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CITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

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To: Planning Board  
From: Jeff Roberts, Land Use and Zoning Planner  
Suzannah Bigolin, Urban Design Planner  
Date: November 25, 2015  
Re: **PB #305, Proposed Improvements to 240 Green Street**

This memo contains an overview of the proposed improvements at 240 Green Street, the special permits being requested, and related comments. The Central Square Advisory Committee reviewed the proposed project during their meeting on 10/26/2015 (meeting summary attached).

### **Summary of Proposal**

Manning Apartments, constructed in 1976, is a 19-story structure with 199 public housing units. The proposed improvements include renovations to the building façades, core systems, apartment interiors, and indoor and outdoor common areas. An existing office space on the second floor is proposed to be converted into four one-bedroom units and two two-bedroom units, increasing the total number of units to 205. The proposed improvements will increase the FAR from 2.79 to 2.88. The proposal also includes changes to the Green Street forecourt and a redesign of the Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK) plaza, including a vehicle turnaround. No new off-street parking spaces are proposed, but the project will provide 40 new long-term and 41 new short-term bicycle parking spaces.

### **Requested Special Permits**

The property is located in the Residence C-3 base zoning district, which is modified by the Central Square Overlay District. The Applicant is seeking a Special Permit to increase the Floor Area Ratio (FAR) in the Central Square Overlay District pursuant to Section 20.304.3.2 of the Zoning Ordinance. The maximum as of right FAR is 2.0 for this parcel, but the Planning Board can issue a special permit to increase the FAR up to 3.0 if the Board finds that the proposal meets the criteria in Sections 10.43 and 20.305 of the Zoning Ordinance (see following page).

Because the Applicant is also a public agency (Cambridge Housing Authority), the application also seeks Planning Board approval to waive the special permit fee.

The applicable special permit findings and goals of the *Central Square Action Plan* and the *Central Square Development Guidelines* are summarized on the following page. Applicable sections of the zoning are provided in an appendix.

Requested Special Permits	Summarized Findings (see appendix for zoning text excerpts)
Special Permit for additional FAR (Section 20.304.3.2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improvements are in conformance with objectives contained in <i>Central Square Development Guidelines and Central Square Action Plan</i>.</li> <li>• No National Register or contributing building is demolished or altered as to terminate or preclude its designation (either now or within the past 5 years).</li> <li>• Building and site designs adequately screen the parking provided and are sensitive to the contributing buildings in the vicinity (See map attached).</li> <li>• Conforms to general criteria for issuance of a special permit. (<i>See attached</i>)</li> </ul>
<b>Central Square Action Plan (1986) Goals and Objectives (intended to provide general guidance)</b>	
<p>The Plan’s overarching goals are to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage responsible and orderly development;</li> <li>• Strengthen the retail base to more completely serve the needs of the neighborhoods;</li> <li>• Preserve the Square’s cultural diversity;</li> <li>• Create active people oriented spaces;</li> <li>• Improve the physical, and visual environment;</li> <li>• Provide retail establishments that serve people of diverse economic and social groups who live in the surrounding neighborhoods;</li> <li>• Encourage the development of new mixed income housing; and</li> <li>• Promote compatible retail adjacent to residential uses.</li> </ul> <p>Relevant objectives include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve the appearance of secondary public ways such as Green Street by sidewalks, signage, lighting and where possible provide new trees;</li> <li>• All new development projects should include landscaping and open space areas;</li> <li>• Create an animated and active environment both in the day time and evening hours;</li> <li>• Provide safe and inviting links between the business area and neighborhoods;</li> <li>• The condition of sidewalks and roadways should be improved where needed.</li> </ul>	
<b>Central Square Development Guidelines (1989) Goals (intended to provide general guidance)</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New development shall reflect the existing neighborhood by providing a mix of affordable housing opportunities;</li> <li>• Preserve structures which contribute to the historical fabric of the Square;</li> <li>• Maintain an active streetscape both during the day and evening;</li> <li>• Promote compatibility with existing uses; and</li> <li>• Improve the overall physical and visual environment.</li> </ul>	

## **Staff Comments**

Over several months, CDD staff has worked collaboratively with the Cambridge Housing Authority (CHA) and its design team to review various elements of the project, including the design and detailing of the new façade materials, and changes to the open space areas and pedestrian access. Much like the work that was completed at the LBJ Apartments in 2013, the revitalization of the Frank J. Manning Apartments will improve the energy efficiency of the building, address maintenance and ageing infrastructure issues, and provide additional amenities for residents.

