



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

To: Planning Board

From: CDD Staff

Date: August 16, 2023

Re: Special Permit **PB-397, 2161 Massachusetts Avenue** (continued from 6/6/2023)

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Overview

Submission Type: Special Permit Application

Applicant: Nelson Group Companies

Zoning District(s): Business A-2 (small portion in Residence B); Massachusetts Avenue Overlay District

Proposal Summary: Relocate the existing building and construct a new addition to develop a mixed-use building with 8 dwelling units, ground floor office space and 7 off-street parking spaces. The final gross floor area would be 9,786 square feet.

Special Permits Requested: Section 20.110.6.2 Additional FAR for a lot containing a historic structure in BA-2 District in Massachusetts Avenue Overlay District
Section 6.44.1(g) modification of required setbacks for on grade open parking facilities

Other City Permits Needed: Historical Commission

Planning Board Action: Grant or deny requested special permits.

Memo Contents: CDD Zoning Report & Urban Design Report

Other Staff Reports: None

Zoning Section	Required Planning Board Findings <i>(Summary - see appendix for zoning text excerpts)</i>
Special Permit for additional FAR for a lot containing a historic structure in BA-2 District in Massachusetts Avenue Overlay District (Section 20.110.6.2)	<p>The Planning Board may grant a special permit to increase the allowed FAR in the BA-2 Districts, but not to exceed 1.75, for any combination of permitted uses upon finding that the increased FAR would:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) facilitate the preservation of the historic structure through economic reuse, (b) preserve the essential historically significant elements of the structure's architecture and setting, (c) introduce uses that are respectful of the structure's historic character, and (d) advance the stated purpose of the Massachusetts Avenue Overlay District and the purpose of the standards applicable in the BA-2 Districts.
Special Permit to allow for modification of required setbacks for on grade open parking facilities (Section 6.44.1(g))	<p>The Board of Zoning Appeal may grant a special permit to allow for modifications of the requirements in 6.44.1 (a) or (b) if site specific factors favor such modifications.</p> <p>6.44.1 (a) No on grade open parking space shall be located within ten (10) feet of that portion of a building wall containing windows of habitable or occupiable rooms at basement or first story. However, on grade open parking spaces serving one, two, or three family dwellings may be located within five (5) feet of that portion of such building wall.</p> <p>6.44.1 (b) Except for one, two, or three family dwellings existing at the time of the effective date of this Ordinance or amendment thereto, no on grade open parking space or driveway shall be located within five (5) feet of any side or rear property line.</p>
General Special Permit Criteria (Section 10.43)	<p>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:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (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

Zoning Section	Required Planning Board Findings <i>(Summary - see appendix for zoning text excerpts)</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">(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.

Revised Proposal

Overview

On June 6, 2023, the Planning Board held a public hearing on an application by Nelson Group Companies to relocate the existing building and construct a new addition to develop a mixed-use building with 8 dwelling units, ground floor office space and 7 off-street parking spaces on 2161 Massachusetts Avenue. The project proposes to relocate the existing historic building on the same lot and increase the allowed FAR, not to exceed 1.75, within the Business A-2 (BA-2) and Massachusetts Avenue Overlay District (MAOD), which requires a special permit from the Planning Board pursuant to Section 20.110.62 of the Zoning Ordinance.

The project also proposes to construct surface parking within 10 feet of a building wall containing habitable windows on the first floor, which requires a special permit pursuant to Section 6.44.1(g) of the Zoning Ordinance.

Following a presentation from the Applicant, testimony from the public, and review of written materials from City staff, the Planning Board voted to continue the public hearing to a future date, with requests that the Applicant further explore the following site design elements:

- Opportunities to redesign or reduce the parking area to comply with the setback requirements of Section 6.44.1 or request special permit to modify those requirements;
- Alternative colors for roof and façade including matching existing brick;
- Ability to screen the transformer and bicycle parking area;
- Preservation of the magnolia tree at the western corner of the lot.

Zoning Comments

Key Revisions

The Applicant has submitted revised plans and an updated narrative which addresses the Board's previous comments, as follows:

Parking setbacks – The Applicant has submitted a request for a special permit to modify the parking layout requirements under Section 6.44.1(g). The parking area has not been redesigned since the initial submission, which abuts the rear of the building and the lot line. The applicant states that the width of the lot and the footprint of the building make it impossible to adhere to the setback requirements of Section 6.44.1(a) and (b). The Applicant also emphasizes that neighbors strongly preferred that parking be provided on site and the requested special permit would allow for that parking to occur. In order to accommodate the parking while minimizing potential impact on adjacent residential units in the building, the Applicant has adjusted the first floor windows facing the parking area. According to the interior floor plans included in the revised submission, the windows of the ground floor unit that face the parking area look into the kitchen/living area. The bedroom abutting the parking area only has windows on the street side of the building, minimizing the impacts on sleeping residents. It is also unclear whether the proposed parking layout also conforms to the screening requirements in Section 6.47 or the landscaping requirements in Section 6.48 for on-grade, off-street parking lots consisting of at least five spaces. Should the proposed parking area not conform to these requirements, additional relief would need to be sought from the Board of Zoning Appeal (BZA) prior to the Project obtaining a building permit.

