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CITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

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To: Planning Board  
From: CDD Staff  
Date: December 2, 2016  
Re: **PB #179, North Point PUD Building JK and Open Space Design Review**

The Special Permit for the North Point Planned Unit Development (PUD) was originally granted by the Planning Board in 2003, and since that time has been modified several times through the PUD amendment process. The most recent major amendment (number 6) was granted by the Planning Board on July 26, 2016.

Three residential buildings have been completed on site, and the first building since Major Amendment 6 was approved, "Building JK" (Commercial Building) has been submitted for review along with the proposed open space, "Baldwin Park", on the adjacent parcel. The special permit requires that the each building and its associated park, street segment cross-section, streetscape details, or other associated physical improvement is subject to design review by the Planning Board before the issuance of a building permit.

The Planning Board's review of the building and landscape design is guided by the conditions of the special permit, which includes the goals and objectives of the *Eastern Cambridge Planning Study*, the guidelines established in the *Eastern Cambridge Design Guidelines*, and utilization of the North Point Design Guidelines as a design reference.

This memo summarizes the key areas of focus associated with each element of the review.

### **Review Process**

Since July, staff has had several meetings with the North Point team and the project architect to review various aspects of the design. At the same time, work on revising the *North Point Design Guidelines* has also taken place, which resulted in the Planning Board adopting the updated set of design guidelines at the November 22, 2016 Planning Board meeting, subject to some minor refinements to be undertaken by staff.

Comments from the Traffic, Parking and Transportation Department (TP&T) have been incorporated into this memo, and the Department of Public Works (DPW) has provided a separate letter to the Board.

## **Building JK**

Building JK is prominently sited at corner of North Street and First Street, overlooking North Point Common, and represents the first commercial building to be built in North Point. The site forms part of the new retail corridor, which will extend down from Lechmere Station, to the end of First. Parcel JK is also unique within the PUD area as the municipal boundary between Cambridge and Somerville runs through the parcel.

### Relevant Design Objectives and Guidelines

In addition to the *Eastern Cambridge Design Guidelines*, design guidelines specific to the site were developed as part of the original PUD process in 2003 and have been subsequently amended in the recently updated document, which the Board reviewed last month. The *North Point Design Guidelines* that are most relevant are summarized in the attached Appendix.

The Special Permit strongly endorses the need to set back the upper floors of tall buildings “in order to celebrate a strong cornice line at lower levels of those buildings”. If the Applicant wishes to vary from those guideline provisions, the design rationale for any proposed variation should be clearly presented and should explain how the alternative approach achieves the intent of the guideline.

The Special Permit also calls out the need for buildings along North Street (now Dawes Street), which is designated as a tight, narrow urban street, to receive close attention. “Each design should contribute to the creation of an intimate urban street; the concern is that without careful design of the details of the street itself and of the buildings fronting on it, it might have a crowded and oppressive feel”.

### Comments

Over several meetings with the North Point team, staff reviewed schematic designs for the project. Much of the discussion focused on ways to mitigate the length of the building as it faces North Point Common, the interface with Baldwin Park, treatment of the mechanicals penthouse, and the qualities of the glass curtain wall on the south elevation. As the north side of the building is located within the City of Somerville it has been designed to meet the City of Somerville’s zoning requirements, and has not received as much attention from Cambridge staff.

### *Siting, Scale and Massing*

Since the parcel was previously two separate buildings, one of the most important urban design goals for the project is to make sure that massing is not overwhelming. In this regard, the North Point Design Guidelines are quite explicit about commercial buildings with frontages longer than 200 feet needing to be “made permeable and visually articulated as several smaller masses”.

The proposal has some massing variation. The different design approaches that each City has adopted are evident in the two rectangular bars that form the north and south sides of the building, and the two-story base. This massing variation is most evident on the east and west ends of the buildings, where the two approaches meet and the roofline varies. A central notch is used to mitigate the length of the south elevation, and is most discernable on the first two stories of the building where it is well set back. The

central notch above level two does provide some modulation; however, in the renderings it does not appear to provide enough relief across the facade, and that dimension should be further reviewed.

