



To: Planning Board

From: CDD Staff

Date: May 14, 2025

Re: Special Permit **PB-409, 350 Massachusetts Avenue**

Overview

Submission Type:	Special Permit Application
Applicant:	BRE-BMR 350 Massachusetts LLC
Zoning District(s):	Cambridgeport Revitalization Development District (CRDD)
Proposal Summary:	Renovate the existing building to convert office use to laboratory use.
Special Permits Requested:	Project Review Special Permit (19.20)
Other City Permits Needed:	Stormwater Control Permit
Planning Board Action:	Grant or deny requested special permits.
Memo Contents:	CDD Zoning Report & Urban Design Report
Other Staff Reports:	Department of Transportation (DOT), Department of Public Works (DPW), in separate documents.

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

Zoning Section	Required Planning Board Findings <i>(Summary - see appendix for zoning text excerpts)</i>
Project Review Special Permit (19.20)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traffic Impact Findings. Special permits will be granted if the project has no substantial adverse impact on city traffic as analyzed in the Traffic Study. • Urban Design Findings. The Planning Board shall grant the special permit only if it finds that the project is consistent with the urban design objectives of the city as set forth in Section 19.30.
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

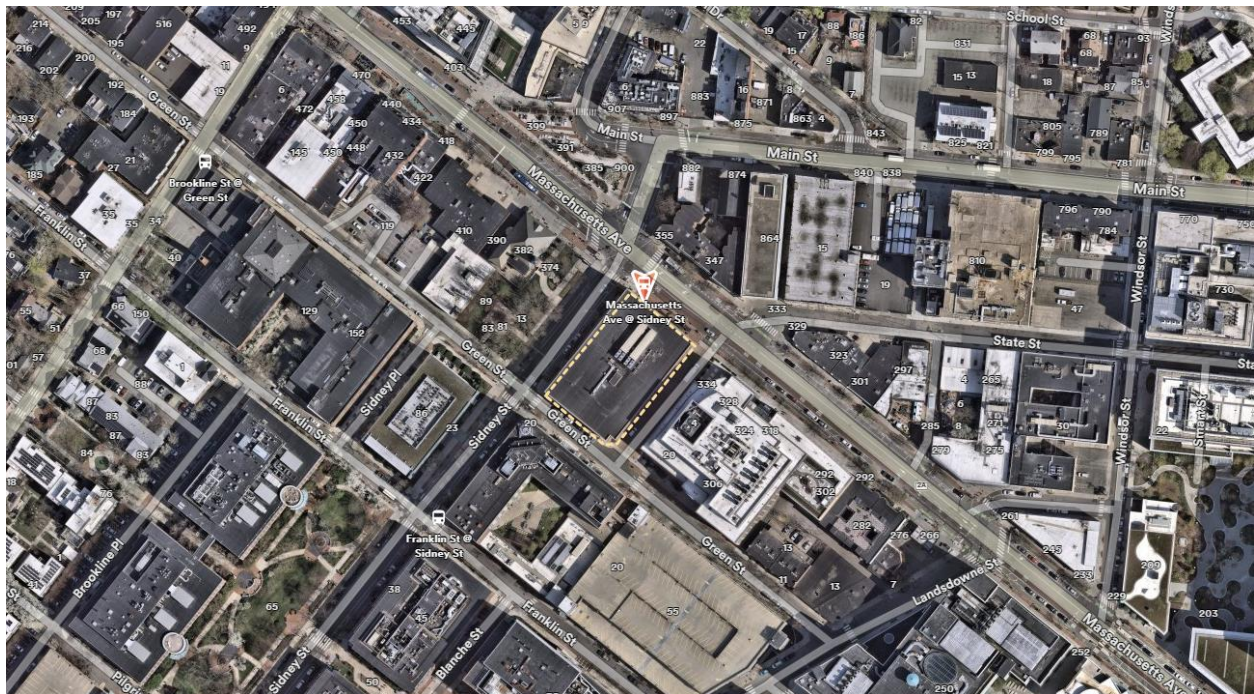
Area Planning and Zoning

Site Context

Neighborhood/Area: Central Square/University Park

Development Patterns: The site is located on the eastern side of Central Square at the intersection of Massachusetts Avenue and Sidney Street. The building is located on a block with a mix of retail and consumer service uses, with office space and some residential above the ground floor.

