. New housing is important not only to sustain the area's growth, but to create a more welcoming urban environment with street life beyond normal office hours.

About 1,000 units of housing have been developed in Kendall Square over the past decade, with more planned or under construction, either as stand-alone buildings or as part of multi-building projects. New housing, along with retail, open space and other public uses, have contributed to a transformation in the character and perception of Kendall Square.

Housing in Cambridge Center

Residential development was contemplated in the MXD district since its initial establishment, but it was originally not a high priority. In the initial MXD zoning, multifamily housing was limited to no more than 300,000 square feet, or 11% of the total development permitted.

The additional 200,000 square feet of residential development capacity granted during the 2001 Eastern Cambridge Rezoning was meant to provide a stronger incentive to develop housing in the MXD district. This led to a proposal from Boston Properties to construct a 200,000 square-foot residential building with ground-floor retail at 75 Ames Street, which received a special permit from the Planning Board in 2005. However, the project was not built as the global financial crisis stalled much of the new residential development in Cambridge.

Meanwhile, as there was a growing demand for additional office and laboratory space to serve the adjacent Broad Institute, Boston Properties proposed to use the 75 Ames Street to build an expansion to the Broad Institute in place of the permitted housing. This proposal required a zoning change, which the City Council granted in 2010.

A Letter of Agreement was attached to the 2010 rezoning, outlining commitments made by Boston Properties to the City. Boston Properties agreed to identify alternative sites for the anticipated housing and to commence construction within seven years of the completion of the Broad Institute expansion, or else make a series of escalating payments to the Cambridge Affordable Housing Trust. The 88 Ames Street location was one of the alternative housing sites identified. The Broad Institute expansion at 75 Ames Street was completed earlier this year.

In late 2012, Boston Properties indicated that it would proceed with a residential project at 88 Ames Street but needed additional approvals from the City Council due to the complex nature of the site. First, the zoning needed to be amended to relax some zoning requirements (discussed on the next page). Second, Boston Properties would need to acquire a portion of the public street to accommodate the footprint of the new building. Following a process for disposition of municipal land, the City agreed to convey a 20-foot wide strip of the Ames Street right-of-way to Boston Properties for the purpose of constructing this building in exchange for a \$2.01 million payment and a requirement to reconstruct Ames Street to City specifications and relocate any utilities in the public way.

In public hearings for the 2013 rezoning and disposition, the Planning Board expressed a favorable opinion of this site since it would provide desired housing, retail and open space and would improve the character of this portion of Ames Street, which is currently used for parking and loading. The City Council approved the zoning changes and the land disposition in December, 2013.

Applicable Requirements

The site is located in the Ames Street District, a subdistrict of MXD created in 2010 and modified in 2013 to facilitate the development of new commercial and residential buildings fronting Ames Street.

Gross Floor Area (GFA)

GFA is controlled by a total development cap and aggregate limits for certain use types within the district as a whole. According to the Development Summary included in the Application Documents, nearly all of the development under current MXD zoning limitations is either built, under construction or otherwise accounted for in agreements pertaining to other sites. The remaining development potential includes 200,000 square feet for residential use only, plus about 22,000 square feet for unspecified uses. A building with 200,000 square feet of housing and 16,000 square feet of retail is proposed.

Dwelling Units

The number of dwelling units is not limited by zoning. Because the project proposes more than 10 units, affordable units will be provided pursuant to Inclusionary Housing requirements in Section 11.200.

Height

The height limit in the district is 250 feet, which is the proposed height of the building.

Open Space

Zoning (as amended in 2013) provides that open space requirements for individual lots can be waived so long as 53,000 square feet of public open space is provided in the Ames Street District. The disposition agreement for Ames Street requires that land transferred from the City to Boston Properties must only be used for housing, retail or open space, with the Planning Board approving any open space.

Parking

The zoning (as amended in 2013) requires parking at a rate of 0.5 space per dwelling unit. Because parking in the district is pooled in garages, exact spaces do not need to be identified, but 140 spaces from the total inventory must be dedicated to residential use only.

Bicycle Parking

Development is required to meet the bicycle parking requirements in Section 6.100 of the Zoning Ordinance, adopted in 2012. The Planning Board may permit an alternative Bicycle Parking Plan if it is found to be equal or better than what would be required under the specific 6.100 requirements. Comments on the proposal are provided in memos from TPT and the Cambridge Bicycle Committee.

Project Review

A Project Review Special Permit under Section 19.20 of the Zoning Ordinance is required in addition to design review and approval by the CRA. This requires the Planning Board to make transportation impact findings, discussed in the TPT memo, and urban design findings, discussed on the following pages.

Urban Design

This project represents a milestone in the development of Cambridge Center. For many years, the community has advocated for housing and a livelier neighborhood in the heart of Kendall Square. Following a long process of negotiation, the 88 Ames Street project is proposed to fulfill some of these desires with the development of around 280 housing units and ground floor retail.

