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# CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

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To: Planning Board

From: CDD Staff

Date: June 8, 2023

Re: Special Permit **PB-398, 55 Washburn Avenue**

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Community Development

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Deputy Director  
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## Overview

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Submission Type: Special Permit Application

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Applicant: Antje Danielson

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Zoning District(s): Residence B

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Proposal Summary: Construct a single-family residence greater than 75 feet from the front line and to the rear of an existing single-family residence.

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Special Permits Requested: Special Permit for more than one structure containing a principal residential use (Section 5.53.2)

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Other City Permits Needed: BZA variance granted

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Planning Board Action: Grant or deny requested special permits.

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Memo Contents: CDD Zoning Report & Urban Design Report

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Other Staff Reports: Department of Public Works (DPW) in separate documents.

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Zoning Section	<b>Required Planning Board Findings</b> <i>(Summary - see appendix for zoning text excerpts)</i>
Special Permit for more than one structure containing a principal residential use (Section 5.53.2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The development of two structures on the lot will not significantly increase the impact of the new construction should it occur in a single structure, <u>OR</u></li> <li>• The development of two structures will provide identifiable benefits beyond that provided by construction in a single structure, considering the following:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Extent to which preservation of a large contiguous open space in the rear of the lot or series of adjacent lots is achieved</li> <li>○ Incentives to locate buildings and parking in the front half of a lot per the prevailing development pattern in the neighborhood</li> <li>○ Providing an enhanced living environment for residents on the lot</li> <li>○ Incentives to retain existing structures, particularly structures that are preferably preserved</li> <li>○ Opportunities to reduce visual impact of parking from the public street and adjacent lots</li> <li>○ Opportunities to reduce height and bulk of new construction is deeper into a lot or closer to structures on abutting lots</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Conforms to general criteria for issuance of a special permit.</li> </ul>
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: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) It appears that requirements of this Ordinance cannot or will not be met, or</li> <li>(b) traffic generated or patterns of access or egress would cause congestion, hazard, or substantial change in established neighborhood character, or</li> <li>(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</li> <li>(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</li> <li>(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</li> <li>(f) the new use or building construction is inconsistent with the Urban Design Objectives set forth in Section 19.30.</li> </ul>

## Zoning & Development Staff Report

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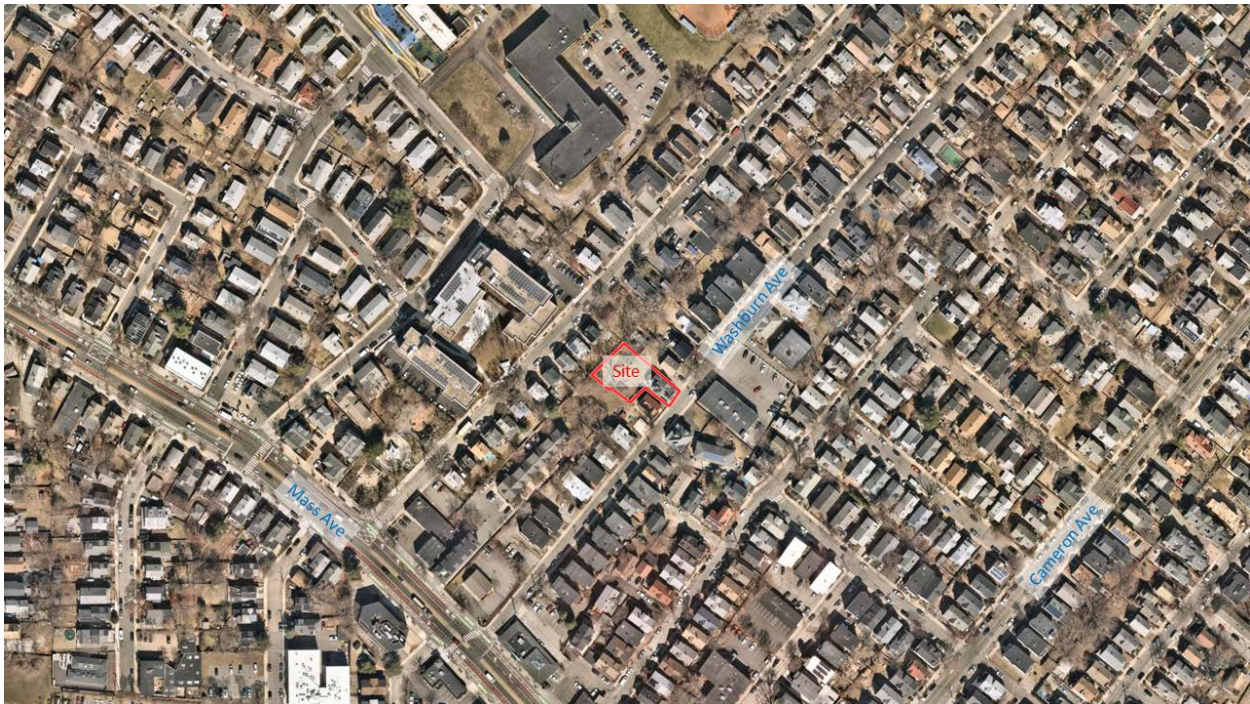
### Area Planning and Zoning

