



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

To: Planning Board

From: CDD Staff

Date: June 8, 2021

Re: Special Permit **PB #361, 711-727 Mass Ave - Continued Hearing**

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This memo contains an overview of the proposed project at 711-727 Massachusetts Avenue, the special permits being requested, and related comments.

Update

Since the last Planning Board meeting on April 27, 2021, the Applicant has worked with staff to respond to comments and questions raised in the prior review of the application. The Applicant's recent submission provides a revised set of plans and dimensions with additional information about the project in narrative and graphic form. This memo comments on the additional information and proposed changes and is supplementary to CDD's prior memos on this proposal.

The proposal is also subject to the Green Building Requirements in Section 22.20. Staff has reviewed the required submissions to certify compliance with the Green Building Requirement. Compliance with the Incentive Zoning Requirements will be reviewed at the time of issuance of a building permit.

Planning Board Action

The current Application (as revised) is proposing to renovate and rehabilitate the historic building with an addition behind and partially above the existing building. The proposed uses include ground-floor retail, office space, and a 36-room hotel. The renovated building plus addition will result in a total FAR of 3.83 – which excludes areas exempt from gross floor area (GFA) calculations either as-of-right or by special permit – and a total of six stories above grade.

The Applicant is seeking Special Permits allowed in the Central Square Overlay District for building height (Section 20.304.2) and FAR (20.304.3), to exempt rooftop spaces from the calculation of GFA (20.304.3.), to establish a Formula Business (20.304.5) and to modify limitations on bank frontage (20.304.5.3.b), and to waive parking and loading requirements (20.304.6). The Applicant also seeks an exemption of basement area from the calculation of GFA (Article 2.000).

Applicable sections of the zoning are provided in an appendix.

Requested Special Permits	Summarized Findings <i>(detailed zoning text in appendix)</i>
<p>Central Square Overlay District: Standards for Issuance of Special Permits (Section 20.305)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proposed development is consistent with the goals and objectives of the Central Square Action Plan: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ encourage responsible and orderly development; ○ strengthen the retail base to more completely serve the needs of the neighborhoods; ○ preserve the Square’s cultural diversity; ○ create active people oriented spaces; ○ improve the physical, and visual environment; ○ provide retail establishments that serve people of diverse economic and social groups who live in the surrounding neighborhoods. • Building and site designs are consistent with “Urban Design Plan for Central Square” as outlined in the “Central Square Action Plan” and the “Central Square Development Guidelines” (see summary on following pages). • Building and site designs adequately screen the parking provided and are sensitive to the contributing buildings in the vicinity. • No National Register or contributing building is demolished or so altered as to terminate or preclude its designation (either now or within the past 5 years).
<p>Central Square Overlay District: Building height up to 80 feet and combined residential and non-residential FAR up to 4.00 (Sections 20.304.2 & 20.304.3)</p>	<p><i>Central Square Overlay District findings set forth above</i></p>
<p>Central Square Overlay District: Exemption of rooftop spaces from calculation of Gross Floor Area (GFA) in Central Square Overlay District (Section 20.304.3.6)</p>	<p>The rooftop spaces are located and designed to minimize impacts on neighboring uses, including but not limited to light trespass, noise or other nuisance, and may place further requirements or conditions on the design or operational aspects of rooftop space, including but not limited to hours of operation, range of activities permitted, signage and lighting fixtures, visual screening devices, sound mitigation, and other measures to ensure ongoing compliance with the findings.</p>

Requested Special Permits	Summarized Findings <i>(detailed zoning text in appendix)</i>
Central Square Overlay District: Reduction of parking and loading requirement (Sections 20.304.6 & 6.35.1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Total development authorized on the site is reduced to 90% of the maximum permitted on the lot or a cash contribution is made to the Central Square Improvement Fund in an amount equal to fifty (50) percent of the cost of construction of the parking spaces not provided. • Subject lot is sufficiently small in size as to contribute to a development pattern of diverse, small scale, new structures and the retention of existing structures. • Exemption from parking and loading requirements will result in a building design that is more appropriate to its location and the fabric of its neighborhood. • <i>Other Central Square Overlay District findings set forth above</i>
Central Square Overlay District: Special Permit for Formula Business (Sections 20.304.5.4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The design reflects, amplifies and strengthens the established historical character of existing buildings and storefronts in Central Square. • The particulars of the building or storefront design is varied from the formula or standard design of the chain in order to reflect the unique character and conditions of Central Square generally or the specific location in particular. • Standard elements of the enterprise defining it as a Formula Business are modified to respect and provide unique expressions of Central Square history and traditions as well as innovation in physical design and marketing that will distinguish the Central Square location from other locations of the Formula Business.
Central Square Overlay District: Bank frontage occupying more than 25 feet of building frontage facing Massachusetts Avenue or more than 30% of a lot's aggregate building frontage (Section 20.304.5.3.b)	<i>Central Square Overlay District findings set forth above</i>
Special Permit for exemption of basement area in the calculation of Gross Floor Area (GFA)	The uses occupying such exempted GFA support the character of the neighborhood or district in which the applicable lot is located.
General Special Permit Criteria (Section 10.43)	Special permits will be normally granted if the zoning requirements are met, unless it is found not to be in the public interest due to one of the criteria enumerated in Section 10.43.

