



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

IRAM FAROOQ
Acting Assistant City
Manager for Community
Development

To: Planning Board
From: Jeff Roberts, Land Use and Zoning Planner
Suzannah Bigolin, Urban Design Planner
Date: March 25, 2015
Re: **PB #295, 305 Webster Ave Project Review**

Overview

305 Webster Ave is a site in the Business A zoning district, which covers the Cambridge Street corridor from Inman Square to Lechmere. It is a unique triangular lot that does not directly front Cambridge Street, but sits at the Y-shaped intersection of Webster and Columbia Streets, which both extend into Somerville to the north and merge just before intersecting with Cambridge Street to the south.

The proposal is to develop a building totaling 37,510 square feet, with 35 residential units and a small commercial space on the ground floor. The building will combine an existing 1-to-2-story commercial structure (formerly Webster Auto Parts) with a new conforming addition that reaches a maximum height of four stories.

The project will require approval of a Project Review Special Permit because in the Business A district, the review threshold is 20,000 square feet rather than the typical 50,000 square feet. However, the project does not exceed the threshold to require a traffic impact study. Therefore the approval is based only on consideration of the urban design component of Project Review.

The project is also seeking a special permit to waive some dimensional standards in converting a non-residential building to residential use, which is allowed pursuant to Section 5.28.2 of zoning. In this case, the proposed Gross Floor Area, dwelling units, height and parking meet the district requirements. The relief needed is to allow the setbacks of the existing building to be maintained at the basement, first floor and part of the second floor. Without this relief, all residential uses would be required to be set back at least 10 feet along all streets, including at the basement level.

Requested Special Permits	Summarized Applicable Findings (see appendix for zoning text excerpts)
Project Review Special Permit (Section 19.20)	Project is consistent with the urban design objectives of the City as set forth in Section 19.30.
Dimensional Relief for Conversion of Non-Residential Structure to Residential Use (Section 5.28.2)	Project meets general special permit criteria and multifamily development criteria, also considering: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Privacy impact on residential neighbors. • Efforts to address concerns raised by abutters and neighbors.

Land Use Considerations

The site is in a rather unique location, a nexus point along the Cambridge Street corridor where Webster Ave and Columbia Street converge. To the north, Webster Ave connects to Union Square in Somerville, with the planned MBTA Union Square Green Line station about a 5-minute walk from the site. Columbia Street to the north extends into an industrial area of Somerville that has become known for small-scale fabrication and food-related businesses. To the south, Columbia Street continues through the Wellington-Harrington and Area Four/Port Neighborhoods leading toward Central Square.

Because of its location between rail lines and industrial districts in Somerville and residential neighborhoods in Cambridge, this small area retains an eclectic mix of uses including retail, office, residential, manufacturing and auto-related uses, even some blended activities like the “Clover Hub” that includes a café and production facilities for a food truck operation. Nearby in Somerville, there have been a number of projects that converted former commercial sites to residential buildings in the vicinity of Union Square.

Because of the close proximity to a future public transit station as well as bus service, retail and other amenities, the City’s growth policies suggest that this is a good location for the development of housing at a moderately high urban scale and density. In addition, the inclusion of ground-floor commercial space is critical to support the feeling of a connected urban streetscape from the future MBTA station to the Cambridge Street mixed-use corridor. In general, the project should contribute positively to establishing a safe and attractive pedestrian connection from Cambridge Street to the new station.

The main land use concern is that the area will likely continue to serve a mix of uses, including commercial uses that are industrial in nature, for some time. While this kind of urban character may be acceptable (or even desirable) to some residents, the project’s design should provide reasonable protection to residents of the building from noise or other nuisances that may be present in the surrounding area.

Urban Design

As described above, the proposal is very much located in a transitional area with a mixed-use character. There are several one and two-story structures on site that have some contextual significance related to the historical auto-parts and recycling uses that were a major feature of the neighborhood.

Consequently, the key urban design issues are how to adaptively reuse the existing buildings and how redevelopment can respond to both to the historic industrial qualities of the site and the evolving character of the mixed-use neighborhood. The project proposes a design solution that both retains the site’s industrial character and accommodates its new function as a mixed-use residential development.

