



To: Planning Board

From: CDD Staff

Date: 10/1/2026

Re: Special Permit **PB-412, 9&25 Birch Street/30-36 Bay State Road** (continued from 7/21/2026)

Overview

Submission Type:	Special Permit Application
Applicant:	BSR Birch LLC
Zoning District(s):	Residence C-1A (C-1A)/ Mixed Use Residential (MXR) Overlay
Proposal Summary:	Construct a 6-story residential building of approximately 91,585 square feet gross floor area with 85 residential units, 15 off-street parking spaces, 89 long-term and 10 short-term bicycle parking spaces.
Special Permits Requested:	Project Review Special Permit (19.20); Reduction of Green Roofs requirement (22.35.3)
Other City Permits Needed:	Tree Removal Permit, Stormwater Control Permit
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>
Project Review Special Permit (19.20)	• 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.
Reduction of Required Green Roof Area (22.35.3)	The Planning Board may grant a special permit to reduce the required Green Roof Area provided that each square foot so reduced be compensated by a unit price contribution to the Cambridge Affordable Housing Trust.
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: (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

Revised Proposal

Overview

On July 21, 2026, the Planning Board held a public hearing on an application by BSR Birch LLC to demolish the existing structures to construct a 6-story, 85-unit residential building. The approximately 91,585 sq ft building would include 15 motor vehicle parking spaces and 89 long-term bicycle parking spaces. Entrances would be located both along Birch Street and Bay State Road. Most existing trees would be retained, and some landscaping and usable open space would be constructed at grade and on the roof.

Following a presentation from the Applicant, testimony from the public, and review of written materials from City staff, the Planning Board voted to continue the public hearing to a future date, with requests that the Applicant further explore the following:

- Extent of green roof relief sought by the Applicant;
- Proposed mix of unit sizes (with an emphasis on 2+ or 3-bedroom family sized units);
- Additional clarification on flood elevation and fire code compliance;
- Bicycle parking arrangement;
- Transportation mitigation;
- Building massing and exterior façade materials;
- Refinements to roof top design and amenity spaces.

Zoning Comments

Key Revisions

The Applicant has submitted revised plans and an updated narrative which addresses the Board's previous comments, as follows:

Unit Mix

In response to Planning Board feedback on family-sized housing units, the applicant has provided one additional 3-bedroom unit by combining two smaller units on the fourth floor. This has lowered the overall proposed unit count from 85 to 84 units. The Applicant has indicated that this 3-bedroom unit would be designated as inclusionary housing. Housing staff are supportive of this proposal.

Market-rate units remain predominantly studios and 1-bedrooms, and the applicant maintains that market-rate 3-bedroom units are not financially feasible and would likely attract roommate groups.

Bicycle Parking

It was suggested at the previous Planning Board meeting that the applicant pursue a special permit to allow for the use of bicycle stackers. As proposed, the bicycle parking complies with the base zoning requirements and transportation staff are not generally supportive of bicycle stackers due to accessibility concerns.

Green Roof Special Permit Relief

The Applicant has provided additional clarification and calculations showing the extent of the proposed green roof area in Exhibit 9 of their resubmitted materials. The Applicant shows that 81.9% of the eligible roof area is proposed to be non-intensive green roof area. This is a slight increase to the 80% that was shown in the initial application.

The Applicant's request for a Reduction of Required Green Roof Area (22.35), as articulated in their initial application, is intended to account for any minor revisions to the rooftop area that is considered eligible for the purposes of 22.35, or for any revisions made to the design and placement of rooftop HVAC systems. Such revisions are common as buildings advance from the special permit stage to building permit application.

Any substantial change to the site design, including major revisions to the overall design of green roof area, would require that the Applicant return to the Planning Board for review and approval. This is a standard process for any Planning Board Special Permit project when substantial revisions to the site plan are made prior to building permit. Staff would recommend the inclusion of standard condition language requiring authorized development to substantially conform with the submitted application materials.

Flood Resilience

The Applicant has provided additional exhibits denoting ground elevations on the first-floor plan, as well as a new "Flood Resistance Plan" prepared by Hancock Associates. The DPW staff comments denoted in their 7/14/2026 memo have not changed.

Fire Safety

The Applicant has additionally provided a third-party review conducted by the Code and Fire Engineering Group at Cosentini Associates that notes compliance with requirements for fire access routes. Review and sign off on compliance is not something provided by Cambridge Fire Department (CFD) staff at this stage of review but will be required as part of building permit review.

Additional fire safety questions were raised regarding e-bike batteries and charging. Again, this issue falls outside the scope of zoning and of the Planning Board’s Special Permit review. CFD staff will review life safety concerns as this development progresses through later permitting stages. However, below, DOT staff have compiled some of our standing policies and recommendations when it comes to e-bike batteries and charging.

- Most CFD and DOT recommendations focus on lithium-ion battery safety and best practices targeted to consumers. These recommendations fall outside the purview of a development team and include the following: buy bikes with batteries that meet safety standards UL 2849 or EN 15194; follow charging instructions that come with the bike; disconnect the battery from the charger once it's fully charged; never use charging equipment that didn't come with your bike; stop using your e-bike if the battery shows signs of damage (if it has an unusual odor, changes in color, gets too hot, changes in shape, begins to leak or smoke, or does not hold a charge); and if your bike needs repairs, take it to a qualified professional. More information about best practices for lithium-ion battery safety are available at these links: [CFD pdf on important safety tips for charging](#); [CFD webpage “Help to prevent fires caused by lithium-ion batteries”](#); [video overview on e-bike battery safety](#); [CDD Information on e-bikes](#).
- For charging areas, CFD recommends flat areas away from direct sunlight, liquids, tripping hazards, and in a location where the bike cannot easily fall. Compliance with the bike parking regulations in Article 6.100, as demonstrated in this Application, requires the types of accessible facilities and access routes that naturally satisfy some of these recommendations. Article 6.100 regulations additionally require types of bike racks that are specifically designed to make bikes less likely to tip over.

