



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

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To: Planning Board

From: Jeff Roberts, Senior Manager for Zoning and Development
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Date: October 19, 2017

Re: Special Permit **PB #330, 55 Wheeler Street – Continued Hearing**

This memo contains an overview of the proposed project at 55 Wheeler Street, the special permits being requested, and related comments.

Update

Since the last Planning Board meeting, the Applicant has worked with staff to respond to comments and questions raised in the initial review of the application. The Applicant's recent submission provides additional information about the project in narrative and graphic form. This memo comments on the additional information and proposed changes. Previously submitted staff materials are also attached.

Planning Board Action

As a reminder, the project is proposing to replace the existing office building with a multifamily residential development consisting of three buildings with off-street parking spaces accommodated at the basement and ground levels and in a small surface lot, long-term and short-term bicycle spaces, and landscaped areas accessible to the building residents and general public.

The project is within an Alewife Overlay District (AOD) and requires Special Permits for increasing the FAR (Section 20.95.1), the height (Section 20.95.2), and the dwelling unit density (Section 20.95.4), and reducing required yard setbacks (Section 20.95.34.1). A small portion of the site is located within the Flood Plain Overlay District and requires a Special Permit (Section 20.70), though the proposal for that portion of the site is to create publicly beneficial open space. In addition, the project is seeking a Project Review Special Permit (Section 19.20) and Multifamily Special Permit (Section 4.26.1). In addition, the project is seeking a special permit for reduction of required parking (Section 6.35.1) and a special permit to exceed allowed curb cut width (Section 6.43.5(b)). The project requires review by the Conservation Commission for compliance with Massachusetts Wetlands Protection Act, and the proposed office building demolition has been reviewed by the Cambridge Historical Commission staff. The applicable special permit findings are summarized below. Applicable sections of the zoning are provided in an appendix.

Requested Special Permits	Summarized Findings <i>(see appendix for zoning text excerpts)</i>
Project Review Special Permit (Section 19.20)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The project will have no substantial adverse impact on city traffic within the study area, upon review of the traffic impact indicators analyzed in the Transportation Impact Study and mitigation efforts proposed. • The project is consistent with the urban design objectives of the City as set forth in Section 19.30 (see following page).
Increase FAR, Increase Building Height, Reduce Lot Area per Dwelling Unit, waive yard requirements, and reduce required open space in Alewife Overlay Districts (Sections 20.95.1, 20.95.2, 20.95.4, 20.95.34, 20.96.3)	<p>The project promotes the general interests of the larger commercial and residential neighborhood noted in Section 20.92 and is consistent with the goals, objectives and guidelines established in the Concord-Alewife Plan (see following page).</p> <p>For waiver of yard requirements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The objectives of the Concord-Alewife Plan continue to be met. • The stormwater management objectives for the area continue to be met both on the site and as the site may be a part of a larger system for managing stormwater runoff. • The reduction or waiver of yard requirements provides for more efficient development of land; encourages or facilitates a more logical pattern of buildings, streets, parks and open space; or enhances the urban, pedestrian character of the area as envisioned in the Concord- Alewife Plan. <p>For reduction of required open space:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The urban design and stormwater management objectives as set forth in the Concord-Alewife Plan continue to be met.
Construction in Flood Plain Overlay District (Section 20.70)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No encroachment of the floodway or displacement of water retention capacity is allowed unless fully offset. • Flood water systems shall not cause nuisance, hazard or detriment to site or abutters. • Development is consistent with zoning, area plans and guidelines, and applicable laws including Wetlands Protection Act. • Review by the City Engineer and Conservation Commission are required.

Requested Special Permits	Summarized Findings <i>(see appendix for zoning text excerpts)</i>
Construction of Multifamily Dwelling in Office-1 District (Section 4.26.1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key features of natural landscape are preserved. • New buildings relate sensitively to existing built environment. • Open space provides visual benefits to abutters and passersby and functional benefits to occupants. • Parking, access and egress are safe and convenient. • Intrusion of onsite parking is minimized. • Services such as trash collection and utility boxes are convenient yet unobtrusive.
Reduction in required parking (Section 6.35.1)	Lesser amount of parking will not cause excessive congestion, endanger public safety, substantially reduce parking availability for other uses or otherwise adversely impact the neighborhood; or will provide positive environmental or other benefits to the users of the lot and the neighborhood, including assisting in provision of affordable housing units.
Exceedance of allowed curb cut width (Section 6.43.5)	Increased curb cut width will facilitate traffic and safety.
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 (see appendix).

