



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

To: Planning Board

From: CDD Staff

Date: May 29, 2024

Re: **AHO-7, 87-101 Blanchard Road - Affordable Housing Overlay Design
Consultation Meeting #2**

IRAM FAROOQ
Assistant City Manager for
Community Development

SANDRA CLARKE
Deputy Director
Chief of Administration

Overview

Submission Type: Affordable Housing Overlay (AHO) Advisory Design Review

Applicant: B'nai B'rith Community Development, LLC. (BBH)

Zoning District(s): Residence C-1; Business A (BA)

Proposal Summary: Construction of senior housing in place of an existing 2-story commercial building to create hundred and ten (110) new rental units under the AHO.

Planning Board Review and comment on conformance with AHO

Action: Development Standards, City Development Guidelines for the proposal area, Design Guidelines for AHO, and Citywide Urban Design Objectives.

Memo Contents: CDD Zoning Report & Urban Design Report

Other Staff Reports: None

AHO Design Guidelines

Site Design Objectives	
Response to Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design site layouts to harmonize with the neighborhood context.
Open Space & Landscape Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design open space to enhance the lives of residents and the broader community by offering aesthetic and environmental benefits. • Offer useful amenities to residents, provide opportunities to minimize the impact of new development on neighbors' privacy and quality of life, and contribute to the beauty of the city.
Circulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote non-motorized mobility by prioritizing pedestrian-friendly and bike-accessible site design.
Parking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimize the impact of parking and driveway.
Utilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimize the visual, acoustical, and environmental impacts of essential utilities and services.
Outdoor Lighting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide lighting for safety and functionality while minimizing energy use, light pollution, and other negative impacts.
Public Art	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enrich the visual environment and strengthen the sense of place by incorporating art.
Building Design Objectives	
Massing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Configure massing for compatibility with the prevailing or desired pattern of neighboring buildings and open spaces. In established neighborhoods, relate to the existing pattern of streets and other open spaces, and prioritize compatibility with existing buildings. In evolving areas, configure new developments to help realize the City's vision for urban form.
Facades	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design facades to enhance and enliven the public realm. In established areas, emphasize compatibility and reinforce sense of place. In evolving residential and commercial districts, contribute to the transformation of urban form by setting precedents for design excellence. • Where appropriate, incorporate ground level retail spaces and common areas to foster a lively enliven the urban environment. • Provide daylight to interior spaces, avoid excessive energy use, and protect the privacy of residents of neighboring buildings. • Design facades to relate to the residential scales and patterns of Cambridge's diverse and historic neighborhoods. • Design street facades to offer a sense of civic presence and human scale, and visual interest as appropriate to their role in defining public space.
Architectural Details, Materials, Color, and Finishes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use materials that are warm, inviting, and compatible with surrounding existing buildings and the neighborhood context. Develop building facades of high-quality, durable materials and with colors, finishes, and textures appropriate to building contexts.

Building Interiors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Affordable housing, like all housing, should serve the needs of its residents while contributing to the residential character and sense of neighborhood within the area at large.
Sustainable Design Objective	
Site and Building Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Achieve resilience measures to the maximum extent possible, including energy efficiency and measures to promote the health and wellness of residents.

The complete set of Design Guidelines for Affordable Housing (28 July 2020) can be found at:

https://www.cambridgema.gov/-/media/Files/CDD/Housing/Overlay/zngamend_aho_designguidelines_20200728v2.pdf

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

Zoning & Development Staff Report

Overview

B'nai B'rith Community Development, LLC (“BBH” or the “Applicant”) proposes to demolish an existing, one-story commercial building and construct a six-story, L-shaped building consisting of 110 affordable dwelling units for seniors and approximately 8,000 square feet of non-residential space on the ground story at the northeastern corner of Blanchard Road and Normandy Avenue in the Cambridge Highlands neighborhood of Northwest Cambridge. The project parcel also contains a three-story residential development separated into two distinct buildings at the back of the site.

The project includes thirty off-street parking spaces, 67 long-term bike parking spaces, and a new 19-dock Bluebikes station on the site. The site is proposing approximately 53,000 square feet of open space (38% of the total lot area), which exceeds the minimum requirements under the AHO.

Planning Board Comments from Initial Consultation Meeting

Overall, the Planning Board supported the creation of new affordable housing for seniors, the scale and massing of the building, and the building’s proposed siting along Blanchard Road.