Nearby Features: The site is located 0.2 miles from the Central Square MBTA Station. The property is part of the University Park mixed-use development. It is next to the Lafayette Square Fire House and across from Lafayette Square.

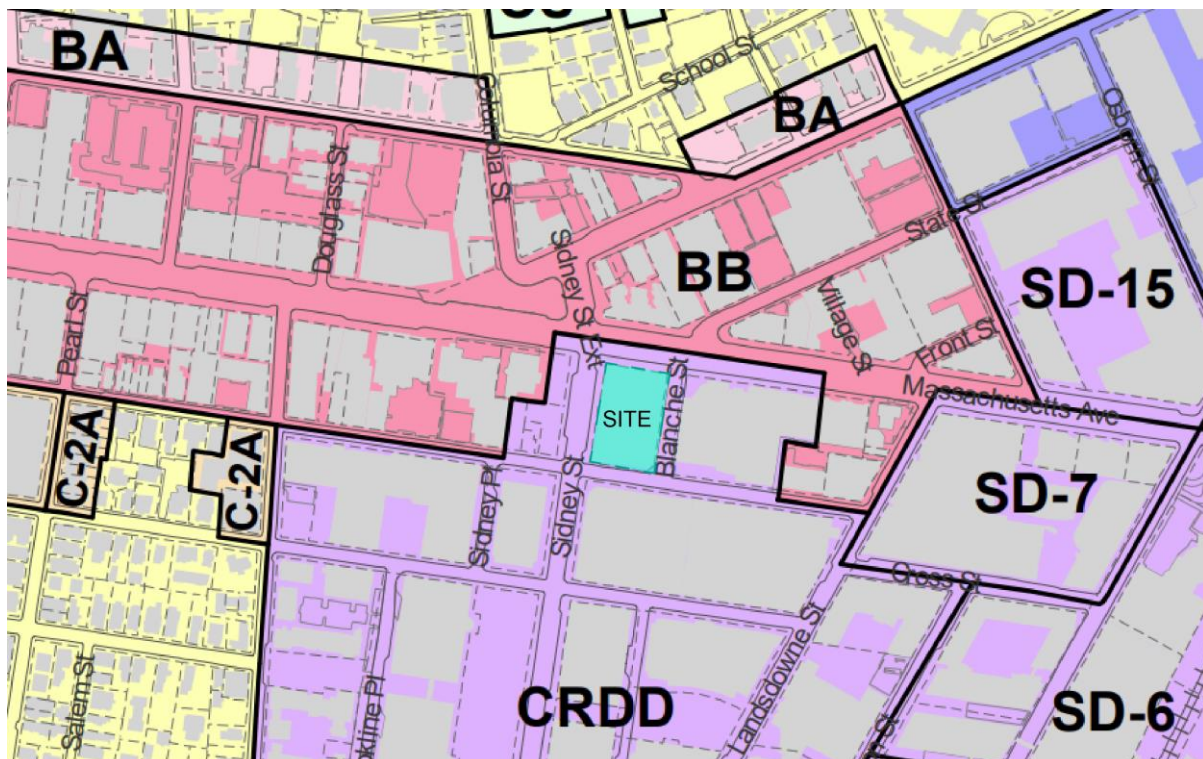


Context Map for 350 Mass Ave. Source: Nearmap Aerial Imagery, 2025

Site Zoning

General description: Special base zoning district that was created in 1988 (amended in 2013) to enable the mixed-use redevelopment of a large-scale former industrial site according to a plan. The CRDD district is designed to promote increased density along corridors and decrease towards neighborhood development.