#### Site Context

Neighborhood/Area: North Cambridge

Development Patterns: Predominantly residential development consisting of single, two- and multifamily structures built close to the street line.

Nearby Features: The site is generally located between Mass Ave to the southwest and the Somerville municipal boundary to the northeast. The site is approximately ¼ mile north of Linear Park and 1/3 mile east of Alewife Brook Parkway. The nearest MBTA bus stop is approximately ¼ mile away on Mass Ave and the site is roughly ¾ mile northwest of the Davis Square MBTA station.

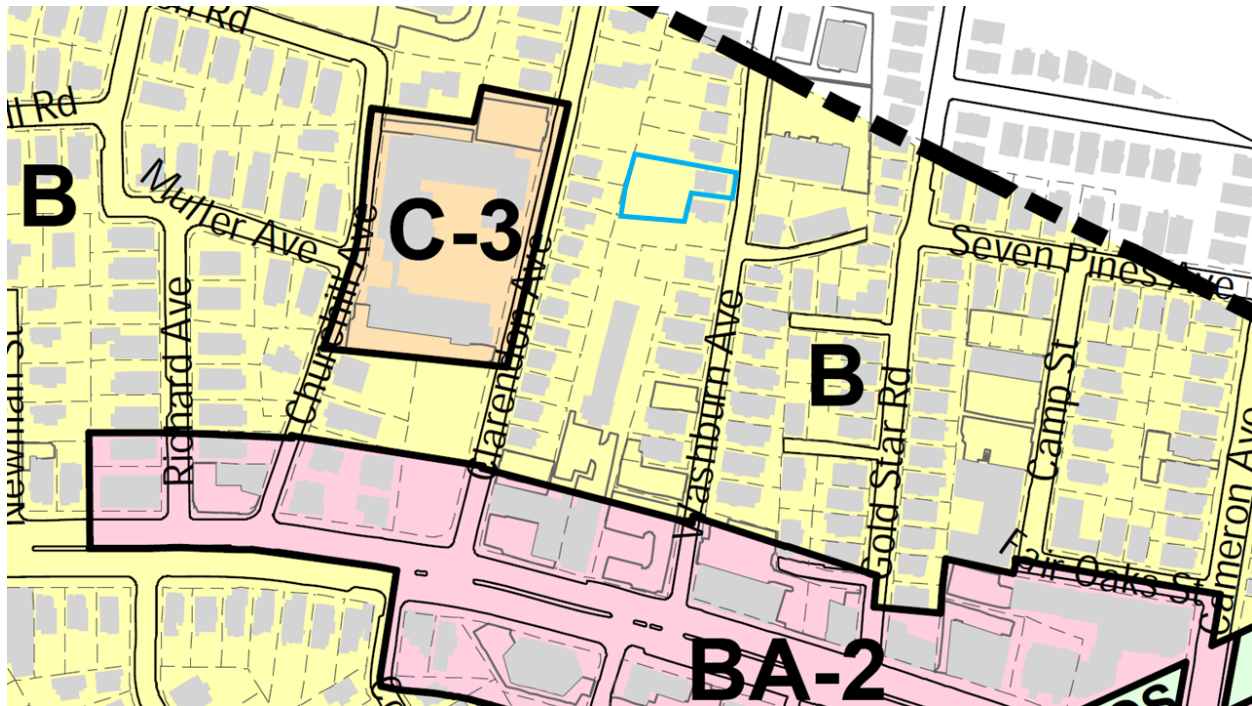


*Aerial Context Map showing 55 Washburn Avenue. Source: Nearmap 2023*

**Site Zoning**

General description: Residence B is a low intensity residential district which permits one and two-family dwellings by-right, and townhouse dwellings (with Planning Board approval for developments of 6 or more units).

