



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

To: Planning Board

From: Community Development Department (CDD) Staff

Date: December 10, 2019

Re: **Alewife Quadrangle Northwest Overlay District Zoning Petition**

Update

On October 22, 2019, the Planning Board ("the Board") held a hearing on the zoning petition ("the Petition") by David Navia, et al., to amend Section 20.90 of the Zoning Ordinance to create a new section that modifies the existing Alewife Overlay District 1 (AOD-1), also referred to as the Quadrangle Northwest. After reviewing the Petition, the Planning Board requested the following information from the developer Cabot, Cabot and Forbes ("CC&F") who presented on behalf of the petitioner:

- Comparison of the current zoning petition to the recommendations outlined in the Alewife District Plan;
- Evaluation of the impact of the current Petition on all parcels in the Alewife Overlay District 1 (Quadrangle Northwest);
- Explanation of how assurances will be made that the proposed uses will benefit the public over time in the ways presented.

The Board continued the hearing and did not make a recommendation on the Petition. The Ordinance Committee of the City Council also held a hearing, on October 23, 2019, which it concluded by keeping the Petition in committee without making a recommendation. The petition will expire on January 21, 2020 unless it is refiled.

Since these two public hearings, staff from CDD, the Department of Public Works, and the Traffic, Parking, and Transportation Department have met with CC&F to discuss the Board's comments and other issues related to the Petition. A brief summary of the issues that were discussed is provided on the following pages.

The hearing on this Petition will be continued at the December 17, 2019 Planning Board meeting so that CC&F can provide a response to the Board's comments. The hearing will follow a brief presentation by CDD staff on the Alewife District Plan, which can be viewed in its entirety online here (with zoning recommendations on pages 155-163): <https://www.cambridgema.gov/CDD/News/2019/10/~media/E2335363BFA149E29C6BE57727A09872.ashx>.

Key Issues in Alewife Planning

As the Planning Board noted, one of the key issues for staff is how the current proposal aligns with the recommendations of the Alewife District Plan, not just in its specifics but in its intended outcomes. The proposal follows the recommendations of the Alewife Plan in terms of allowed height and density, but the Alewife Plan articulates other goals that are intended to be incorporated into the zoning for the area. The following is a summary of some of the more crucial issues that are relevant to the current petition.

- Economic Opportunity. A central goal of the Alewife District Plan is to preserve and expand space for businesses that offer low-barrier-to-entry jobs with living wages, specifically light industrial businesses or community-focused businesses that require light industrial space, such as commercial recreation, athletics and fitness, and arts establishments. Other potential uses that support these economic goals might include job training or collaborative industrial workspace. The Alewife zoning recommendations would require any commercial development to include ground-floor spaces with higher ceilings for such uses. The rationale for an increased height limit of 85' and exemption of the ground floor industrial space from FAR calculations was to allow high rent-generating commercial spaces on the upper floors (such as office/lab) to cross-subsidize the light industrial space at the ground floor. It is crucial that new buildings have the necessary ground-floor heights and other design features to meet the needs of these types of uses so that they are not made infeasible, and zoning incentives should be reserved for businesses that meet these broader goals. In terms of more conventional retail, while some convenience retail might be beneficial to residents, the focus of the Alewife Plan is to create better connectivity to retail nodes that already exist to serve a broader area.
- Transportation and Parking. The Alewife Plan looked carefully at the potential transportation impacts of commercial growth. A transportation analysis identified that, without aggressive mobility strategies, the land use mix proposed for the Alewife area would negatively impact traffic congestion compared to development under current zoning. As such, the Alewife plan recommends critical policy changes and infrastructure improvements to reduce the percentage of drive-alone commuters. These include aggressive parking requirements (e.g., low parking maximums), enhanced transportation demand management (e.g., charging end-users for parking to reduce incentives to drive), improved bus service, and new infrastructure connections. Staff agrees that a pedestrian/bicycle bridge in this location would contribute toward achieving this goal; the Alewife Plan recommends a contribution of \$5 per square foot of new commercial development to support public infrastructure improvements including a pedestrian/bicycle railroad crossing. However, improved infrastructure would need to accompany the full set of other strategies identified in the plan.
- Urban Design. The Alewife Plan recognizes the importance of a strong urban design vision given how much the character of the Quadrangle is expected to change. Although some flexibility might be accommodated through the Planning Board review process, specific recommendations such as calibrating building front setbacks to anticipated future street conditions and limiting building

lengths to establish a more urban pattern of blocks need to be clearly articulated so that future developments fit into the overall pattern that is envisioned by the plan.

- Resilience. In addition to addressing flood resilience, which is noted in the petition, the Alewife Plan identifies urban heat island impacts as a concern given the current conditions of the Quadrangle. Strategies for increased open space and tree planting are recommended, with other strategies being developed as the City's resilience planning efforts are ongoing. The plan also recommends investigating district energy systems that can provide energy to buildings in a specific area more efficiently and resiliently.
- Development Review. An issue that is not explicitly discussed in the Alewife Plan recommendations, but has been brought to mind by the current proposal, is how the development review process might be better defined to meet the plan's goals. The current AOD-1 zoning petition anticipates a phased, multi-site master plan on Mooney Street, similar to a PUD (although the current zoning for the area does not specify procedures for PUD review and permitting). This approach provides a good opportunity to review large-scale site planning issues such as circulation and arrangement of uses in a way that is not practical in typical project review, and can more effectively advance the goals of the Alewife Plan. It might be helpful if the zoning established some expectations for how such large-scale development plans would be reviewed, such as requiring alternative site plans to be presented at a schematic level before proceeding to more detailed site and building design.