	Base District
District(s):	Cambridgeport Revitalization Development District (CRDD)
Allowed Uses:	Light industry Office uses Retail and Consumer Establishments Residential uses Entertainment and Recreational uses
Max. Building Height	80ft
Max. FAR/GFA	District aggregate of 1,820,000 sqft GFA for all non-residential uses, plus a minimum of 400 dwelling units in the district (with affordability requirements)
Required Setbacks	No requirements
Required Open Space	District aggregate of 100,000 sqft of publicly beneficial open space
Other District Standards or Requirements	At least 75% of ground-floor building frontage along Massachusetts Ave. must be occupied by retail/consumer service or entertainment/recreation uses; marketing plan required as part of project review procedures.



Site overview. Source: Zoning Map, City of Cambridge

Development Plans and Guidelines

- The two most relevant planning efforts for the area are the 2013 Central Square Plan and Design Guidelines as well as the 1987 University Park Design Guidelines. The Central Square plan and guidelines set a framework for continued change in Central Square with an emphasis on civic identity, market realities, sustainability, density and built form, housing, parking and transportation, retail and nonprofit uses, public spaces, and social services.
- The University Park District Design Guidelines provide direction for development patterns within the district that promote density and activation closer to Central Square and more residential and typical neighborhood density further into Cambridgeport.
- Some relevant goals from Envision Cambridge comprehensive plan (2019):
 - **Great Commercial Districts:** Preserve and enhance the distinctive character of Cambridge’s commercial districts, especially its major squares and mixed-use corridors.
 - **Development Patterns:** Maintain the existing patterns of the city where they are well-established, and advance the city’s values through a mix of preservation and complementary infill development.
 - **Activation:** Shape the form, use, and design of development, especially its public spaces and street frontages, so that it supports an active public realm

Current Proposal

Overview

The site currently contains a five-story, approximately 118,000 square-foot building with roughly 18,000 square feet of retail space on the ground floor and offices above. The building was built in the late 1990s as a part of the University Park development. There is no parking on site, but tenants have access to parking in the nearby Franklin St. Garage.

The proposed project is to renovate the existing building for technical office/lab use with no change to the existing building footprint. The project would reduce the amount of retail space to roughly 4,000 square feet, concentrating it along Mass Ave. The project will include a modern redesign of the façade and a new mechanical penthouse to support the incoming lab use.

From a zoning perspective, the change in use is permissible because the district has an overall limit on non-residential use that does not distinguish among types of non-residential use. The reduction in retail space is allowed so long as the 75% linear frontage along Mass Ave is maintained. The change does trigger compliance with some development standards as described below, as well as the requirement for urban design and transportation review under the Project Review Special Permit.

Proposed Uses

The Application proposes the following uses on the site:

Proposed Uses	Location/Size	Allowed/Special Permit?
4.34 (f) Technical Office for research and development, laboratory use	Floors 2-5	Allowed use
4.35 Retail or Consumer Service Establishments	Ground floor, Mass Ave frontage, roughly 4,000 sf	Allowed use

Note: The CRDD district requires a minimum of 75% of the Massachusetts Avenue frontage, to a minimum average depth of 40 feet, to be occupied by Retail or Consumer Service Establishments.

Proposed Parking, Bicycle Parking, and Loading

The project is not subject to the Bicycle Parking requirements in Section 6.100 because the proposed change in use does not increase the bicycle parking requirement. However, the Application is proposing 30 new long-term bicycle parking spaces interior to the building on the Sidney Street side. These spaces appear to conform to the Design and Layout requirements in Section 6.105. There are no new vehicular parking spaces proposed but the project includes one additional loading bay in addition to the two existing bays on Blanche Street.

Special Permits

Project Review Special Permit

As a change of use greater than 50,000 sf in a base Cambridgeport Revitalization Development District, this project triggers a Project Review Special Permit, which requires the Planning Board to make transportation impact findings and to assess the proposal's general conformance with the Citywide

Urban Design Objectives. Please refer to memos from DOT and Urban Design for comments on these topics.

Other Zoning Requirements

Sustainability

The floor area of the building in the proposed project exceeds the 25,000 square-foot threshold that requires conformance with Green Building requirements in Article 22. By virtue of triggering Green Building requirements, the project is also subject to Green Factor and Flood Resilience Standards. This project does not trigger Green Roof requirements because it does not involve the construction of a new building.

