



To: Planning Board

From: CDD Staff

Date: April 10, 2025

Re: **PB-175 Open Space Design update, 2 Leighton Street**

Background

This Planned Unit Development (PUD) was first approved in 2002 and included the construction of two residential buildings and the preservation of an existing commercial building on three sites, along with new street segments, utilities, and open space; comprising approximately 870,000 square feet of total GFA and 830 dwelling units.

The original PUD was developed in two phases. Phase I consists of 1 Leighton Street (hereinafter "Elevate"), a 426-unit residential building with ground-story retail completed in 2006; as well the conversion of the Maple Leaf Building to a residential use was subsequently completed in 2014. Phase II included the construction of a residential building containing approximately 300 dwelling units. The PUD has been amended five times, most recently as 2023.

AvalonBay Communities has submitted materials regarding a design update for the open space and multi-use path along Monsignor O'Brien Highway and partially under MBTA Green Line viaduct. Condition 2 in the special permit for PB-175 notes that the Board will get a presentation of site details when they get finalized.

Open Space Design Update

The Planning Board reviewed and approved the design of the open space and multi-use path in January 2015 and endorsed design changes in June 2015. At that time, the approved design included a dog park, plaza, and multi-use path subject to continuing review by staff.

As 10 years have lapsed since the Planning Board reviewed the project, there have been changes to the Green Line alignment and Monsignor O'Brien Highway. We are bringing the updated design to the Board to gather feedback that will inform the finalization of project details. The update includes modifications to the design and location of the dog park and multiuse path. It also reintroduces the exercise area that had been part of the January 2015 scheme and features additional historical elements related to the Green Line.

Melissa Peters | Acting Assistant City Manager for Community Development
Sandra Clarke | Chief of Administration & Operations

Staff comments

The overall design concept—including the dog park, multi-use path, and station plaza—essentially remains unchanged. The reintroduction of fitness equipment represents a significant improvement, contributing to a more diverse and purposeful use of the area below the viaduct. This addition not only supports active recreation but also helps animate the space throughout the day. Equally positive are the use of color, which creates vibrancy and visual interest; the incorporation of historical elements, which reinforces the site’s history and provides educational opportunities; and the strengthened north-south pedestrian connection, which improves accessibility and circulation beyond the site.

Staff are also mindful of the inherent limitations of the space beneath the viaduct, including constraints imposed by Monsignor O’Brien Highway, the MBTA station and infrastructure, and grade changes. These site conditions understandably influence what is feasible in terms of design and programming. However, there are opportunities where staff would encourage the applicant to further clarify, refine, and enrich the proposal to maximize its potential as a meaningful, vibrant, and welcoming public space.

Suggestions for improvements include:

1. While a certain degree of flexibility and openness under the viaduct is desirable, the design could benefit from a stronger sense of organization and spatial clarity. Establishing a clear spatial framework helps users intuitively understand how to use the space, and creates a more cohesive and legible public space. This can be achieved through the strategic use of visual cues—such as varied paving materials, distinct color palettes, lighting, and site furnishings—to define zones, edges, and circulation paths. For instance, differentiated surface treatments or coordinated furnishings could demarcate areas designated for specific activities, such as groupings of particular fitness equipment, pathways, or the interpretation of historic fabric.
2. Where possible, further enhancements should be made to the pedestrian environment, particularly along the southern edge of the viaduct, where the dog park and cobblestone strip meet the Monsignor O’Brien sidewalk. This transitional zone plays an important role in shaping the overall public realm experience and has the potential to become more inviting and comfortable. Improvements should focus on additional plantings, including shade-tolerant plants, as the height and location of the viaduct should allow a reasonable amount of light along this edge. Depending on the existing street and open space lighting, additional pedestrian-scale lighting could also be provided below the viaduct. Furthermore, the interface between the plaza and the cobblestone strip could integrate seating or other amenities that help define that edge.

Staff welcomes feedback from the Planning Board and looks forward to continuing to review the project with the project team as it is further refined.

Continuing Staff 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 discussion to a future date, or as items for ongoing design review by staff as the project is implemented:

- Detailed design of the open space: layout, dimensions, accessibility, design and locations of elements including furniture, fitness equipment, pedestrian-scaled lighting, bicycle parking, etc.

- Design of the multi-use path and pedestrian pathways, including integration with surrounding streets, sidewalks, building entrances, as well as signage, sightlines, line markings, and other related elements.
- Landscape materials: plantings, paving, fencing, etc.
- Design and locations of wayfinding signage.
- Design, location, and content of informational signage, including interpretive content associated with the historical elements and signage to convey that the open space is open to the public, including use of the City's "Open to All" logo.
- A narrative related to infrastructure impacts of the changes, including how the site would drain and how this drainage / snow melt would/could impact adjacent pathways.