



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

To: Planning Board

From: CDD Staff

Date: January 4, 2024

Re: Special Permit **PB-401, 655 Massachusetts Avenue (Dunkin' Donuts)**

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Community Development

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Overview

Submission Type: Special Permit Application

Applicant: Beantown Donuts LLC dba Dunkin Donuts

Zoning District(s): Business B; Central Square Overlay District

Proposal Summary: Establish a Formula Business that occupies 1259 square feet on the ground floor of an existing building

Special Permits Requested: Formula Business (20.304.5(4))

Other City Permits Needed: None

Planning Board Action: Grant or deny requested special permits.

Memo Contents: CDD Zoning Report & Urban Design Report

Other Staff Reports: None

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Zoning Section	Required Planning Board Findings <i>(Summary - see appendix for zoning text excerpts)</i>
Central Square Overlay District: Formula Business Special Permit (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: Criteria for Issuance of Special Permits (Section 20.305)	<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.” • Building and site designs adequately screen the parking provided and are sensitive to the contributing buildings in the vicinity. <p>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>

Zoning Section	Required Planning Board Findings <i>(Summary - see appendix for zoning text excerpts)</i>
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(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.

Zoning & Development Staff Report

Area Planning and Zoning

Site Context

Neighborhood/Area: Central Square

Development Patterns: The site is located on the eastern side of Central Square at the intersection of Massachusetts Avenue and Prospect Street. The site is part of a 3-story, mixed-use, multi-tenant building that contains Central Square Florist, John's Barber Shop and Donut Villa Diner on the ground floor. The building is located on a block with two- or three-story brick and frame buildings with a mix of retail and consumer service uses, with office space and residential uses above the ground story.

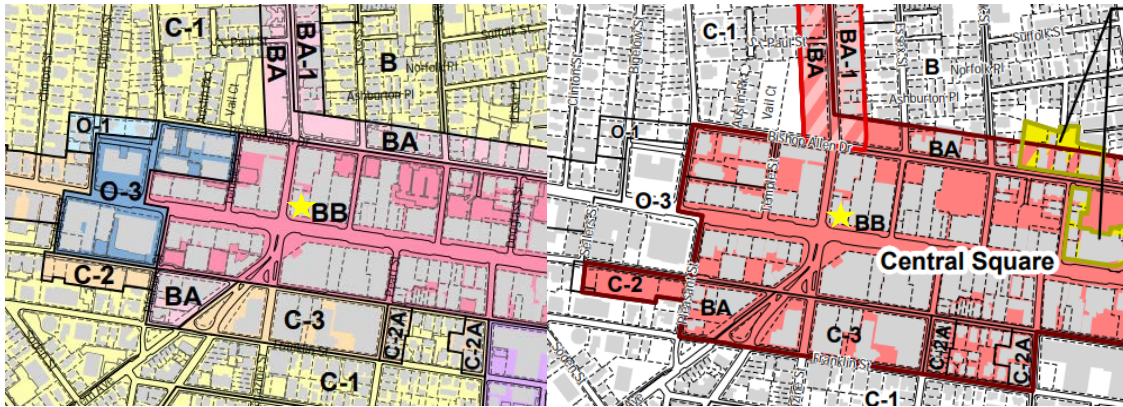
Nearby Features: The site is located across the street from Carl Barron Plaza. The MBTA Central Square station headhouse, a stop for the Route 1 MBTA bus and a Bluebikes station are located adjacent to the east side of the building.



Aerial Context Map showing 655 Massachusetts Avenue. Source: Nearmap, 2023.

Site Zoning

General description: The base zoning for the site is Business B (BB). Business B allows a wide range of typical neighborhood business uses, as well as office and residential uses. The district development standards allow higher-density development, with maximum heights up to 80 feet and floor-area ratios (FAR) up to 3.00. The site is also in the Central Square Overlay District, which modifies base zoning provisions both as-of-right and by special permit.



Zoning Map (left) and Overlay Zoning Map (right). (Source: City of Cambridge)

Development Plans & Guidelines

- [Central Square Overlay District](#). The Central Square Overlay District (CSOD) was created in 1989 following a planning study that established development goals and guidelines for the area; it was most recently amended in 2017. There are a variety of plans and guidelines focused on Central Square, including the [Central Square Planning Study - C2 \(2013\)](#), the [Central Square Action Plan](#), and the [Central Square Development Guidelines](#). Overall, these documents envision a Central Square with a strong retail base made up of local, independent retailers; an active arts community; vibrant public spaces; new development that is compatible with the existing historic character of the square; and a diverse range of housing types.
- [Formula Business](#). The definition of “Formula Business” was added to the Zoning Ordinance in as part of the 2017 amendments to the CSOD. The Zoning Ordinance requires that a special permit be obtained prior to a Formula Business use being located within the CSOD. The special permit for a Formula Business applies to the entity itself rather than an overall use category. Therefore, if an existing Formula Business is replaced by a different Formula Business, a new special permit is required.