The proposed project satisfies Green Building requirements by meeting the conditions of the LEED BD+C: Core and Shell v4 certification, as confirmed by a Green Building Professional.

Regarding the Green Factor submission: since the project does not involve a new building or the enlargement of an existing building's footprint, the target Cool Score does not need to meet the typical 1.0 standard, but it must not be less than the Cool Score of the existing site. The Applicant noted that the site has an existing Cool Score of 0.01, with only 90 square feet of low planting area contributing to the total. The Cool Score of the proposed project exceeds the existing score at 0.1, which is met by slightly increasing the low planting area to 110 square feet and adding 1,500 square feet of green roof area. The Applicant noted that they are still exploring the feasibility of incorporating a green roof. The Applicant has also acknowledged that any added or replaced roof membrane will be required to have an initial SRI of 82 per Green Factor standards. The Cool Score will be reviewed and certified again at the building permit phase. Green Building and Green Factor Certifications are attached to this memo.

Compliance with Flood Resilience has been reviewed and confirmed for compliance by the Department of Public Works. Much of the site is situated below the Long-Term Flood Elevations (LTFE). The Applicant is proposing to meet the Flood Resilience standards by elevating building lobbies, allowing loading docks and the bike room to flood, and protecting the transformer vault by elevating the entrances above the 1% LTFE. More detailed information can be found in the attached DPW memo.

Retail Tenanting and Marketing Plan

Per the Cambridgeport Revitalization Development District standards in Section 15.24.1 of the zoning ordinance, the Applicant is required to provide a marketing plan for the retail space required along the Mass Ave front of the building. The marketing plan must include the following:

- Target uses and users (particularly local and independent retailers)
- Designate an individual responsible for implementing the plan
- Describe types of economic incentives that may be offered to tenants

The marketing plan indicates that one retail space is intended to contain a food and beverage user, and the other could include other types of retail or consumer service establishments like a clothing store, bookstore, or barber shop. The team intends to target local businesses where possible.

This plan is included in the Appendices of the Application and has been reviewed by staff in the Economic Opportunity and Development (EOD) Division of CDD. EOD staff agreed the target users are

appropriate but cautioned that the proposed accordion windows may not get much use due to the noise from vehicular traffic on Mass Ave. Staff suggested an alternative window that would open on the top half only.

Incentive Zoning

The project will be reviewed at the building permit phase to determine whether Incentive Zoning requirements are applicable.

Non-Zoning Requirements

Stormwater Management Requirements: The Applicant will need to obtain a Stormwater Control Permit from the City prior to any building permit being issued on the project. More information can be found in the attached DPW memo.

Community Engagement

The Application includes a report on community engagement done before the special permit application was submitted. The Applicant met with several local stakeholders, including representatives from the Central Square BID, Cambridge Chamber of Commerce, Cambridge Fire Department, Cambridgeport Neighborhood Association, and direct abutters. In addition to those stakeholder meetings, the Applicant held one meeting on Wednesday September 18, 2024 in accordance with the Planning Board's Pre-Application Early Community Engagement rules. The Applicant noted that notice of the meeting was posted on the City's website, abutters and community groups were contacted, and flyers were posted on and around the project site.

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. **Permitted Uses:** The special permit would authorize the proposed technical office/laboratory use except in the indicated ground-story spaces where only Retail and Consumer Service or Entertainment and Recreation uses would be permitted as allowed in the zoning district. The Planning Board could consider including general office as an allowed use above the ground-story to allow for further flexibility. 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, DOT and CDD. Transportation mitigation measures, as recommended in the DOT memo, would be included as conditions.
5. **Sustainability:** Development will be subject to the Green Building Requirements in Section 22.20 and the Green Factor Standard in Section 22.90. These will be reviewed again by CDD staff at the building permit and certificate of occupancy stages. Development will be subject to the Flood Resilience Standard in Section 22.80, which will be reviewed again by DPW staff at the building permit and certificate of occupancy stages.
6. **Construction Management Program:** Per Section 18.20, staff would recommend a Construction Management Program be provided and approved by DOT, DPW, and other applicable City departments before issuance of a building permit. This program would also include a community outreach program designating a point of contact to provide information to the public during the construction process and notification panels posted on the site with project information.

