



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

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To: City of Cambridge Planning Board
City of Cambridge Board of Zoning Appeals
From: Central Square Advisory Committee
Date: 12/7/2020
Re:

The Central Square Advisory Committee (the "Committee") met on Thursday, December 4, 2020 to discuss 698 Mass Ave, a 46 unit mixed-use building, and 600 Mass Ave, a ground floor retail space whose proposed use is a bank.

This meeting was conducted pursuant to the provisions of Section 20.300 of the Cambridge Zoning Ordinance. The Committee is appointed by the City Manager to undertake all large project reviews of variances and special permits for activities within the Central Square Overlay District (the "District"), and to monitor the progress of the Central Square Non-Zoning Recommendations of the 2013 K2C2 Study (the "Study").

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The meeting minutes from the Committee meeting are summarized below. Public comment was taken after each topic was discussed by committee members.

Topic 1: 600 Mass Ave

Presented by: Peter Quinn – Peter Quinn Architects, Kevin Crane – attorney

The presentation gave an overview of the proposed development at 698 Mass Ave, a six story mixed-use development with 46 residential units and approximately 46,000sf of commercial/retail and office space (at grade and basement level).

Summary of changes since November 2018 CSAC meeting

- Façade updates: Change from a contemporary gray brick façade with balconies to something more traditional that has a plain brick façade with extruding upper story bay windows.
- The building has become more contextual to fit in with the existing historic building stock in the area, especially along Mass Ave. The materials chosen are also more consistent with other buildings along Mass Ave.
- The differentiation between the retail/commercial ground floor and upper stories residential uses is more defined.
- An accessible courtyard will be present on Green St where there will be an active use at the ground floor. The plan involves rebuilding the single story rear façade on Green St.
- There has been a reduction of 6 residential units since the last version that was reviewed and a reduction of commercial square footage in the basement.
- No parking is being provided to accompany this project.

General Comments:

- Appreciates that the building fits within the square from an urban design sense. It has a high transparency at the ground floor and the height respects the other buildings.
- Likes the active ground floor but feels that it is boring and lacks a liveliness in its design. The renderings make it look dull. The back façade ground floor actually looks more interesting.

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- Some members commented on wanting to see some of the pops of color used on the rear make their way to the front, as well, such as in the prior version. They would like to see some minor suggestions in the design that relate the front façade to the side and rear facades of the building. Right now the transition between the traditional brick façade and gray panels on the side and rear is abrupt.
- Some member of the committee would like to see a little more design continuity between the front and back of the building.
- The architect discussed that the first version maintained a complementary relationship between the front and back aesthetically, but the newer version was recommended because it complements the adjacent buildings and character of the square.
- The rear courtyard could be an issue with the nuisance behavior on Green Street and a place for the unhoused population to congregate. The idea of a courtyard is welcome, but certain precautions should be taken, perhaps resolved through the design.
- General support for adding more housing to the square. Some member would like to see even more housing that is being proposed, e.g. a taller building.
- In general, there is an appreciation for a mix of unit sizes and the committee would advocate for that. At first there was a comment of the size of the units seeming larger; however, the architect explained that they are standard, in not small, in size.
- The committee is opposed to seeing the retail space become a bank. They would like tenants that contribute to the vitality of the square and become part of the Central Square community.
- The committee wants to ensure that the retail and residential have separate entrances on Mass Ave.
- There is also a question of the potential of the retail space on Green St. It will be the only retail space on Green St. How do they plan to make that work and what sort of tenant will occupy that space?
- Glad to see that Eversource utility vault is being reduced in size and please make it look nice.

Question and Answer

- **Question:** Green Street is a big social service node in Central Square. What are the concerns at Green St? There may be some nuisance behavior that has to be addressed.
 - **Answer:** To resolve the concern the architect has made the rear an active use with high transparency. It is an urban space with doorways and visibility. The prior version showed a gated entry, but that has since been removed.
- **Question:** This is the only retail on Green Street. What sort of tenant do you imagine moving into this space?
 - **Answer:** Ideally a tenant that can activate the street edge, but yes, it may be a challenge for it to be a typical retail space.
- **Question:** Will the yellow highlights only stay on the Green St side of the building?
 - **Answer:** Yes. The prior version brought that color to the front, but it has since been changed after consultation with the CDD.
- **Question:** Is it possible to have more three-bedroom units in the building?
 - **Answer:** They tried to increase the number of three-bedroom units, but it wasn't possible given the space constraints. They would have to lose other smaller units to do so. The smaller units are designed to appeal to tenants that don't rely on cars. Generally, a younger demographic.