Planning Board Comments from the Second Hearing

The following summarizes the key comment made by the Planning Board at the hearing on 4/27/2020 in addition to comments from staff memos:

- Explore design improvements for the fifth floor with massing adjustments to create additional light and sky view at the top floors of the adjacent building.

Staff Comments on New Materials

Planning and Zoning

The revised proposal retains the numerous aspects of the original proposal that the Planning Board found positive, and includes changes in response to many of the comments from Planning Board members and staff. The use and scale of the project remain largely the same, but there are further changes to the massing due to a partial step-back of the fifth floor (resulting in a reduction in GFA without any changes to the total number of guest rooms). The major focus of staff and the Applicant's team has been to further reduce impacts on the abutting residential building and improve the proposal's overall conformance with Central Square Action Plan and Development Guidelines.

Urban Design

- In the Planning Board's hearing on April 27, 2021, the applicant presented a scheme to address concerns about the project's impacts on the Cheryl-Ann's Place apartment building on the adjoining parcel to the north. A 10 foot stepback above the sixth-floor level was introduced for most of the length of the proposed building's north elevation. The tenant-accessible terrace that had been on the high roof in the previous scheme was eliminated, allowing the building's mechanical equipment to be moved away from the building's north side to the roof's center, fully enclosed within a visual and acoustical screen. The extension of the stairs and elevator to the high roof were eliminated.
- In the April 27th hearing, however, the Board continued to be concerned that despite the changes to the building's massing, it may still cast excessive shadow on residential units in the south side of the Cheryl-Ann's Place building. They recommended that additional changes to the building massing be studied to further reduce the extent of the shadows cast by the proposed building, including stepping back its fifth-floor volume on its north side.
- In response to the Board's comments, the applicant produced a new scheme, stepping back the building's fifth-floor volume by 4 feet. Together with the 10-foot stepback of the sixth-floor's volume, this will increase the sun and sky exposure of the residential units on the south side of the Cheryl-Ann's Place building. The terraces created by the stepbacks are not tenant accessible. The hotel's room count remains at the April 27th scheme's 36 units, but two fifth-floor one-bedroom units have been converted to studios and the building's overall gross area has been reduced by 290 square feet.
- In a meeting with CDD staff, numerous possible ways to further reduce the extent of the building's shadows were explored in detail, and further changes were made. The proposed fifth-floor stepback extends for the full east/west length of the sixth-floor stepback. The parapets on the north side of the building have been eliminated to further open the alley and the Cheryl-Ann's Place building to sun and sky. In addition, to reduce the sense that the elevator overruns

loom over the setback, they have been pulled slightly back from the plane of the sixth floor's setback wall.

- While revised shadow studies would allow a clearer understanding of the project's impact on the Cheryl-Ann's Place building, the changes since the last hearing will both reduce the shading of its south facing units and provide more sky view from them.

Continuing Review

The following is a summary of issues that staff recommends as conditions for ongoing design review by staff if the Board decides to grant the special permit:

- Review of all exterior materials, colors, alterations, and details with the Cambridge Historical Commission, and review of a materials mock-up by city staff prior to any exterior materials being ordered. Coordination of the mockup's location with city staff.
- Review of changes to the adjoining sidewalks and their features, including any new trees and the removal of the existing curb cut.
- Review of exterior lighting.
- Review of Interior lighting and window treatment on the façade facing the Temple Place Apartments.
- Review of visual/acoustical screening of rooftop mechanical equipment.
- Coordination with Cambridge Arts Council on the removal of its upper portion of the mural on the west wall of the existing building when the existing rooftop penthouse is demolished, and on protection of the remaining portion during construction.