Citywide Urban Design Objectives [SUMMARIZED]

Urban Design 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

Concord-Alewife Plan Goals for Quadrangle (intended to provide general guidance)

- Encourage creation of housing along Concord Avenue.
- Introduce neighborhood-focused retail to form a mixed-use core near the Alewife Brook Parkway edge of the Quadrangle.
- Continue to allow light industrial uses closer to the railroad tracks.
- Create appropriate transitions between the Highlands and nonresidential uses in the Quadrangle by introducing a green buffer and allowing lower densities and heights near the Highlands.
- Create a public space that serves a stormwater function as well as being an open space resource.
- Increase the amount of permeable surface in the Quadrangle as the area redevelops.
- Encourage future development to respond to stormwater goals for the area.
- Create a hierarchy of boulevards, avenues, streets, and pathways.
- Enhance the character of Concord Avenue by improving its streetscape.
- Design new public spaces and places that support a range of community-focused activities.
- Improve traffic circulation within the Quadrangle by enhancing existing roads and adding new ones—without creating a direct vehicular connection to the Highlands.
- Improve the streetscape within the Quadrangle to enhance the pedestrian and bicycle environment. Strengthen pedestrian/bicycle access to Alewife Station to improve connections to transit and to the Minuteman Path and Linear Park.
- Improve the pedestrian environment along Concord Avenue and provide safe crossings.
- Continue to encourage residential use along Concord Avenue.
- Encourage housing development within the Quadrangle, particularly close to the Highlands.

Concord-Alewife Design Guidelines – Areawide (intended to provide general guidance)

- Break up large blocks into smaller blocks, of sizes similar to those in surrounding Cambridge neighborhoods.
- Vary the design of individual buildings to create an architecturally diverse district.
- Street level facades should include active uses such as frequent residential entrances; neighborhood-serving retail; services for the public or for commercial offices; and community spaces.
- Encourage awnings/ canopies to provide shelter and enliven ground-floor façades.
- Design residential buildings with individual units and front doors facing street.
- Utilize low impact development principles in building and site design
- Use site design that preserves future rights-of-way identified in the Circulation Concept Plan.
- Improve existing streets to meet City standards, including streetscape improvements.
- Strengthen bicycle and pedestrian links to adjacent areas.
- Screen service areas from major streets.
- Parking below-grade is preferred. If above-grade parking is to be provided, design it so it is not visible from public streets, or pathways; line above-ground structured parking with active uses.
- Design and locate lighting and signage in support of the district’s pedestrian-friendly quality.
- Use site design to minimize shadows on other buildings or on public streets, open spaces, parks, and plazas.
- Design residential development to include a range of units of various sizes and bedrooms.

Concord-Alewife Design Guidelines – Quadrangle (intended to provide general guidance)

- Use streetscape and other improvements to define Wilson Road as part of a major east-west connection through the Quadrangle.
- Create an open-space system characterized by parks and green spaces of varying scales and uses.
- Use pooled resources to create a new central public open space in the Quadrangle that incorporates stormwater management.
- Locate active uses around the future open space to create a safe and active environment throughout the day and evening.
- Provide pedestrian links to strengthen physical connections to the shopping center.
- Create building height/façade setbacks between 85’ and 105’.
- Provide pedestrian links to strengthen connections to Fresh Pond Reservation, consistent with the Fresh Pond Master Plan.
- Strengthen the streetscape and other improvements to define Concord Avenue.
- Locate new development to allow for a future above-grade crossing between the Triangle and the Quadrangle.

Planning Board Comments from First Hearing

The following summarizes some of the key comments made by the Planning Board at the September 5, 2017 hearing. The Applicant has provided some responses in the submitted materials.

- Review flood resiliency measures, emergency response and recovery strategies in detail, and provide site cross-sections to help understand grade changes.
- Provide additional information about use and operation of the proposed service road.
- Refine vehicular movement within the site for pick-ups, drop-offs, delivery, and loading activities.
- Clarify location, access and egress for long-term and short-term bicycle parking.
- Consider further reduction of parking to reduce the impacts and explore options to improve TDM measures and increase mitigation.
- Consider future connections to Terminal Road.
- Explore options for additional usable open space and play areas, including discussing how public open space will function.
- Provide additional information regarding the mix of units and affordable housing allocation.
- Explore exterior façade treatments to create a more interesting built environment with options for alternative materials and color.
- Clarify material details, structural column locations and need for acoustical windows.
- Review building entries and consider locating an entry closer to Building 1.