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- **Question:** Is there a way to make the front of the building, especially the ground floor more dynamic? Right now, it seems a little dull and booring.
 - **Answer:** The architect will take that into consideration.
- **Question:** Have you considered exiting the building early in the morning and how people that live in the building might respond to the activity?
 - **Answer:** This building is separated by one retail space from Supreme Liquors (they are “two doors down”). It is assumed that residents will be aware of the conditions on the street and any nuisance activity in the square.
- **Question:** Will there be a concierge service for the building?
 - **Answer:** No, it will be a locked door with a key to enter the building.
- **Question:** Will there be any issues with anyone getting on the roof of the Chipotle building next door?
 - **Answer:** There isn’t any access to the adjacent roof unless someone went from the balconies of the units onto the roof.
- **Question:** What about tenants’ access to views if another building is built atop the Chipotle building.
 - **Answer:** That likely won’t be an issue as it wouldn’t be allowed and because it is the same owner. There will also be screen of the rooftop mechanicals so as not to disrupt the views.
- **Question:** How much will construction activity disrupt operations on the Mass Ave side of the building, both vehicular and pedestrian traffic?
 - **Answer:** Everything will be approached from the Green Street side of the building with respect to redevelopment of the site and construction. There will likely be some front scaffolding at some point, but most of the construction and staging will be from the back.
- **Question:** Is there a contribution to a parking fund, if you are not provided parking onsite?
 - **Answer:** If you build over 90% of permissible SF on the site, you have to contribute to a fund, but this building does not do that.

Public Comment

- There were a few comments on the design of the building and suggesting that the colors found on the rear of the building might be transitioned to the front of the building too. One member, in particular preferred the prior version because of the color palette and the presence of balconies on the front of the building. The CDD had advised the architect to revise the drawings to show a façade that is in keeping with the architectural character of Central Square and to eliminate the balconies.
- Two members of the public made a point to say that they preferred the new brick façade over the previous version.
- There were concerns expressed about the activity in front of Supreme Liquors and considering it is the same owner as the one developing the 600 Mass Ave site, are they able to do anything to resolve the nuisance of the retail store. This is a concern especially during COVID when we are trying to limit the prevalence of group activity.
- A member of the public had questions as to why the developer was not building over the Chipotle and Supreme Liquors sites. They were told that because Chipotle has a long term lease on their space, they would not be able to do so now. The retail space they are building over is currently vacant.
- One member of the public expressed that they felt the development was a positive because it brought residential uses to the square, but that it was not big enough. There



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is a greater need for residential in Central Square and this is an opportunity to do that. Wonders why they do not develop more of the site, which would include Chipotle site.

Committee Consensus

All member of the committee are in support of the project. They feel that additional residential development is needed in Central Square and more ground floor uses that are not banks are welcome additions. One committee member would like to see even greater density than is being proposed. All committee members expressed some concern about the viability of the Green Street commercial space even though they like the courtyard.

Topic 2: 698 Mass Ave

Presented by Patrick Barrett – attorney

- The project being presented is for a new occupant for the recently vacated Rodney's Bookstore space at 698 Mass Ave. The proposed use is for a bank, which would be relocated from across Mass Ave to this retail space (Citizens Bank). The proposed change will occupy approximately 3000sf of commercial/retail space at the ground level.
- The special permits being requested will increase the length of the storefront to greater than 25 feet and will use more than 30% of the building frontage. The applicant is also looking for a special permit for a formula business.
- Citizens Banks currently has ADA issues that need to be resolved and would like a smaller retail space. Despite the resistance to additional banks in Central Square, this would be a net neutral since it will only be a relocation of an existing bank.
- The front façade of the building will be updated with new awnings and storefront windows. It will have a more "subdued" presence according to the applicant.

General Committee Comments

- Committee members are disappointed to see Rodney's Bookstore close and even more so to see that it will potentially become a bank. They would prefer not to see any additional banks in the square since they detract from street life and imply that another local business will not be located in the square. Generally, local businesses are more attached the "community" than formula corporate businesses, in the opinion of the committee. However, the point was made by the applicant that the landlord of the building is very supportive of the business community in Central Square and has been instrumental in working with the BID during the COVID pandemic, Starlight Square and the opportunity events.
- Committee members expressed concerns about what will then happen with the vacated Citizen Bank space across the street. They feel that it will "deactivate" the sidewalk. The applicant is not aware of what the plans are for that space, and it is not the applicant's purview to address that situation. This was understood by the committee.
- Committee members were glad to see that there is not a vestibule for the ATMs since that often leads to the vestibules being occupied by people.
- Committee members would like to see the bank be a better corporate citizen and contribute to the Central Square community.
- There is a concern by the committee that this is just a lateral shift and not a contribution to the life of the square.
- They imagine that people will raise concerns about the ground floor treatment at the planning board. The applicant sees the green theme of Citizens as no different that the Target Red and that Citizens will need to express its corporate identity.



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Public Comment

- The members of the public were also curious to know what will become of the existing Citizens Bank space across the street, but understood that it is not the applicants responsibility to know the answer to that question.
- Aesthetically, the public had concerns about the design of the storefront.
 - They felt that the window graphics are unattractive and obscure the space inside.
 - They also felt that there is an overwhelming amount of green awning and that all of the branding seems unnecessary, and that it is “aggressive” corporate branding.

Committee Consensus

All committee members support the project; however, they are concerned with having additional banks in the square, and even though this isn't adding to the number of banks, it is taking up space that was occupied by a local retailer. The space vacated by Citizens Bank across the street is a concern for them, as it is a big unknown who might occupy that space in the future.

Also, while they support the project, members believe that there is too much pronounced green along the façade, primarily from the awning.

Additional Business

There was a suggestion that the next meeting involve a conversation around the surface parking lots in Central Square and what the future of them might be and could be.

Committee Members Present

- Robert Winters
- Joel Altstein
- Esther Hanig
- Michael Monestime
- Melissa Greene

Submitted on behalf of the Committee,
Drew Kane, Senior Land Use Planner
Community Development Department