Appendix - Zoning Text Excerpts

Project Review Special Permit

19.25 Review Criteria. In granting a special permit under this Section 19.20 the Planning Board shall make the following findings.

19.25.1 Traffic Impact Findings. Where a Traffic Study is required as set forth in Section 19.24 (3) above the Planning Board shall grant the special permit only if it finds that the project will have no substantial adverse impact on city traffic within the study area as analyzed in the Traffic Study. Substantial adverse impact on city traffic shall be measured by reference to the traffic impact indicators set forth in Section 19.25.11 below. [Further discussion in DOT memo]

19.25.2 Urban Design Findings. The Planning Board shall grant the special permit only if it finds that the project is consistent with the urban design objectives of the city as set forth in Section 19.30. In making that determination the Board may be guided by or make reference to urban design guidelines or planning reports that may have been developed for specific areas of the city and shall apply the standards herein contained in a reasonable manner to nonprofit religious and educational organizations in light of the special circumstances applicable to nonprofit religious and educational activities.

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

Occupying a highly visible corner, the existing building plays a significant role in defining the streetscape and its location at the intersection of Massachusetts Avenue and Sidney Street. Its massing contributes to the creation of continuous streetwalls on each street, maintaining the human-scale that characterizes much of University Park. At the street level, the existing building emphasizes the pedestrian realm. Ground-floor retail and transparent façades create a visually permeable and active edge on Massachusetts Avenue, Sidney Street, and parts of Blanche and Green Streets.

Although the project involves the reuse of an existing building and relatively minor new construction, two critical areas of urban design require focused attention: the treatment of the ground floor and the integration of the mechanical penthouse. These elements significantly influence how the building engages with its urban context and the surrounding public realm.

Ground floor treatment

As the primary point of interaction between building and street, the ground floor is critical to defining the character and quality of the public realm. Its design and use should foster a strong sense of openness, transparency, and active engagement with the surrounding streetscape.

The proposed façade changes introduce a finer grain level of detail, character, and depth to the double-height storefront bays on each street facade. Such modifications enhance both the architectural expression of the building and the pedestrian experience. In addition, blank walls and service doors will be enlivened with mural artworks and lighting. The Massachusetts Avenue frontage is proposed to include two distinct retail spaces featuring operable windows and planters, which will contribute to a more vibrant and engaging streetscape. The retail frontage wraps the corner onto Blanche Street, which, if programmed as a restaurant, has the potential to activate the shared street with outdoor seating and visual interest.

While the facade improvements are extended along Sidney Street, its frontage lacks active uses. The previous design incorporated a restaurant that occupied most of the facade, a narrow office entrance, and some ground floor office space; however, the restaurant space has been vacant for several years. The new design proposes a large transformer/mechanical room, bike room, and 60 feet of lobby frontage. Although the proposed window box art walls provide color and visual interest, the location of the transformer at the corner of Green and Sidney Streets is not optimal. Leaving both sides inactive undermines the vibrancy of the streetscape and open space. A mid-block transformer location would be preferable and would have less impact on the streetscape experience.

Particular attention should also be given to the proposed placement of the lobby at the corner of Massachusetts Avenue and Sidney Street. Lobbies tend to be inactive spaces that do not typically generate much foot traffic or visual interest. They also have a more private and uninviting character. Given the prominence of the corner, maintaining a retail store, café, or restaurant at this location is strongly encouraged, as it would contribute to a more active and engaging streetscape. However, it is important to recognize the ongoing challenges in the retail market. If the lobby cannot be relocated,

staff recommend a more detailed examination of its design to identify opportunities for enhancing pedestrian engagement and community interaction. This may include seating or gathering areas, incorporating public art or local cultural elements, and ensuring the lobby enhances the streetscape through a welcoming, active, and visually accessible presence. Providing a connection/entrance between the retail and the lobby can also soften the distinction between private and semi-public space and enhance the lobby's civic role.