In terms of site design, Board members urged the Applicant to explore opportunities to reduce the overall paving on the site and consider alternatives to providing off-street parking beneath the footprint of the building. Board members also asked the Applicant to explore adding more ‘green’ to the site – in the form of additional trees and/or outdoor open space and recreational area.

In terms of building design, Board members requested the Applicant further increase the articulation of the building façade, use a more limited and contextual material palette, and explore relocating the isolated dwelling unit on the ground floor near the drop-off area in the rear.

Staff Comments on Revised Submission

A revised application was received by the City dated May 1, 2024, consisting of revised application forms and narrative, a revised graphics volume, and a revised appendix volume. The Applicant also met with City staff to discuss further design refinements since the initial hearing, and the revised application is responsive to both staff and Board comments on the original application.

The project remains consistent with the AHO zoning standards. In the initial [Zoning memo](#) from CDD staff, further detail of the proposed mechanical screen was requested to ensure that the proposed opacity requirements set forth in Section 11.207.7.5.c would be met. Perspective views illustrating the location and view of proposed rooftop mechanical equipment are provided on Pages 58-60 of Volume 2b of the graphical materials, and demonstrate that mechanical equipment will be set back from the principal wall plane and permanently screened from view. Further, the proposed rooftop mechanical equipment will be enclosed by a screenwall that is entirely opaque.

Urban Design Staff Report

Overview

The Affordable Housing Overlay project at 87-101 Blanchard Road proposes the redevelopment of an existing, two-story commercial building fronting Blanchard Road into a 6-story building containing 110-unit age-restricted apartments of 100 percent affordable housing. Amenity and social service spaces are to be provided on the ground floor. The footprint is “L” shaped, with one wing oriented along Blanchard Road to the west, and the other aligning with the Blair Pond Stream to the north. To the south and east are two existing, four-story multifamily residential buildings separated from the project by a shared parking lot that will be substantially reconfigured. Abutting the northeast corner of the parcel is Blair Pond, a natural area hydrologically connected to the Alewife Brook Reservation.

Blanchard Road forms the boundary between the Town of Belmont and the City of Cambridge, specifically the Cambridge Highlands neighborhood in which the project is located. Its character changes frequently along its relatively short length, from light industrial/commercial adjacent to the Fitchburg Line tracks to small-scale residential approaching Concord Ave, and thereafter to a mix of residential and open space where it fronts the Fresh Pond Reservation. The project occurs at the transition between the industrial/commercial and residential areas. While no separated bicycle facilities exist along Blanchard Road, the Fitchburg Cutoff Bike Path is a short distance to the north, and there are protected bike lanes along Concord Avenue to the south.

In general terms, the design shown in the revised submission (May 2, 2024) is similar to the design presented at the first Planning Board hearing on January 29, 2024 (materials dated November 29, 2023). While the revised design incorporates numerous improvements, it remains in general conformance with the Design Guidelines for the Affordable Housing Overlay (2020):

- Creating a generous, lushly landscaped, and activated urban edge and street wall that reinforces Blanchard Road.
- Stepping down the height and massing as it approaches smaller-scale adjacent context.
- Creating a highly transparent, welcoming, and visually prominent entry at the building’s corner with benches and plantings.
- Visually shielding parking from the public right of way.
- Employing natural and durable materials that relate to the context.
- Incorporating a range of sustainability measures including habitat restoration, increased site plantings and permeability, and all-electric, passive house standard construction.

In the project’s first hearing, the Planning Board strongly supported the project but suggested that further study be given to specific aspects of the design, including:

- The amount of the site that is devoted to parking.
- The relative benefit of the nine below-building parking spaces versus other programmatic uses, and the potential circulation conflicts its two-way drive aisle creates.
- The amount and coherence of the open spaces provided for residents, and specifically expanding the amenity deck along the Blair Pond Stream.
- Increased opportunities for trees, especially in the parking lot to reduce heat island effect.
- The number of building materials and whether a reduction would clarify the composition.
- The single unit located in the north wing, and if it could be clustered with the other residential units on the ground floor to decrease its isolation.

Urban Design Comments on Design Revisions

The design of the project has evolved collaboratively in conversation with Staff since the previous meeting, and while some issues previously identified by the Planning Board remain, most have evolved in a substantially positive direction.