Transportation Mitigation

Based on the approved TIS, staff maintain their recommendation to include a standard condition incorporating transportation mitigation measures as detailed and agreed to in the DOT memo. This would include the funding of speed hump on Bay State Road by the Applicant, support for a new BlueBikes station, and other general TDM measures.

Transportation staff noted at the July 21st meeting that the estimated number of vehicle trips generated for the new residential development at 52 New Street were included in the approved parking analysis.

Special Permit Conditions

As noted in the previous zoning memo on this case, 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 multifamily residential uses. 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. CDD would also review for compliance with Green Roof Requirements in Section 22.35, and if the final design is determined not to meet the full Green Roof Requirement, then a payment would be made to the Cambridge Affordable Housing Trust to account for the difference in required and provided square footage. 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. **Housing:** Development will be subject to Inclusionary Housing requirements, which will be certified by the Housing Department at the building permit and certificate of occupancy stages.
7. **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.

Note on Site Remediation

Issues of site remediation were raised during the July 21st Planning Board meeting. Site remediation is regulated separately from zoning but can be reflected in the general conditions that require compliance with all applicable laws and regulations. The Special Permit findings to be made by the Planning Board relate to the land use, and not construction activity.

Urban Design Staff Report

Comments from the July 21st Hearing

Planning Board members commented positively on the contextual relationships created through the use of setbacks and step backs, the depth and articulation of the façade, the internal location of the transformer, the inclusion of vehicular parking, the quality of the streetscape design, and the additional housing units that the project will bring to this area of Cambridge.

Board members expressed reservations about the resolution of the roof deck design, the lack of a garage door on Bay State Road, the number of family-sized units, the scale of the transformer door, and the durability of the metal cladding at the lower levels.

In addition to raising those reservations, Board members requested the applicant include the locations of doors and windows on the building plans, confirm that the elevations of critical equipment comply with flooding requirements, confirm adequate fire access to mid-block portions of the building, and verify the required number of family-size units.

Changes to Site Plan/Open Space

- *Roof Deck* - The roof deck's design has been further developed to a commensurate level with other open spaces like the courtyard along Birch Street. The "hammerhead" shape has been substantially reduced, and the space now accommodates a range of activities- an outdoor kitchen beneath a pergola, café tables, two seating areas, a lounging area, and lawn games. The surface is shown as a combination of wood, pavers, and synthetic turf, and the majority of the space is framed by 42" tall planters. Precedent images have been included which provide a sense of the intended character of the amenity space.

Changes to Building Massing

- No changes have been made to the building's massing. Board members were generally supportive of the prior massing and its strategy for employing step backs and bays.

Changes to Floor Plans

- *Windows & Doors* - The floor plans now include the locations of windows and doors on all floors, clarifying the intended access, circulation, and glazing.
- *Unit Mix* - An additional 3-bedroom unit has been created on the fourth floor by combining two smaller units. This has lowered the unit count by one to 84 units, which seems an acceptable trade-off to increase the number of family-sized units.

Changes to Building Facades

- *Extent of Metal Panels* - A stone base has been inserted where the building meets the ground to address concerns about the durability of metal panels in locations where they are most susceptible to damage. The inclusion helps visually ground the building with a natural material while expanding the building's exterior palette.
- *Color* - The prior brown color of the metal panels has been shifted to a warmer terra cotta. This color reads more vibrantly and provides a stronger contrast to the gray cladding.
- *Transformer Door* - The transformer door has been redesigned to reduce its visual prominence. The doors have been divided into two portions- the upper clad in solid metal paneling that blends with the surrounding façade, and the lower in vertical louvers. The break aligns with the top of the adjacent glazing units, reinforcing the impression that the lower louvered portion is part of that visual language and not a distinct element.
- *Alignment with Context* - The applicant explored reducing the previously 4-story brown (now terra cotta) cladding to three stories on Bay State Road to reflect the three-story height of the buildings to the north. While it now visually corresponds to that context, it no longer aligns with the 4-story height of the adjacent building to the south and also changes the spatial logic of the facade. It previously read as a single volume vertically modulated by a bay and distinct corner treatments. In the updated design the corners and bay are materially unified across the fourth floor, making them appear as a single element, resulting in the terra cotta portion appearing more applied.
- *Garage Door along Bay State Road* – The applicant explored including a garage door for the vehicular entrance off Bay State Road. Its addition prevents visibility of the tuck-under parking and is encouraged by the Multifamily Design Guidelines. However, the circumstances in this instance are somewhat unique- unlike the enclosed garage fronting Birch Street, much of the drive aisle is open to sky. Additionally, the inclusion of the garage door modifies the reading of the portion above it from a projecting upper level element into a solid full-height volume. If there is support for including the garage door, a more creative approach to its design is warranted to lessen its impact on the public realm.

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 materials, colors, and details. A visual mock-up of all materials should be installed on the site to be reviewed and approved by staff and the Planning Board prior to any materials being ordered.
- Landscape design details including species, planting standards for trees and other vegetation, locations of trees, bicycle racks, and details of hardscape, benches, etc.
- Further development of the mural proposed for the parking garage along Birch Street should be coordinated with Cambridge's Director of Arts and Cultural Planning.
- Ensure lighting is programmable, dimmable, and dark-sky compliant to minimize glare and light trespass.
- Coordinate the location and species of all proposed street trees with Cambridge DPW.