Current Proposal

Overview

Beantown Donuts LLC (the “Applicant”) proposes to operate a Fast Order/Quick-Service Food Establishment in the space formerly occupied by Starbucks at 655 Massachusetts Avenue, consisting of approximately 1259 square feet. While Fast Order/Quick-Service Food Establishments are allowed as of-right by the Zoning Ordinance, the Applicant is a Formula Business and therefore needs a special permit from the Planning Board. Minor exterior modifications are shown and new signage is proposed. No changes to the pre-existing use or building dimensions are proposed. Details on the retail fit out, including proposed floor plans and sign plans, have been submitted by the Applicant. Planning Board Special Permits within the Central Square Overlay District require review by the Central Square Advisory Committee (CSAC). CSAC issued a positive recommendation with additional comments.

Special Permits

Formula Business Special Permit

Cambridge zoning defines a Formula Business as “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.”

The zoning effectively creates a two-part test to determine if a business is a Formula Business:

- 1) The number of establishments (either 10 or more within Massachusetts or 20 or more globally); and
- 2) Whether there exists a legal obligation to conform to a set of common branding, design or operating features, such as trademarks/logos, standardized architecture and signage, and/or standardized colors.

The criteria for granting a Formula Business special permit in the Central Square Overlay District focus on the extent to which the proposal is unique to Central Square. The Application notes that the proposed signage is in keeping with the existing building façade and includes a more muted color palate than is typical for other Dunkin’ Donuts locations. The Urban Design report includes additional commentary on the proposed building design and signage.

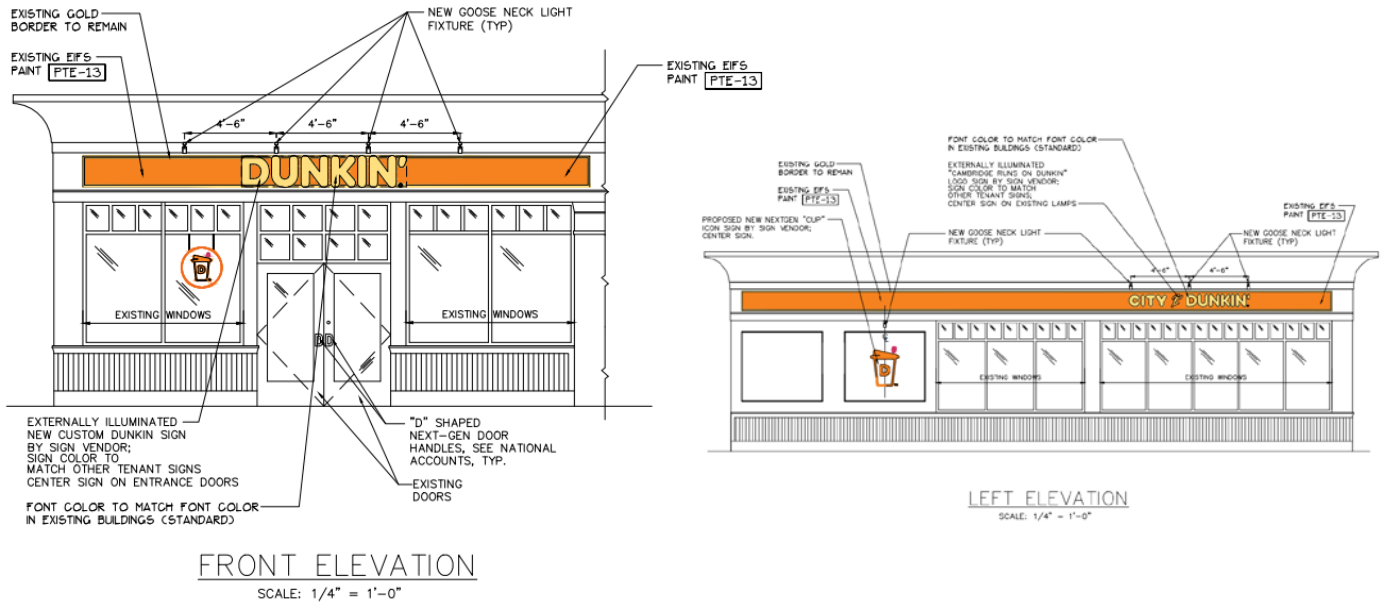
Advisory Review

Central Square Advisory Committee (CSAC) Review and Comment

On October 4, 2023, pursuant to the provisions of Section 20.300 of the Cambridge Zoning Ordinance, the Central Square Advisory Committee reviewed and commented on this project in advance of the Applicant’s request for a Formula Business special permit from the Planning Board. No public comments were received by CSAC. The Committee voted to forward a report to the Planning Board with a positive recommendation. CSAC members were supportive of the proposed retail use and raised no major concerns. The original proposal to CSAC included more square footage of signage with an orange