At the interface with Baldwin Park, rather than creating a podium, the design opens up towards the park and peels away at the bottom two floors to reveal columns. To understand this edge condition completely, it would be helpful to see a perspective view from within the park as a pedestrian would experience the interface.

#### *Architectural character*

The character of the building changes on each side to reflect its future context and, as mentioned above, to respond to the different design requirements and guidelines of each city. Considerable effort has been applied to the curtain wall design to address its solar orientation with horizontal projections, and to create a rhythm of vertical bays per the requirements of the design guidelines. These are all successful scaling elements. The central notch is also given a different treatment, which announces the main entrance and creates variation.

Turning the corner to North First Street, the two bar volumes are expressed in differing facade treatments as the curtain wall meets a more traditional façade of metal panel, punched windows, and projecting bays. The podium has also been given a different architectural treatment to the floors above and the use of warmer materials is appreciated. This approach seems to work better on the south elevation, as it relates to the curtain wall. On the north side, there is a disconnect between the architectural character of the podium and the punched window tower above.

The design of the mechanicals penthouse is also an area of focus. An initial concept reviewed by staff incorporated a fully screened approach. While this design provided a sleek look, staff felt it added excessively to the building's bulk, and created an overwhelming presence on North Point Common and Baldwin Park. The revised response is a partially screened outcome, with some equipment exposed in a more layered and visually appealing approach on the south. This is an approach that is supported in the design guidelines. Setbacks from the facade should be reviewed, particularly from the Baldwin Park edge. Also, the treatment of the mechanicals on the Dawes Street side should be further studied. Without a setback from the façade, the proposed metal louvers appear heavy and add visual bulk.

#### *Ground floor design and uses*

Placing the retail at the corner ties in with the overall concept of focusing retail on First Street and is the right approach to anchor the corner. While outdoor dining helps activate the street, staff question whether this is a successful urban design outcome as it creates a wide setback at the corner of North and First Streets. From a retail perspective, the preference is for pedestrians to see the building when walking up First Street and to shorten perceived walking distances.

Transparency is maximized on the south, east and west ground floor facades, and the double height lobby space works well to announce the main building entry. It is hoped that the ground floor tenant space is designed to accommodate active functions, such as a cafeteria, fitness center, or other amenity spaces, and multiple building entrances, to help enliven the building frontage where it abuts the park and expanded public realm on North Street.

Loading and service functions are sensibly located on Dawes Street, away from First Street and open space areas. There does appear to be quite a long, unbroken stretch of loading docks, ramps and mechanicals/service areas. Opportunities to break this up with windows and occupied spaces should be explored. The parking garage also has direct pedestrian access from First Street, which could perhaps be further enlivened and celebrated as an area of visual interest on First Street.

#### *Environmental impacts*

Wind conditions around the site are expected to be comfortable for pedestrians at all times of the year. There are three locations where uncomfortable conditions in winter are anticipated; however, one of these is an upper level terrace. The other two locations are the center of a future open space to the north, which is anticipated to include landscaping. Further information should be provided regarding the nature of wind conditions in that space and whether the massing of Building JK contributes to that condition.

#### *Transportation and parking*

The following comments have been assembled with consultation from the Traffic, Parking and Transportation Department (TP&T):

- The location of the garage ramp is too close to the intersection of Dawes Street/ First Street intersection, and is also not at the location shown in the design guidelines. As such, the Applicant should demonstrate that the garage driveway and loading docks are in the safest location.
- The long-term bicycle parking being on the ground floor is positive, and staff is very supportive of the way this space has been given prominence. The potential to create an access door directly from the sidewalk, instead of from a long internal corridor, should be explored. Ideally, the door should also be wider, with accessible automation to improve convenience.
- Short-term bicycle parking should be provided on the building parcel, not within future public sidewalk space. While all the land is currently owned by North Point, the expectation is for the roadways and sidewalks to become City Streets. So, to be consistent with current zoning, short-term bicycle parking requirements should be met on the parcel.

