



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

To: Planning Board

From: CDD Staff

Date: February 23, 2021

Re: Special Permit PB #373, 698 Massachusetts Avenue (parcel address – 706 Massachusetts Avenue)

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Submission Type: Special Permit Application

Applicant: Central Property Limited

Zoning District(s): Business B (BB) / Central Square Overlay District

Proposal Summary: Relocation of an existing branch of the Citizens Bank to a new location across the street on the first floor of 698 Massachusetts Avenue.

Special Permits Requested: Special Permit for a formula business use (20.304.5.4) and Special Permit to waive the limitations on bank frontages in the Central Square Overlay District (20.304.5.3.b). *A summary of the applicable special permit findings is listed on the following page. Applicable sections of the zoning are provided in an appendix.*

Other City Permits Needed: None being sought prior to building permit

Planning Board Action: Grant or deny requested special permits.

Memo Contents: Review of area planning and zoning, comments on proposal addressing planning, zoning, and urban design.

Other Staff Reports: N/A

Requested Special Permits	Summarized Findings <i>(see appendix for zoning text excerpts)</i>
Special Permit for Formula Business in Central Square Overlay District (Sections 20.304.5.4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design shall reflect, amplify, and strengthen the established historical character of existing buildings and store fronts in Central Square. • The particulars of the building or storefront design shall be 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. • The standard elements of the enterprise defining it as a Formula Business shall be 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.
Special Permit to waive restricted use of bank frontage in Central Square Overlay District (Sections 20.304.5.3.b)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvements are in conformance with objectives contained in <i>Central Square Development Guidelines and Central Square Action Plan</i> (see next page). • No National Register or contributing building is demolished or altered as to terminate or preclude its designation (either now or within the past 5 years). • Building and site designs adequately screen the parking provided and are sensitive to the contributing buildings in the vicinity.
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.

Area Planning and Zoning

C2 Study

The Central Square (“C2”) Study, completed in 2013, established specific planning goals for Central Square and provided recommendations related to retail diversity within Central Square, such as:

- Recommending a requirement for ground floor retail along Massachusetts Avenue; and
- Focusing on creating a framework of incentives for the inclusion of retail and/or active, ground-floor, community-serving uses such as childcare, arts, and nonprofit uses; and
- Supporting local businesses and preserving the unique identity of Central Square and its mix of small, independently owned shops and creative start-ups.

Central Square Restoration Zoning Petition

In February 2017, the City Council adopted zoning changes which helped to implement some of the planning goals identified above. These changes established new ground-story dimensional requirements for banks and financial institutions within Central Square. Such uses are limited to a maximum of twenty-five (25) feet of frontage facing Massachusetts Avenue and a maximum of 30% of the building's aggregate building frontage facing all public streets. The Planning Board may approve modifications by special permit.

The adopted zoning changes also included a new definition for "Formula Business", as follows:

Formula Business. *An individual Retail or Consumer Service establishment that is required by virtue of a contract, franchise agreement, ownership or other similar legal obligation to conform or substantially conform to a set of common design and operating features that serve to identify the establishment as one of a group of establishments for business, marketing and public relations purposes. Specifically, an establishment shall be considered a Formula Business if it shares at least two (2) of the following three (3) characteristics with ten (10) or more other establishments in Massachusetts or within twenty (20) or more other establishments.*

1. *Trademark, service mark or logo, defined as a word, phrase, symbol, or design or combination thereof that identifies and distinguishes the source of the goods or services from others;*
2. *Standardized building architecture including but not limited to façade design and signage;*
3. *Standardized color scheme used throughout the exterior of the establishment, including color associated with signs and logos.*

The zoning changes set forth that an entity meeting the definition of a Formula Business may only be established within the Central Square Overlay District through the issuance of a Planning Board special permit. The intent of such a regulation was to implement the planning goal of preserving the unique, eclectic retail landscape of Central Square.

Comments on the Proposal

Consistency with Planning & Zoning

Overall

This application is similar to a previous Planning Board application, PB-349, by Santander Bank in 2019. There, as here, an existing financial institution within Central Square proposed to relocate from one existing ground story tenant space to another nearby space also within Central Square.

Citizens Bank is currently located directly across the street in the Savings Bank building at 689 Mass Ave, and is proposing to relocate across the street to 698 Mass Ave, previously occupied by Rodney's Bookstore. The proposed relocation would result in Citizens Bank occupying approximately 80% of the building's Mass Ave frontage.

Scope of Proposed Changes

The ground story will be used for consumer banking uses. The entrance to the bank will be via the east entrance on the Mass Ave side of the building frontage, which will also contain a secure ATM transaction area.

On the exterior of the building, the existing storefront signage for Rodney's Bookstore will be removed and a green awning with an exterior light bar will be installed in its place. The bottom of the storefront windows will be altered to include a Citizens-branded vinyl window cling. The proposed entrance on the east side of the building will include a new sign band adhered onto the glass doors which reads "Citizens". To the left of the east entrance doors, a new, double-faced illuminated projecting sign is proposed to be installed, but it is unclear how it will be illuminated.

Special Permit Criteria

As mentioned above, this Application seeks a special permit to locate a formula business in the Central Square Overlay District, and a special permit for an individual bank or financial institution (Section 4.34e) to occupy more than twenty-five (25) linear feet of building frontage facing Mass Ave and more than 30% of the total frontage. Both special permits can be granted by the Planning Board in accordance with the criteria set forth in the Zoning Ordinance, summarized earlier in this memo.

The Applicant has provided a concise narrative which directly addresses some of the applicable criteria. The Application states that the proposed location represents an overall reduction in both Mass Ave frontage and square footage dedicated to the bank use compared to its location on the opposite side of the street, that the proposed design is "more muted" than the existing storefront, and that the proposed location is of a scale more appropriate to the retail pattern of the district.