### Built form

The Manning Apartments building was designed by Robert Charles Associates to specifically meet the need for additional elderly housing in the community. The building is a precast concrete frame and panel structure designed in the Brutalist architectural style. It is not listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is not within the Central Square National Register District; the only abutting contributing buildings in the Central Square National Register District are the row of commercial and mixed-use buildings at 576-619 Massachusetts Ave, which will not be impacted by the development.

CDD staff is supportive of the CHA's goals of renovating and modernizing the existing building and enhancing on-site amenities for residents through modest increases in floor area. The improvements to the building envelope will provide energy efficiency gains, as well as aesthetic benefits. The vertical-stripped pattern of cladding panels, combined with the expression of horizontal floor lines at varying levels, has been selected to reduce the bulk and scale of the buildings. A subtle play of pale gray colors is proposed, with the building bump-outs and original massing accentuated in bronze-toned panels. The use of pops of red to highlight the double-height window reveals on the east elevation, and window spandrels, adds further interest and dimension to the facades. Such variation is considered a worthwhile strategy given the changes to the building envelope, and the need to bring the windows forward to the face of the building, which has somewhat flattened out the façades. In the long range views, this play of color and pattern appears to help the building fit in with the rich, architectural fabric of Central Square, while not being overwhelming.

Staff has encouraged the Applicant to explore different material patterns and colors along the lower floors of the Franklin Street façade to enhance the pedestrian experience, as well as the residential interface. A subtle variation in terracotta panel colors is proposed, which relates to the vertical expression of panels above, while attempting to create a stronger building base. Given the existing floor plan, the practicalities of doing much with this façade is limited; however, there may be further scope to continue to enhance the visual interest of this edge of the building and create a human scale.

Rooftop mechanicals are integrated into the building form and well-screened, which includes repainting the existing elevator penthouse to match the new cladding material, and additional screening.

Site planning and design

Several open space improvements and changes are proposed. The proposed improvements to the Green Street plaza will be a welcome addition to the existing hardscape urban environment of Green Street. Greater delineation of the pedestrian pathway between the building and the parking garage will be achieved through lighting and a glazed canopy. These changes will enhance the link between Franklin Street and Green Street, providing a safer and more inviting pedestrian environment. Such improvements are entirely consistent with the objectives of Central Square Action Plan and Development Guidelines. The proposed improvements to the Green Street Garage, including the installation of green walls and other screening elements, while not finalized, are also anticipated to have a positive impact on the quality of the public realm.

The design of the MLK Plaza on Franklin Street is intended to be finalized early next year with further discussion amongst various stakeholders, including the Central Square Branch Library staff, Traffic Parking & Transportation and Department of Public Works. The plaza is a south-facing, courtyard space, which connects the entrances of the Manning Apartments, Central Square Branch Library, and the garage. While the plaza is currently underutilized, staff has been interested in its potential to provide amenities to the neighborhood. As such, staff has worked with the CHA to minimize the extent of the turnaround and building overhang within the plaza. The provision of the turnaround, while not normally a desired urban design outcome, in this instance provides weather-protected pick-up and drop-off for residents, and also removes vehicles from Franklin Street, which is a recognized traffic congestion and pedestrian safety issue. Maximizing landscaping opportunities, retaining as many existing trees as possible, improving the appearance of the garage structure, and encouraging clear and welcoming pedestrian access to the library have also been a part of these discussions.

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:

- Details of all external materials, including a materials mock-up on the site.
- Review of all landscaping details, particularly continuing review of the MLK Plaza design as it develops.