Staff Comments on New Materials

The supplemental material dated October 6, 2017 primarily addresses concerns that were raised by the Planning Board associated with managing and mitigating flood risks, the circulation patterns for service and delivery vehicles, bicycles, and pedestrians, the housing unit mix, and the architecture, landscape

and urban design of the project. The material also includes a discussion of the project's relationship to the objectives of the *Envision Alewife* planning process that is currently underway. The revised set of plans and supporting graphic materials show changes to the site layout, building design and landscape with minor changes to the project program. The changes include reduction of residential units from 526 to 525, long-term bicycle parking from 562 to 555 spaces, and short-term bicycle parking from 54 to 52 spaces (however, it should be noted that at least 53 short-term bicycle parking spaces will be required to meet zoning requirements for 525 dwelling units). In the original application materials, the front yard along the existing section of Wheeler Street did not consist entirely of Green Area or Permeable Open Space as the non-vegetated and impermeable area occupied more than 25% of the open space area. The revised Landscape Materials Plan (page 52) indicates that walkways proposed in the front yard will have permeable paving to mitigate the environmental impact of the added hardscape in conformance with zoning requirements.

Comments on the Applicant's response to various transportation issues, including service and delivery operations, bicycle access, parking, and traffic impacts, will be provided by the Traffic, Parking and Transportation Department (TP&T).

Envision Alewife Planning

The new materials incorporate information from the ongoing planning process that is being undertaken through the City's Envision Alewife Working Group, a component of the *Envision Cambridge* planning process led by CDD and consultants Utile. This working group has met eleven times since May 2016, and has worked to develop a vision, objectives, and land use scenarios for areas including the Quadrangle, the commercial corridors along Alewife Brook Parkway and Fresh Pond Parkway, and other districts proximate to Alewife Station. While a final report is not yet complete, the most recent material from this process can be reviewed online (view items tagged as "Alewife Working Group"):

<http://envision.cambridgema.gov/documents/meeting-documents/>

The Applicant's team has engaged with the *Envision Alewife* process for nearly as long as it has been underway, and has provided a summary that explains how the proposal responds to the applicable objectives that have emerged through the process thus far.

Many of the key objectives that are pertinent to this project are shared by both the prior *Concord Alewife Planning Study* and the current *Envision Alewife* process, including the creation of new public streets, pedestrian/bicycle connections, and open spaces to promote a transformation from suburban commercial patterns of development to a more mixed-use urban environment. Some other aspects of the project respond to more current planning concerns, such as the establishment of an elevated first floor and a raised sidewalk at the higher elevation that will mitigate flood risk in a way that promotes a more pedestrian-friendly experience than above-grade parking.

Flood Mitigation

The new submission describes in more detail how the building will perform in the event of flooding, with reference to the 2030 and 2070 1% flood elevations determined in the City's ongoing climate change resiliency planning. The general approach is to locate habitable floors above the 2070 flood elevation

along with critical building equipment, including transformers (though it is not entirely clear from the plans where the transformers will be located). The underground garage will be about 10 feet below this elevation, but the landscaping will form a barrier to prevent infiltration and the entrances will be designed to control flooding. The materials also describe how common areas in the building can provide relief in the event of an extended power outage. This information adds to the technical information in the original petition, which describes how the project intends to comply with the specific zoning requirements applicable in the Flood Plain Overlay District, and the stormwater requirements that are explained in the prior memo from the Department of Public Works (DPW).