Site planning, access and landscape design

At the site planning level, the project preserves the shell of the existing structures, while redeveloping the interior with a 3-story addition. The apex of the triangle will be utilized for outdoor seating associated with the first floor commercial space, while the northern end of the site will provide vehicular access to the basement parking. It will be important to ensure the open space area has an open and welcoming appearance as opposed to being fenced in. Other improvements to open space, including the

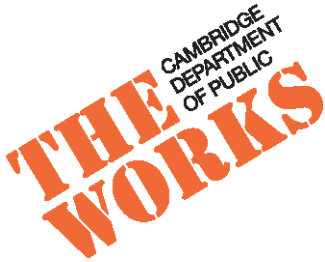
proposed street trees and closure of the existing curb cuts, will significantly improve the neighborhood and pedestrian experience. New on-site landscaping softens the existing industrial character and will help to create a more attractive residential environment.

Currently, the site is inhospitable to reach on foot, and it will be important for both the future residents and retail patrons to have a clear way to walk to the building. In order to ensure safe and welcoming pedestrian access, the proponent will need to work with the Department of Public Works and Traffic, Parking and Transportation, regarding the intersection of Columbia Street and Webster Avenue, and will be responsible for any necessary improvements.

Architectural design and character

The overall building height and form is consistent with the scale of recent housing projects in the area. The new addition is appropriately neutral to render it as background to what will hopefully become a well-maintained historic streetscape edge and building base. It also appears well set back from the existing buildings so that a clear distinction between old and new is achieved and the unique character of the site is preserved. It would be preferable to maintain the existing brickwork on the exposed facades that are proposed to be re-clad in metal tile in order to retain the integrity of the original historical fabric.

The proposed fenestration patterns support the mix of window styles found in the original buildings, but in some instances could perhaps be better aligned. There are some long stretches of flat wall plane, particularly on the Webster Ave façade, that lack variation and rhythm that would normally be achieved through the expression of bays and other architectural features. The retention of the existing brick structures, which will have texture and variation, does however help to ameliorate some of these concerns. Creation of a stronger cornice line would add some interest along the roofline of the addition as well as a “top” to the building. It would be helpful to see a more accurate representation of the proposed materials, colors and finishes in relation to the surrounding context and existing brick buildings as this is unclear in the application materials. In addition, there appears to be a mismatch of materials that does not always complement the existing buildings and should be further reviewed. While not specifically a Planning Board consideration, it is noted that the first floor apartments have a poor level of internal amenity, particularly the 3-bedroom apartment in the north-west corner.



City of Cambridge Department of Public Works

Owen O'Riordan, Commissioner

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March 17, 2015

TO: Planning Board

FROM: Katherine F. Watkins, PE
City Engineer

RE: Webster Ave Residences: 305 Webster Ave

We are in receipt of the Special Permit Application materials for the Webster Ave Residences project, dated December 2014. We have reviewed the materials and have presented below some comments related to the interests of the Department of Public Works.

The Applicant has met with the DPW to review the project. Generally, the DPW, based on the provided documentation, does not anticipate the project having any issue meeting all of the requirements of the DPW as the project will be subject to thorough and complete engineering review at the time of the Building Permit Application.

As the project is further developed, DPW will work with the applicant to ensure the following requirements are met:

Public Infrastructure:

1. Requirements for temporary and permanent alterations to the Public Right of Way will be considered as part of the Building Permit review process, when a full understanding of the scope of the utility and surface work is presented.
2. Pedestrian connections adjacent to the site need to be considered to confirm if there can be any improvements can be made to circulation patterns as part of the sidewalk improvements proposed by the project.

Stormwater Management:


1. Under the City Land Disturbance Regulations, the Applicant will need to obtain a Stormwater Control Permit from the Department of Public Works. The permit requirements cover the design standards and long term operation and maintenance of a management system for the project site, as well as the construction phase erosion and sedimentation control plans. The permit requirements also include the standard to mitigate the stormwater runoff from the site from the proposed 25-year storm to a rate below the pre-redevelopment 2-year storm event. The Applicant provided a draft of this permit application in the Special Permit Application

Sewer System:

1. The city sewer and drain infrastructure in the vicinity of this site operates as combined and has a history of surcharging. This is a concern to the DPW as the Applicant is proposing below grade parking infrastructure. If the below grade parking is constructed, back flow prevention shall be installed at every fixture.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns related to the comments provided above.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Katherine F. Watkins".