background, as well as illuminated window signs. There was some disagreement among members, with some liking the prominent use of orange and others not liking it. The committee came to consensus on recommending a more subdued black signage band with orange window signage. Despite these minor aesthetic disagreements, the Committee was enthusiastic for an active retail use on this prominent corner.

Previous Proposal Shown to CSAC



Plan Sheet A-5.0, dated August 13, 2023 and prepared by James D. Smith Architects



Plan Sheet A-5.0, dated October 2, 2023 and prepared by James D. Smith Architects

Community Engagement

According to the Applicant’s community engagement summary, a virtual pre-application community meeting was held via Zoom on October 11, 2023 and in-person at the retail location on October 12, 2023. The applicant noted that no members of the public attended either meeting. Standard notice was provided by the Applicant to abutters.

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. Urban design staff specifically recommend ongoing design review of exterior lighting, all exterior signage details, including attachments, and any new exterior colors, materials, and details.
3. Formula Business: The special permit would specifically authorize Dunkin Donuts as the approved Formula Business use at this location. The Board's approval of this Formula Business would not be transferrable to a different entity or use.

Appendix - Zoning Text Excerpts

Special Permit for Establishing a Formula Business in Central Square Overlay District

20.305.5(4) Formula Business District. A Formula Business as defined in this Ordinance may be established in the Central Square Overlay District only after the issuance of a special permit from the Planning Board. In reviewing an application the Planning Board shall take the following into consideration:

- a. The extent to which the design of the proposal reflects, amplifies, and strengthens the established historical character of existing buildings and store fronts in Central Square.
- b. The extent to which 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.
- c. The extent to which the standard elements of the enterprise as they define 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.

Issuance of Special Permit in Central Square Overlay District

20.305 *Standards for Issuance of Special Permits.* In addition to the general standards for the issuance of a special permit found in Section 10.40 of the Zoning Ordinance, the special permit granting authority shall in addition make the following findings:

1. The proposed development is consistent with the goals and objectives of the Central Square Action Plan:
 - 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;
 - Encourage the development of new mixed income housing; and
 - Promote compatible retail adjacent to residential uses.
2. The 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";
3. The building and site designs adequately screen the parking provided and are sensitive to the contributing buildings in the vicinity;
4. No National Register or contributing building is demolished or so altered as to terminate or preclude its designation as a National Register or contributing building; and
5. No National Register or contributing building has been demolished or altered so as to terminate or preclude its designation within the five (5) years preceding the application.

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

Urban Design Staff Report

Urban Design Comments

Reactivating this prominent corner location will provide a desirable node of liveliness in the heart of Central Square. Central Square is characterized by businesses with relatively narrow ground floor street frontages, and vibrant and diverse storefronts, that create a varied experience for pedestrians. The important corner location of this project, and its ground floor façades with their pleasant pedestrian scale, appropriate materials, and highly glazed storefronts contribute to this pattern. It is also noteworthy that this storefront is part of the oldest building in Central Square, and as such, has great historical significance.

The proposed Dunkin Donuts essentially maintains the storefront façades of the existing building. A high degree of visual transparency is provided, including increasing the amount of transparency on Massachusetts Avenue by removing the existing window film. Signage is subtle and replicates the previous tenant's approach to utilize the traditional signage band, which staff feel is consistent with the character of the existing building. According to the application materials, the signage bands will be painted black, and the letters will be a yellow/gold color. Other portions of the storefront, including the panels below the windows, the piers, and window mullions, also appear to be a black color on the renderings. New gooseneck lights are proposed to replace the existing ones. Given the significance of the property, Staff very much appreciates the use of non-corporate colors and branding, and the minimal alterations to façade. Historical Commission staff have suggested that a charcoal, or very dark brown, may be more pleasing than the black shown on the renderings. Details of the exterior lighting, signage and any changes to exterior paint colors and materials, are proposed to be reviewed as part of the continuing review process.

Continuing Review

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

- Review of exterior lighting.
- Review of all exterior signage details, including attachments.
- Review of any new exterior colors, materials, and details.