However, the Application does not specify the proposed linear frontage or explain why the bank could not be designed to have more limited frontage and allow for smaller retail storefronts. It is unclear whether the proposed storefront would contain more or less signage, on a per-linear foot basis, than the current bank use at 689 Mass Ave and it is not clear how it compares to the previous retail use at 698 Mass Ave. It is also somewhat unclear what design approaches have been taken to distinguish the proposed storefront design from other Citizens Bank storefronts at other locations, or how the unique identity of Central Square is supported and reinforced by the proposed design.

Finally, the Application does not include a narrative that responds to the criteria for the Central Square Overlay District in Section 20.305, which reference the Central Square Action Plan and Central Square Development Guidelines. The Planning Board will need to find that the proposal is in general conformance with the City's plans and design guidelines for the area.

The Department of Public Works (DPW) has not submitted a report on this application, but will review the proposed physical changes to the building as part of the standard Building Permit process. Consistent with any project of this type, the DPW will be most interested in impacts to the Public Right of Way and public and private infrastructure needs of the project.

The Traffic, Parking & Transportation (TP&T) Department has not submitted a report on this application, but has provided some comments to CDD staff. As part of the Building Permit review, TP&T staff would

seek more information about the loading and delivery needs for the new use and a plan for maintaining the sidewalk near the ATM vestibule in order to manage snow and ice clearance, debris and trash removal, and security. TP&T also encourages promoting non-automobile transportation options for visitors and employees, such as providing bicycle parking or subsidy for employees who choose to commute by transit or bicycle.

Urban Design

Central Square is characterized by businesses with relatively narrow ground floor street frontages, creating a varied experience for pedestrians. The existing façade of 698 Massachusetts Avenue, with its pleasant pedestrian scale, appropriate materials, and highly glazed ground floor façade contributes to this pattern.

Citizens Bank is currently located across the street at 689 Massachusetts Avenue, a masonry building whose high opaque base does not offer significant views into the interior. In this location, the bank has little presence on the street other than its small ATM room, the bank's tall entrance in the center of the facade, and its signage. In contrast, due to the 698 Massachusetts Avenue building's much more transparent ground floor façade (which in accord with Central Square's design guidelines, the proposed design largely maintains), the bank use will be a more visible presence in Central Square in its new location.

The majority of 698 Massachusetts Avenue's ground floor frontage is proposed to be allocated to the bank, far exceeding the limitations of 25 feet and 30% of the building's frontage required by the Central Square Overlay District zoning. To mitigate this, the applicant could consider limiting the bank's frontage to only one of the building's two façade bays, and accommodating a separate active use in the other one.

The proposed canopy – colored the bold green of Citizens Bank's branding - extends continuously across the width of the façade, as does the decorative vinyl adhered to the lower portion of the storefront windows. This emphasis on horizontal unity across the width of the façade seems more attuned to the speed of vehicular traffic than to the pedestrian experience. In these respects, the design could be improved to strengthen the established historical character of existing buildings and storefronts in the rest of Central Square.

The canopy will be mounted in a close to vertical orientation, covering the signage zone above the ground floor windows, rather than extending horizontally to shelter the sidewalk. Due to its vertical mounting angle, its extension across the entire width of the building's facade, and the boldness of its color, the canopy appears likely to overpower the existing building's façade and ground floor shopfront. If a canopy is desired, consideration could be given to changing it to a more horizontal angle, and to making it retractable.

A horizontal lighting strip is proposed above the canopy, where it will illuminate its upper surface. Consideration could be given to instead locating the lighting below the canopy, where rather than

further emphasizing horizontal unity across the width of the façade, it would instead illuminate the pedestrian sidewalk and the building's ground floor façade.

The green color is also applied to the interior of the bank's entrance/ATM vestibule. As the vestibule is highly glazed, this interior space will have a significant impact on the pedestrian experience. Consideration could be given to reducing the extent of the green color.

Additional documentation of the proposed design would facilitate a full evaluation of the proposal, including an existing and proposed floor plan; a drawing of the proposed elevation with materials noted and colors indicated; a description of the proposed changes to the elevation including any changes to glazing or to the 700 Massachusetts Avenue entrance; a site plan showing the sidewalk, street trees, benches, etc. and any changes proposed to them; a depiction and description of any proposed exterior lighting besides the "Light Bar" proposed above the canopy or any changes to the existing exterior lighting ; plans and a description of any proposed changes to exterior components of the building's mechanical systems; and documentation of typical Citizens Bank installations for comparison to the proposed project

Continuing Review

The following is a summary of issues that staff recommends should be further studied by the Applicant, either in preparing revised materials if the Planning Board continues the hearing to a future date, or as conditions for ongoing design review by staff if the Board decides to grant the special permit:

- Additional factual information directly responding to the criteria in Sections 20.305 and 20.304.5.4 of the Zoning Ordinance, if needed for the Board to make the necessary findings.
- Review of proposed design drawings for changes to the building's exterior.
- Review of exterior materials and colors.
- Review of the proposed canopy, including its attachments to the existing façade.
- Review of exterior lighting.
- Review of all exterior signage and attachments, and façade alterations and details with staff at the Cambridge Historical Commission.
- Review of site plan.
- Review of proposed floor plan.
- Comparison to typical Citizens Bank installations on other sites.
- A plan for anticipated loading and delivery operations of the bank.
- A plan for bicycle parking for employees and patrons of the bank.
- A maintenance plan for the sidewalk in the area surrounding the proposed ATM vestibule.