Katherine F. Watkins, P.E.
City Engineer



CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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William B. King, *Chair*, Bruce A. Irving, *Vice Chair*, Charles M. Sullivan, *Executive Director*
William Barry, M. Wyllis Bibbins, Robert G. Crocker, Chandra Harrington, Jo M. Solet, *Members*
Shary Page Berg, Joseph V. Ferrara, Susannah Barton Tobin, *Alternates*

March 20, 2015

To: Members of the Cambridge Planning Board

From: Charles Sullivan, Executive Director
Cambridge Historical Commission

Re: Columbia Auto Parts complex, 305 Webster Avenue

I am writing with regard to the proposed adaptive reuse of the structures at 305 Webster Avenue, which will require a special permit to utilize the existing footprints and setbacks.

The first structure at 305 Webster Avenue was permitted as a one-story machine shop in 1926, but was opened as an auto parts store by the owner, Joseph Glassman of Brookline. The Glassman family, by then doing business as Columbia Auto Parts, Inc., added a two-story addition on the Cambridge Street side of the building in 1940, a garage on Columbia Street in 1946, and a much larger warehouse addition in 1958. A narrow one-story storefront facing Cambridge Street cannot be dated. The complex today is a mixture of one and two-story buildings uniformly faced with buff brick, with a mixture of fenestration and storefront styles.

No one could call the Columbia Auto Parts complex a potential landmark, but it does have some significance for its associations with the auto parts and recycling district that was a major feature of this part of Cambridge from the 1920s through the 1990s. That commercial sector is now disappearing, but these structures retain enough integrity that it seems preferable to preserve and adaptively reuse them.

Sincerely,

Charles M. Sullivan
Executive Director

cc: Sean Hope, Esq.

Project Review Special Permit – Urban Design Findings

19.25.2 Urban Design Findings. The Planning Board shall grant the special permit only if it finds that the project is consistent with the urban design objectives of the city as set forth in Section 19.30. In making that determination the Board may be guided by or make reference to urban design guidelines or planning reports that may have been developed for specific areas of the city and shall apply the standards herein contained in a reasonable manner to nonprofit religious and educational organizations in light of the special circumstances applicable to nonprofit religious and educational activities.

19.30 Citywide Urban Design Objectives

The following urban design objectives are intended to provide guidance to property owners and the general public as to the city's policies with regard to the form and character desirable for new development in the city. It is understood that application of these principles can vary with the context of specific building proposals in ways that, nevertheless, fully respect the policies' intent. It is intended that proponents of projects, and city staff, the Planning Board and the general public, where public review or approval is required, should be open to creative variations from the detailed provisions presented in this Section as long as the core values expressed are being served. A project need not meet all the objectives of this Section 19.30 where this Section serves as the basis for issuance of a special permit. Rather the permit granting authority shall find that on balance the objectives of the city are being served. Nor shall a project subject to special permit review be required to conform to the Required Building and Site Plan Requirements set forth in Section 19.50.

Further indicators of conformance with these policy objectives shall be found in planning documents and plans developed for specific areas of the city or the city as a whole, to the extent that they are not inconsistent with the objectives set forth in this Section 19.30. These documents include the *Harvard Square Development Guidelines*, the *Central Square Action Plan*, the *Central Square Development Guidelines*, the *North Massachusetts Avenue Urban Design Guidelines Handbook*, the *University Park at MIT Urban Design Guidelines*, the *North Point Policy Plan and Design Guidelines*, the *Cambridge Institutional Growth Management Plan*, the *East Cambridge Riverfront Plan*, the *Eastern Cambridge Plan*, the *Eastern Cambridge Design Guidelines*, the *Alewife Revitalization, Alewife Urban Design Study Phase II* and its Draft update of 1991, and *Toward a Sustainable Future: Cambridge Growth Policy Document*.