	Base District
District(s):	Residence B
Allowed Uses:	Single, Two-Family and Townhouse Dwellings.
Max. Building Height	35'
Max. FAR/GFA	0.5 (reduced to 0.35 for portions of the lot over 5,000 SF)
Max. Unit Density	1 unit per 2,500 SF lot area (reduced to 1 unit per 4,000 SF for portions of the lot over 5,000 SF)
Required Setbacks	Front – 15'; Side 7'6" (sum of 20); Rear 25'
Required Open Space	40%
Other District Standards or Requirements	N/A



Site overview. Source: Zoning Map, City of Cambridge

**Current Proposal**

**Overview**

The site currently contains a three-story gable house constructed in the early 1900s as a two-family dwelling. In 2021 the Applicant converted the existing structure to a single-family dwelling with an accessory unit. The proposal includes the preservation of the existing structure and construction of a 2.5-story single-family modular structure in the rear yard of the existing dwelling. The proposed rear yard dwelling is sited to preserve a large canopy tree in the rear yard.

The proposal does not include additional vehicular parking but does include a bike shed. Access to the new structure is proposed to be a narrow path between the northeastern side of the existing building and the property line.

**Consistency with Development Plans and Guidelines**

Infill rear yard residential development in Residence B neighborhoods helps to implement broader City planning goals of increasing housing production without disrupting the overall prevailing development pattern of the neighborhood.

**Consistency with Zoning Requirements**

The proposal has the following dimensional characteristics:

Dimension	Proposal	Requirement	Relief Sought?
Lot Area	8,697 SF	5,000 SF	None
Gross Floor Area (GFA)	3,754 SF	3,794 SF max	None
Floor Area Ratio (FAR)	0.43	0.44 max	None
Height	33' Building 1 (existing); 33' Building 2	35'	None
Setbacks	Building 1 (existing): 3.7' front*; 7.9' left side; 6.2' right side*  Building 2: 74' front; 48.4' left side; 7.5' right side; 35' rear	15' front; 7.5' side; 35' rear	None*
Open Space	67%	40%	None
Off-Street Parking	1 space	0 spaces	None

\*Preexisting nonconforming

**Special Permits**

In a Residence B district, the Zoning Ordinance permits more than one structure containing a principal residential use on a lot. However, if the second structure is located more than seventy-five feet from the street line, a Planning Board Special Permit is required.

The criteria for approval of the special permit include: whether the development of two or more structures will reduce the potential impact of new construction should it occur in a single structure; whether two or more structures provide additional benefits beyond the construction of a single structure; whether the development of two or more structures helps to maintain a pattern of development that is compatible with the existing development pattern in the neighborhood; whether the development of two or more structures enhances the living environment for residents; and whether the visual impact of parking and the structure's height and bulk can be minimized in the development of more than one structure.

The Application notes that the development of a second structure, as opposed to an addition to the existing structure, will conform to the prevailing development patterns of the neighborhood in terms of height and bulk. A single structure solution would result in a long structure that would be unlike any other property on Washburn Avenue. The Application notes that the siting of the second structure preserves a large contiguous open space in the back yard, including a large shade tree. Furthermore, the Application notes that the two-structure proposal allows for both buildings to have windows on four sides, allowing for more light and air to enhance the living conditions of each home. The proposed structure is of a similar modest scale to existing structures in the neighborhood and is smaller than the existing structure on the site.

#### ***Other Zoning Requirements***

The proposal is subject to the new Green Factor Standard, which is proposed to be met primarily through the preservation of existing trees and planting of new trees on the property. The Green Factor Certification is attached to this memo.

#### ***Community Engagement***

The Applicant held two community meetings at the property on April 19, 2022 and May 24, 2022. Flyers were hand-delivered or mailed to direct abutters, the North Cambridge Stabilization Committee, and the Alewife Study Group. The Application notes that no objections or concerns were raised at either community meeting about the proposal but there were some questions about the construction plan and requests to keep the neighbors informed as the project progresses.

### **Special Permit Conditions**

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.
2. **Continuing 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.
3. **Non-Zoning Requirements:** The development would need to comply with all other applicable City Ordinances, such as the Noise Ordinance and Tree Protection Ordinance.



## Appendix - Zoning Text Excerpts

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### Special Permit for More than One Structure Containing a Principal Residential Use

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**5.53** In Residence A-1 and Residence A-2 districts, only one structure containing a principal use shall be allowed on a lot.