Roof and Façade Colors – The Applicant has provided additional renderings that show an alternative lighter gray color for the addition façade and roof. The renderings also show the brick as a more yellowish color than the initial submission, which more accurately matches the existing brick.

Transformer and Bicycle Parking Screen – The updated renderings do not include any screening for the transformer or bicycle parking area.

Tree Preservation – The new plans and renderings all illustrate that the existing magnolia tree on the corner of Mass Ave and Milton Street will be preserved and a tree protection plan has been submitted with the revised special permit application. The renderings also include an additional street tree on Mass Ave that isn't identified in the plans.

As noted in the previous zoning memo on this case, if the Board decides to grant the special permit, the following list summarizes the general categories of conditions recommended for this development based on the requested special permits:

1. **Approved Development:** Authorized development would need to conform with the submitted application materials. An Approved Dimensional Form would be attached as an Appendix. As noted earlier in this memo, the inconsistencies identified between the dimensional form and the plan set would need to be clarified prior to the special permit decision being filed with the Clerk's office.
2. **Permitted Uses:** The special permit would authorize a specified range of uses, which includes multifamily residential uses and general office uses on the ground floor. In the future, uses that are allowed by zoning but not authorized by the special permit would require Planning Board approval, and uses that are limited by the Zoning Ordinance (e.g., requiring a separate special permit from the Planning Board or BZA) would need to seek the necessary relief.
3. **Design Review:** CDD staff would review and approve design details at the construction documents phase, prior to issuance of a building permit, to certify that the plans conform to the Planning Board's approval. Board members may cite specific areas of focus for detailed review, based on the Urban Design Report and Board discussion.
4. **Transportation and Infrastructure:** Work being done on City property would be subject to review and approval by appropriate City departments, including DPW, TP+T and CDD. Should the Applicant's plans for stormwater management result in site changes that substantially differ from what is approved by the Planning Board, then the proposal would need to return to the Planning Board for a design update or special permit amendment.
5. **Sustainability:** Development will not be subject to the Green Building Requirements in Section 22.20 or Green Roof Requirements in Section 22.35 because the project is less than 25,000 square feet. The project will be subject to Green Factor requirements in Section 22.90 and will be reviewed again at the building permit stage.

Urban Design Comments

In response to comments, several design changes have been made and additional materials provided.

The Site Plan is unchanged from the 3/27/2023 drawings

- Efforts should be made to screen the transformer, which still immediately adjoins the Mass Ave sidewalk. If possible, it should be moved deeper into the site.
- Low planting is proposed along the Mass Ave sidewalk edge. Explore if any of the well-grown existing hedges be transplanted.
- Consider providing a narrow strip of low planting be provided between the short-term bicycle parking spaces and the building.
- The vertical and horizontal/sloped members of the railing at the steps and ramps to the west entrance door appear to be very heavy. A review of railings in other Art Moderne buildings may suggest a more compatible design.
- Facades
 - Several changes were made to window locations, some in response to the adjacency of the parking lot. The windows on the north side facing the parking lot are differently arranged, mostly in pairs instead of single. There are second floor windows than previously, and fewer first floor windows.
 - A window was added a window on the 3rd floor south side.
 - A window was added a window on the 3rd floor west side.
 - The renderings show two different shades of grey for the top floor of the addition, and the horizontal bands that run between first and second floor windows. The lighter shade seems preferable.
 - On the revised drawings, the vertical standing seams of the third floor siding are more closely spaced than on the previous application. The current version seems preferable.
- Plans – the unit plans have been filled in.
 - The first floor north side unit [101] living room is located in the middle of the north façade, its only windows face the parking lot. Its bedroom is at the building's northwest corner. It might be better to switch them, so that the living room faces the street and the bedroom faces the parking lot.

Continuing Review

The following are additional recommendations for ongoing design review by staff if the Board decides to grant the special permit:

- Review of all exterior materials, details, and colors by city staff and the Planning Board, including a material wall mock-up on site prior to any exterior materials being ordered.
- Review of systems to accommodate stormwater.
- Review of the design of the addition's facades, with particular attention to the third floor.
- Review of all work on the existing building by CDD staff and the Cambridge Historical Commission, including issues involved in moving the existing building, repairs to brick and pointing, the design and installation of windows, railings, etc.
- Review of sitework, including layout, paving materials, and plantings.
- Review of any exterior lighting.
- Review of screening for mechanical.
- Review of the potential for an additional street tree on Mass Ave.
- Review of the curb cut.
- Review of bicycle parking.