19.30 Citywide Urban Design Objectives [SUMMARIZED]

Objective	Indicators
New projects should be responsive to the existing or anticipated pattern of development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transition to lower-scale neighborhoods • Consistency with established streetscape • Compatibility with adjacent uses • Consideration of nearby historic buildings
Development should be pedestrian and bicycle-friendly, with a positive relationship to its surroundings.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inhabited ground floor spaces • Discouraged ground-floor parking • Windows on ground floor • Orienting entries to pedestrian pathways • Safe and convenient bicycle and pedestrian access
The building and site design should mitigate adverse environmental impacts of a development upon its neighbors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Location/impact of mechanical equipment • Location/impact of loading and trash handling • Stormwater management • Shadow impacts • Retaining walls, if provided • Building scale and wall treatment • Outdoor lighting • Tree protection (requires plan approved by City Arborist)
Projects should not overburden the City infrastructure services, including neighborhood roads, city water supply system, and sewer system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water-conserving plumbing, stormwater management • Capacity/condition of water and wastewater service • Efficient design (LEED standards)
New construction should reinforce and enhance the complex urban aspects of Cambridge as it has developed historically.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutional use focused on existing campuses • Mixed-use development (including retail) encouraged where allowed • Preservation of historic structures and environment • Provision of space for start-up companies, manufacturing activities
Expansion of the inventory of housing in the city is encouraged.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing as a component of large, multi-building development • Affordable units exceeding zoning requirements, targeting units for middle-income families
Enhancement and expansion of open space amenities in the city should be incorporated into new development in the city.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publicly beneficial open space provided in large-parcel commercial development • Enhance/expand existing open space, complement existing pedestrian/bicycle networks • Provide wider range of activities

Dimensional Relief for Conversion of Non-Residential Structures to Residential Use

5.28.2 *Conversion of Non Residential Structures to Residential Use*

Where it is proposed to convert an existing principal use structure, designed and built for non residential use, to residential use (excluding Transient Accommodations and Trailer Park or Mobile Home Park listed in Section 4.31 (i-j)), the dimensional standards generally applicable in the district as set forth in the Tables of Dimensional Requirements in Section 5.30 and other applicable regulations in this Ordinance, including permitted uses, Section 4.30 – Table of Use Regulations, shall apply. However, where some or all of those requirements cannot be met, including any use, dimensional or procedural requirement that may apply in the base district, the following provisions shall apply to such conversion after issuance of a special permit by the Planning Board. The provisions in this Section 5.28.2 shall apply in all zoning districts with the exception of districts with an Open Space designation.

Intent of this Section:

- (a) To allow the economic reuse of buildings that may be substantially out of compliance with the dimensional requirements of the zoning district within which they are located, especially as they are converted to residential use.
- (b) To encourage the preservation of buildings of historic or cultural significance by providing opportunities for reuse of the structures.
- (c) To establish a framework of development standards and criteria within which existing non-residential buildings that are out of scale and character with surrounding residential uses can be converted to housing of an appropriate style and density while limiting potential negative impacts on neighbors.

[...]

5.28.22 *Criteria for Approval of a Special Permit*

In acting upon this special permit, the Planning Board shall consider the standards and criteria set forth in Sections 10.43, 10.47 and 10.47.1 of this Ordinance in addition to the following review standards.

5.28.28.1 *Criteria Applicable to All Projects*

- (a) Provision of Parking. Where it is proposed to add dwelling units above the limits established in the base zoning regulations, the Board shall evaluate the impact of increased numbers of dwelling units above that normally permitted in the district on the demand for on-street parking by residents and visitors to the proposed building, particularly in neighborhoods where off street parking is limited.

In reaching a determination, the Board may require that the Applicant provide elements of a Parking Analysis as set forth in Section 6.35.3 of the Zoning Ordinance. Where a project is

subject to additional criteria as specified in Section 5.28.28.2 below, a Parking Analysis shall be required to be included with the Special Permit Application.

- (b) Privacy Considerations. Where significant variations from the normally required dimensional standards for the district are proposed, the Board shall evaluate the impact on residential neighbors of the new housing use and any other proposed use as it may affect privacy. The location and size of windows, screening elements, decks, entries, security and other lighting, and other aspects of the design, including the distribution of functions within the building, shall be reviewed in order to assure the maintenance of reasonable levels of privacy for abutters. In reviewing a proposed development plan, the Board shall consider, among other factors, the potential negative impacts of the new activity on abutters as a result of the location, orientation, and use of the structure(s) and its yards as proposed.
- (c) Reduction in Private Open Space. Where it is proposed to reduce the amount of on-site Private Open Space below that required in the applicable district, the Board shall evaluate the proposal in light of the following:
 - (1) The extent to which screening and buffering from neighbors will be accomplished
 - (2) The quality and viability of the proposed open spaces as they are designed
 - (3) The tradeoff in benefits and negative impacts of the loss of green space in order to provide the required amount of parking, including consideration of the feasibility of alternate parking arrangements that might produce additional green area, such as placing some or all parking within the structure
 - (4) The availability of common recreational spaces within the building to compensate for the loss of usable outdoor open space
- (d) Community Outreach. The Planning Board shall consider what reasonable efforts have been made to address concerns raised by abutters and neighbors to the project site. An applicant seeking a special permit under this Section 5.28.2 shall solicit input from affected neighbors before submitting a special permit application. The application shall include a report on all outreach conducted and meetings held, shall describe the issues raised by community members, and shall describe how the proposal responds to those issues.