In summary, the design changes are positive improvements that enhance the architectural character of the building, and most notably on Massachusetts Avenue, strengthen its relationship to the public realm. While the proposal supports active ground-floor uses where feasible, demand for retail space has declined in recent years, making it challenging to maintain the full extent of previous retail. However, reducing transparency and the extent of active uses at street level results in a less engaging pedestrian experience and reduced street-level vitality along Sidney Street. Improving ground-level activation, especially at key corners, should be a priority in subsequent design revisions. At the detailed design level, staff would like to continue reviewing key elements of the ground floor—particularly the glazing treatment, signage band, canopy, and associated architectural details—to ensure these features are as responsive as possible to the public realm.

Mechanical Penthouse

For lab/R&D buildings, rooftop mechanical systems are often substantial due to ventilation, filtration, and other technical infrastructure needs. The design team has made considerable efforts to respond to earlier staff feedback regarding the penthouse. Its design appears carefully considered in response to the building's architectural character and minimizes disruption to the surrounding urban fabric. While the penthouse is substantially larger than the existing condition, the equipment is well-screened and set back from Massachusetts Avenue and Sidney Street. The penthouse also reads as a recessive element in the submitted perspective views. The subtle detail introduced on the facades of the lower level screen provides a nod to the architecture of the building below, without being visually prominent. Additional views from further away would be helpful, as would be a detailed review of materials and colors.

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 façade alterations and additions, including glazing materials – visible light transmittance and reflectance, and the mechanical penthouse.
- Review of a mockup of all new exterior materials and colors, to be constructed on site and reviewed and approved by CDD staff before ordering of materials
- Detailed review of the design and programming of the lobby space, including consideration of the following:
 - Incorporating public amenities such as community bulletin boards, seating, public art, or free Wi-Fi zones.
 - Providing physical connections between the lobby and the adjoining retail spaces.
- Detailed review of the window box art walls, including consideration of the following:
 - Clarification of extent – the bike room façade appears part of the art wall installation in the renderings, but this is not reflected in the elevations.
 - Showcasing local artists, community history, or rotating installations.
 - Inviting local schools, groups, or nonprofits to help curate space content.
- Additional perspective views taken from more distant vantage points in order to better understand how the proposed mechanical penthouse will sit within the broader urban context.
- Review of all sidewalk and site alterations, including new paving, planters, and other details.

Appendix: University Park Urban Design Guidelines, 1987 – Summary of Relevant Design Guidelines

The University Park Urban Design Guidelines serve as a framework for ensuring cohesive and high-quality development throughout the district. Key elements include:

- Emphasis on human-scale buildings and street-oriented development with active ground-floor uses to promote street-level engagement.
- Retail uses focused at the Gateway/Market Square location, adjacent to the intersection of Massachusetts Avenue and Sidney Street.
- Creation of green spaces, pedestrian pathways, streets, and public plazas to enhance community interaction and connections.
- Design strategies to improve pedestrian and vehicular access, linking University Park with surrounding neighborhoods and transit options.

Facades

- No limit on the use of expansive areas of glass in Bases of buildings containing retail or hotel uses in order to encourage transparency at ground floors and animate the streets, sidewalks, and open spaces at ground level.
- Walls lacking window openings facing public and private streets to be avoided at ground level, except in areas designed for building services and vehicle access and egress.

Building Entries

- Where feasible, locate main building entries on Sidney, Franklin, Green, Landsdowne, or Pacific Streets, or adjoining open spaces to help animate the major public ways and open spaces.
- Limit building entrance size to maintain leasable street front area, but provide a clear indication of entry location

Mechanical equipment

- Locate to be minimally visible from adjoining public open spaces or adjacent street, unless integral to the architectural design of the building
- Screen with fence or wall enclosures that are compatible with the configuration, materials, coloration, and surface design of the exterior wall below.

Service areas

- No service areas allowed along Sidney Street or Brookline Street. Preferable locations include Blanche Street.
- All service docks to be internal to the building envelope, equipped with closable overhead doors and screened architecturally or with landscaping.
- Bays to be dimensioned so that, during use, trucks will not project into the vehicular street space.