In Residence B districts only one structure containing a principal residential use shall be allowed on a lot except as set forth below:

1. More than one structure containing a principal residential use shall be allowed on a lot provided all portions of all structures are located no farther than seventy-five (75) feet from any street line to which the lot abuts. However, those elements of a structure that are permitted to extend into required yards as set forth in Section 5.24.2, may extend in a similar manner beyond the seventy-five foot limit.
2. By special permit from the Planning Board provided the Board finds
  - (a) that development in the form of two or more structures on the lot will not significantly increase or may reduce the impact of the new construction should it occur in a single structure; or
  - (b) That two or more structures may provide identifiable benefits beyond that provided should all construction be in a single structure. In making its findings the Board shall consider the impact of the new construction on the following:
    - (1) the extent to which the preservation of a large contiguous open space in the rear of the lot or series of adjacent lots is achieved through the provision of a rear yard setback significantly greater than that required and through the dedication of that rear yard as Green Area, as defined in this Ordinance,
    - (2) incentives for the location of buildings and parking facilities in the front half of a lot in a pattern compatible with the development pattern prevailing in the neighborhood,
    - (3) the extent to which two or more structures provides an enhanced living environment for residents on the lot,
    - (4) incentives to retain existing structures on a lot, particularly any structure determined to be a Preferably Preserved Significant structure by the Cambridge Historical Commission,
    - (5) the opportunities presented to reduce the visual impact of parking from the public street and from adjacent lots,
    - (6) The increased opportunities to reduce the height and bulk as new construction is deeper into a lot or closer to structures on abutting lots.

In Residence A-1, A-2 and B districts there shall be no limit on the number of those structures on a lot that contain principal nonresidential uses exclusively, provided all other requirements of this Zoning Ordinance are met.



### **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
- (g) 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
- (h) the new use or building construction is inconsistent with the Urban Design Objectives set forth in Section 19.30.

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

## Urban Design Staff Report

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### Urban Design Comments

#### Site Design and Landscaping

The project utilizes similar siting strategies as comparable infill projects in North Cambridge. Preservation of the existing dwelling maintains the streetscape character, while the new dwelling is barely noticeable from the street. The generous rear yard setback, and the setback from the existing significant tree, results in the two dwellings being relatively close together. However, preservation of the existing canopy tree and the contiguous open space are considered urban design priorities for the site. The new dwelling is oriented to the southwest, so that it takes advantage of the large open space area.

Overall, the site and landscaping changes are very modest, including new trees along the side of the rear dwelling. Unlike other similar projects, this proposal takes advantage of the recently adopted zoning amendment to remove minimum off-street parking requirements, and provides no additional vehicular parking. Pedestrian access to the rear dwelling will occur along a pathway down the northeast property line. As this access seems a little constrained and hidden, the potential to give the rear dwelling its own sense of address and more prominence could be explored. If feasible, this could include the removal of the existing side porch, and an ornamental gate or trellis to provide a formal street address. Use of permeable pavers for all new hardscape areas should also be considered.

#### Building Design

The second dwelling has a modest footprint, and the proposed simple massing and two and a half story building height emulate neighboring structures. It is designed with traditional materials and details, which is in keeping with the style of the existing dwelling and the surrounding built form character. While the details are unclear, if possible, the roof pitch of the new dwelling should match that of the existing dwelling. There could also be some potential finetuning of the southwest(front) façade of the new home to ensure that privacy between the two dwellings is optimized.

### Continuing Review

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

- All landscape details, including proposed plantings, hardscape materials, fences, exterior lighting, etc.
- Details, materials, and colors of all architectural elements.
- Any necessary acoustic screening of air conditioning condensers.

**Green Factor Standard** - Article 22.000, Section 22.90 of Cambridge Zoning Ordinance

**Certification for Green Factor Standard - Special Permit Stage**

**Project:** 55 Washburn Avenue

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**CDD Determination and/or comments for Special Permit submission**

The Community Development Department (CDD) received the Green Factor Report (GFR) for the Special Permit stage. Pursuant to Section 22.96 of the Zoning Ordinance, CDD staff have reviewed the project's GFR and provide the following Determination and Summary of Compliance.

**CDD Determination: The documentation provided by the Applicant is adequate and demonstrates compliance with the Green Factor Standard applicable to the Special Permit stage.**

**Summary of Compliance:**

- Solar Reflectance Index of Roof – proposed roof is entirely high slope roof
- Cool Score – 1.03