5.28.28.2 *Additional Criteria Applicable to Larger Projects*

[NOT APPLICABLE BECAUSE THE PROPOSED GROSS FLOOR AREA AND NUMBER OF DWELLING UNITS ARE NOT ABOVE THE MAXIMUM ALLOWED UNDER BASE ZONING LIMITATIONS]

Multifamily Dwellings

10.47.3 Criteria for approval of Townhouses and Multifamily Dwellings. In reviewing applications for townhouse developments and multifamily dwelling, the special permit granting authority shall consider and address the following site plan criteria as applicable:

- (1) Key features of the natural landscape should be preserved to the maximum extent feasible. Tree removal should be minimized and other natural features of the site, such as slopes, should be maintained.
- (2) New buildings should be related sensitively to the existing built environment. The location, orientation and massing of structures in the development should avoid overwhelming the existing buildings in the vicinity of the development. Visual and functional disruptions should be avoided.
- (3) The location, arrangement, and landscaping of open space should provide some visual benefits to abutters and passersby as well as functional benefits to occupants of the development.
- (4) Parking areas, internal roadways and access/egress points should be safe and convenient.
- (5) Parking area landscaping should minimize the intrusion of onsite parking so that it does not substantially detract from the use and enjoyment of either the proposed development or neighboring properties.
- (6) Service facilities such as trash collection apparatus and utility boxes should be located so that they are convenient for resident, yet unobtrusive.

10.47.41 Additional Criteria for Townhouses and Multifamily Dwellings in Industry A and A-2 districts, Industry B, B-1 and B-2 districts, and the Industry C district. In addition to the criteria set forth in Section 11.47.4 above, the following shall be considered by the Planning Board in these industrial districts:

- (1) On balance the location is appropriate for the proposed residential uses, because:
 - (a) Residential use at the proposed location will not preempt space particularly suitable for nonresidential uses; and
 - (b) Existing or anticipated uses on nearby premises will not make residential use inappropriate because of external impacts such as noise, glare, odors or safety concerns; and
 - (c) The proximity of the proposal to other residential development or reasonably anticipated residential development in the future, helps to establish an amount of housing sufficient to ensure a viable, supportive and healthy residential environment; or
 - (d) The proposal will act as a transition to neighboring residential districts and uses; or
 - (e) The proposal is of sufficient scale to create its own supportive residential environment.

- (2) The proposed design includes amenities appropriate to provide a supportive service environment for the anticipated residential uses.
- (3) Other potential benefits can be identified, including:
 - (a) The proposed residential use may make feasible the preservation of an historic structure;
 - (b) The proposed residential use and nearby commercial uses are linked through work/live arrangements or in other ways.

General Criteria for Issuance of a Special Permit

10.43 *Criteria.* Special permits will normally be granted where specific provisions of this Ordinance are met, except when particulars of the location or use, not generally true of the district or of the uses permitted in it, would cause granting of such permit to be to the detriment of the public interest because:

- (a) It appears that requirements of this Ordinance cannot or will not be met, or
- (b) traffic generated or patterns of access or egress would cause congestion, hazard, or substantial change in established neighborhood character, or
- (c) the continued operation of or the development of adjacent uses as permitted in the Zoning Ordinance would be adversely affected by the nature of the proposed use, or
- (d) nuisance or hazard would be created to the detriment of the health, safety and/or welfare of the occupant of the proposed use or the citizens of the City, or
- (e) for other reasons, the proposed use would impair the integrity of the district or adjoining district, or otherwise derogate from the intent and purpose of this Ordinance, and
- (f) the new use or building construction is inconsistent with the Urban Design Objectives set forth in Section 19.30.