Outdoor Spaces

While the number of parking spaces has not diminished, the amount and quality of outdoor spaces within the portion of the site the applicant controls has increased to the benefit of both the residents and surrounding community. The project also benefits from the close proximity of several major open spaces such as the Alewife Brook Reservation, Clay Pit Pond, and Fresh Pond Reservation.

- The amenity deck along the north side of the building has doubled in area, expanding the interface between Blair Pond Stream and amenity spaces lining the building's north wing.
- The entry from the parking lot now incorporates four additional trees within enlarged permeable and planted areas flanked by seating.
- The sidewalk along Blanchard road has been increased in width, and the proposed trees within the front yard setback have been increased in number and adjusted to better shade the sidewalk (street trees aren't possible in the sidewalk due to the atypical location of underground utilities beneath it).
- The plaza at the entry facing Blanchard Road has been widened, with built-in seating along an enlarged planter including three additional trees.
- Within the parking area, a sidewalk has now been incorporated along the driveway, and the island has been increased in width to accommodate two additional shade trees.

Façade Materials

The organization of materials across the façade has been further refined and rationalized to create a clearer and more compelling composition.

- The wood cladding previously present only around the Blanchard Road building entry has been extended across the length of the ground floor west façade, employing a rich, warm material to reinforce a more clearly legible building base.
- Metal paneling is now used to clad all bays whether projecting or coplanar, creating a clear relationship among them while simultaneously reducing the overall number of materials.
- Projecting brick areas anchor the ends and intersection of the two wings, with the parapet of the central portion now extending backward to complete the volume. Punched windows within the brick portions now include both cast sills and brick headers, adding texture and contrast.
- The inclusion of an additional horizontal mullion on Window Types "B" and "C" lends the fenestration a more residential scale and creates a shared datum across all window types.
- The applicant clarified the challenges that balconies introduce, from the security of residents to achieving passive house standards. Bays, step backs, and canopies have instead been incorporated to add depth and shadow to the façade.

Ground Floor

The program and organization of the ground floor has remained relatively consistent.

- The applicant clarified their concerns around introducing additional ground floor entrances into the building due to security for the intended population. These concerns seem valid, and the landscaping in front yard will still provide an immensely improved public realm experience over the existing condition.
- The single isolated unit in the rear wing was a frequent topic of conversation between staff and the applicant. Suggestions for exchanging its location with that of the trash room were explored but found to negatively impact the upper floors due to the location of the trash chute. Additionally, it cannot be exchanged with the Social Services space as that program is fulfilling a zoning requirement. The unit has been subsequently shifted towards the middle of the wing to lessen its isolation. While still less than ideal, it is still preferable to losing a much-needed unit of affordable housing.
- The below-building parking was also frequently discussed. The 110 units and 30 parking spaces yields a roughly 0.27 parking ratio. Given that the intended population has a higher likelihood of mobility challenges than the general population, this ratio doesn't seem unreasonable. The proposed parking remains fully visually shielded from the public right-of-way, and the drive aisle serving it has now been made one-way to reduce potential conflicts and decreased in width to enlarge the adjacent parking island. This island now accommodates two additional shade trees which will both lower the potential heat island effect of the asphalt as well as further visually screen the below building parking from the adjacent residential buildings.
- Access to the long-term bicycle parking has been shifted from along the boardwalk fronting Blair Pond Stream to the parking lot, with a sidewalk along the driveway and signage to warn cars of potential cyclists. This removes the awkward condition of bicycles traversing the amenity deck.

Suggestions for Further Study

Site

- The point where the painted pedestrian pathway behind the building connects rear building entry plaza is depicted in slightly different ways across the drawings. Staff prefer the design shown on Page 40 as it depicts an enlarged plaza space. However, it would be optimal for the painted pathway to feed directly onto the plaza at the closest available point as opposed to following the curve of the drop off towards the entry canopy.

Façade

- There may be potential to further differentiate the upper levels of the two wings based on their contextual responses to both Blanchard Road and Blair Pond Street in a similar manner to the ground level façade.

Ground Floor

- It would be worth exploring whether the Bicycle Storage Room can include spaces that can accommodate tricycles and recumbent bicycles given the intended population.
- Methods for ensuring that the single unit in the north wing is effectively shielded from the adjacent parking area would be beneficial.