Urban Design

Site Design and Circulation

- Additional details on features and amenities that will be provided within open spaces on the site, including the courtyards of each building, have been provided. Each of the courtyards will include amenities for children. At the ground plane, there is an emphasis on naturalistic design elements and play features, with the northern open space possibly including a climbing structure and educational opportunities, which appear fitting for the context. Staff note that since that open space area is in the flood plain, there are limitations on what structures can be introduced. In addition, as suggested by the Planning Board, further information regarding how the open space will be managed should be provided.
- The supplemental materials clarify the character of the mews connection with some further details provided showing a potential alignment through to Fawcett Street between the Atmark building and the parking garage. Despite the buildings not aligning exactly, the proposed paved connection appears to be direct. The actual pathway should be designed and sited to meet the city's multi-use path standards in the future, which would require a minimum path that is 14' wide with 2' buffers on either side.
- In response to the Board's comments, the service road has been widened to accommodate improved vehicle maneuvering. Staff is satisfied with the proposed design approach and prefers the permeable paver option, which will enhance the appearance of this space and assist with stormwater permeability. Some further consideration should also be given to whether there is a need to demarcate a bicycle lane.
- The lack of a setback to the Fawcett Street extension remains a staff concern. While site constraints and building layout issues are understood, special attention is needed to ensure the habitability of ground floor units and to provide a sufficient public/private buffer.
- The updated project plans describe the parking lot at the end of Wheeler Street as both a flexible play area and surface parking. The concept of creating a flexible play area with a permeable surface treatment and plantings that mitigate the extent of asphalt is supported; however, staff concerns remain as surface parking that is highly visible from the street is contrary to citywide and area-specific urban design objectives. In addition, there are some discrepancies shown in the new materials regarding tree plantings and hardscape materials that should be rectified. The Board may

also want to review how the surface lot use will be monitored and managed as the use of the lot for parking will conflict with it being used as a play area.

Architectural Design

- Generally, the Planning Board was supportive of the project being broken into three buildings and the proposed massing approach, including the sculpted corner treatments. Several comments were made about the façade strategy, including the character of exterior materials, and the lack of breaks and variety.
- The architectural renderings are much improved, and the precedent images help portray the anticipated look and feel of the metal cladding, which will have some texture and pattern. The color too has evolved, and is now a warmer brown, rather than a dark gray or cool brown. The project should be subject to continuing design review, with particular attention to the choice and detailing of materials. As is customary with such large-scale projects, a further opportunity to review the materials, colors and finishes will take place at the time of a visual mock-up.
- Additional building entrances have been incorporated in response to staff comments, which adds to the street activation and permeability of such large buildings. Supplementary views of particular facades, including the Building 3 parking entrance and service road, have also been provided and staff is satisfied with the proposed design treatment.
- The architect has studied the notion of a setback at the seventh story of Building 2. Staff feel that this approach is quite successful, and maintains the architectural concept and façade strategy, while creating a glimpse of the sky through the top of the building.

Sustainability

While the project is designed to be “solar ready”, Staff continue to encourage the consideration of third party arrangements for the installation of PVs (e.g. a solar power purchase agreement), which could avoid any upfront investment and likely reduce electricity costs for the occupants.

Continuing 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 hearing to a future date, or as conditions for ongoing design review by staff if the Board decides to grant the special permit:

- Update the dimensional form to record the changes for dwelling units, long-term bicycle parking, short-term bicycle parking, and any other changes.
- Revised plans clearly identifying all window and door openings, and elevations showing all rooftop appurtenances, equipment, and screening materials.
- Review of all proposed public realm, open space, streetscape improvements and landscape details, including play areas, and screening of electrical equipment and utilities.
- Review of final sidewalk, pathway and service road locations, widths and design treatments, especially the mews connection through the site.

- Site Plan (page 8) and Layout & Materials Plan (page 66) show planted areas with additional trees in the surface parking lot; but Open Space Areas (page 41) and Tree Mitigation plan (page 58) do not show those planted areas within the surface lot. Further, the material treatment proposed for the surface lot varies in the plans. This discrepancy should be resolved with staff recommending that the additional plantings and permeable paving option be pursued.
- Potential approaches to monitoring and managing the surface parking lot use and open space areas located in the north.
- Further study of the Fawcett Street extension building setback and the transition between the public sidewalk and private residential units.
- Review of all exterior materials, colors, and details, including a materials mock-up of all wall assemblies on the site.
- Review of parking, bicycle parking, access and egress by the Traffic, Parking and Transportation Department.

The following items are recommended to be included as conditions for continuing review by the Department of Public Works.

- Continuing review of items identified in the memo dated 8/29/17 (attached). Specifically, with regards to potential tree conflicts with existing drain infrastructure, it is recommended that the developer excavate test pits to definitively locate the large drain in question in areas of potential conflict.
- Review of stormwater management systems and flood resiliency plans.
- Final approval of all streetscape features and materials in areas that are intended to be conveyed to the City. Though unit pavers are shown in some plans, continuous concrete sidewalks will be required along all main pedestrian paths of travel. Regarding lighting, it is recommended that the City's standard "acorn" type fixture for Wheeler Street be replaced with the City's standard "pendant" to match Fawcett Street, which is a similar scale roadway. The property owner will be responsible for maintenance of any non-standard features, including lighting, installed in the City's new right-of-way.