Site planning and open space

The urban design strategy employed is very much a response to the constraints of the site and a desire to strengthen the street wall condition on Ames Street. The benefits of the proposal include a strengthened urban presence in Kendall Square, as well as ameliorating the existing loading and garage interface, and “filling the gap” in the urban fabric of Ames Street. The continuation of ground floor retail activity, which is currently lacking between Legal Sea Foods and Meadhall, is most important in this regard. The continuous retail edge will also contribute to a more coherent urban environment in Cambridge Center.

Other positive urban design moves include high quality improvements to the pedestrian and open space networks. These have the effect of creating a welcoming and vibrant pedestrian environment. Most notably, Pioneer Way has the potential to create a very unique experience in Kendall Square with its more intimate scale, overhead strand lighting, purpose-built bike shed and decorative paving adding elements of surprise into the built environment. One can envision a bustling café, bar or pop-up art installation as a desirable activity generator in this space. Other improvements, including new public open spaces on the north and south sides of the building and widened sidewalks, are significant and create a strong visual and physical connection between the building and public streetscape. Much care and thought has been given to the design of these spaces, and the interface between the proposed building and these new public spaces is worthy of careful attention by the Board.

Scale and massing

The project will deliver a taller built form to Cambridge Center in a location where more intensive urban uses and densification are anticipated. The building massing includes a strong base, slender tower and more subtle top comprising the penthouse mechanicals. The tower element is set to the corner of Pioneer Way and Ames Street, which establishes a strong presence, while the base provides a transition in scale to the north. The notion of a base is achieved through use of a horizontal reveal at the fourth floor. Another architectural strategy that works well is the transparency of the base, combined with the reveal and colored brow, which creates a strong podium form and the appearance of two volumes from some vantage points. The mechanical penthouse is subtly expressed as a separate volume, which is given the same architectural treatment as the tower through use of vertical banding.

While 88 Ames Street is located mid-block, as a consequence of the reconstruction of Ames Street and the discontinued right of way, the building will protrude in front of the building lines of 4 and 5 Cambridge Center. The tower form will be quite prominent, particularly when looking north on Ames Street. Vertical slabs of the buildings will be dominant and will slightly obscure axial views to and from

Loughrey Walkway, which extends north from Ames Street to Sixth Street. Despite this, the entire building is not on axis with any key view lines or major streets, and will often be perceived in the background of several other large buildings in Kendall Square.

Streetwalls and setbacks

Given the constraints of the site and the infill nature of the project, the fourth floor reveal creates a strong datum, which is anticipated in the Kendall Square Design Guidelines (2013) as a possible way to design tall buildings on tight sites. However, it is noted that the reveal, while reinforcing the base as a primary defining element, does not reduce the visual and physical impact of the tower from the ground level in the same way that would be achieved if the tower element were stepped back from the base.

Ames Street is defined as a major public street in the Kendall Square Design Guidelines. In these locations the most intensive and high order active ground level uses are desirable. The project achieves these aims with ground floor retail running the length of the street frontage. In addition, the ground floor is to be entirely glazed and transparent, as are the building sides as they turn to face the open space to the north and Pioneer Way to the south.

Recessed entries to the retail tenancies, as well as the more significantly recessed lobby, differentiate between residential and commercial uses, and generate a sense of identity and street level activation. It may be beneficial to consider an additional retail entry from Pioneer Way, and further celebration of the secondary residential entry, to provide for a more animated pedestrian environment. The incorporation of sign bands, canopies and awnings along the ground floor facade also help with defining a more intimate, pedestrian scale. As the success of the retail and its ability to activate the sidewalk is reliant on maintaining the transparency of each tenancy, consideration should be given to future tenants' interior signage and layout needs.

Architectural details

Much of the visual interest and articulation of the building is achieved through vertical banding of concrete piers, which vary depending on views, access to light and proximity to other buildings. This treatment accentuates the verticality of the tower and emphasizes a slender form. The contrast of the vertical piers with the horizontal glazing system creates modulation and a delicate rhythm across the facades.

The building does lack an overt residential character, which is often desired in many neighborhoods. Some evidence of domesticity will be realized through the horizontal, aluminum windows of the residential program. Notwithstanding this, the site is located in the heart of Kendall Square and conveying the district's spirit of innovation through transparency and distinctive architectural composition is an advantageous approach. In addition, the vertical piers provide a pleasing contrast to the horizontality and punched windows of the neighboring building.

The materials are not necessarily as warm or earthy as materials often used in Cambridge. Given that the site is located in the midst of multiple brick and terracotta-clad buildings, there is an urban design benefit gained from the contrast of a slender tower with high levels of transparency and precast piers with subtle color and texture. Such a materials palette also helps distinguish the building and provides a distinct identity to the residential use.