#### **Open Space and Public Realm**

The scope of this aspect of the review focuses Baldwin Park, as well as the adjoining sidewalks. Baldwin Park is a relatively small space, designated a “Pocket Park Connector” within the *North Point Design Guidelines*. These spaces are part of the green finger network that was originally established for the site’s public realm. In earlier versions of the North Point master plan, the park was surrounded by streets; however, the Planning Board recently approved a departure from this approach that allows buildings to directly abut the park. In doing so, the Board wanted to make sure that the parks maintained a sense of publicness and pedestrian/cyclist permeability. In response, the following guidelines were incorporated into the design guidelines to address these concerns:

- *Fencing is strongly discouraged; clear entry points, lines of sight into the park, and pathways for the public to use are encouraged.*

- *Individual spaces within the large parks are encouraged to have clear identities and themes, so that the public can understand the potential use, including areas for gathering, and community events.*
- *Loading and service shall not interfere with the core function of the park spaces.*
- *The Pocket Parks at North Point shall be designed to be public in nature, creating an open environment that the public can easily identify as welcoming and for everyone's use. The entrance to the park from streets and sidewalks should be designed to be open and inviting to the public.*
- *Pocket Park Connectors ... are framed by clear straight circulation paths either for vehicles (Child Street and Earhart Parks) or for pedestrians (Baldwin Park.) The circulation paths for walking, cycling and non-motorized use are to encourage connections, and to ensure the parks will feel truly public and not part of the adjacent private buildings. Encourage active or transparent edges at ground floors.*

### Comments

Staff appreciate the idea of a rustic treed landscape with irregular plantings, which act as a counterpoint to the sleek lines of Building JK's south elevation. The perspective renderings successfully illustrate the character and qualities of the space; a less manicured, well-landscaped park that will be a pleasant walking environment. Some of the details and intent of the proposed design are a little unclear as the submitted plans are conceptual. In addition, staff have concerns about the following aspects of the design:

#### *Baldwin Park*

- While the need for flexibility is understood, there appears to be a lot of gray hardscape in the center of the space, which should be further studied to see if more lawn and plantings can be provided.
- The setback of Building JK at the corner does help to open up view lines to the park; however, the landscaping within this setback area appears to be mostly ornamental. Further consideration of activating this edge more strongly should be considered.
- The dimensions of the pathways on either side of the park are too narrow to be shared by people walking and bicycling. Staff suggest that at least one side (and preferably both) should be a minimum of 14 feet clear between vertical obstacles.
- The pathway edges could be further enlivened with seating, rather than focusing this activity within the central area.
- The spacing of the bollards should be reviewed as these appear too closely spaced in the renderings.

#### *Sidewalks*

- The streetscape sections are a little unclear regarding property lines and sidewalks. Staff want to ensure the sidewalk is wide enough for comfortable pedestrian use.

- The 40-scale roadway plan includes a cut-in loading zone on the south side of North Street at the intersection with North First Street. This loading area should be revisited because of the impact it has on the sidewalk alignment and pedestrian conditions at that location.

### **Sustainability**

Presently, this project is set to achieve LEED Silver with a projected 54 points. At this time, the Green Building Review Team is confident that the Parcel JK design will meet, at minimum, its projected certification level and point total.

The opportunity to design the roof to be solar ready was also explored; however, due to the mechanical needs of a potential future lab tenant, this was not seen to be feasible.

### **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 meeting to a future date, or as items for ongoing design review by staff if the Board decides to approve the design review:

- Review of all proposed public realm, open space and streetscape design details.
- Bicycle room plans at 1:10 scale.
- Details of the proposed bicycle rack type(s).
- Review of the internal ground floor layout of the tenant space to ensure the level of activation on North Street and Baldwin Park is maximized.
- Review of all exterior materials, colors, and details, including a materials mock-up on the site.
- Review of parking, loading, bicycle parking, access and egress, and sidewalk design by the TP&T and DPW.

## Relevant North Point Design Guidelines

The *North Point Design Guidelines* integrate and incorporate all North Point-related text of the City's adopted *Eastern Cambridge Design Guidelines* document with the Applicant's suggested elaborations.

### Siting, Scale and Massing

- Orientation of buildings is suggested to take advantage of exposure to sun and views to the green spaces and surrounding attractions.
- Buildings should avoid continuous massing longer than 100 feet facing residential streets and 200 feet facing mixed-use and retail streets. If massing extends beyond this length it should be made permeable and visually articulated as several smaller masses using different materials or colors, vertical breaks, bays, or other architectural elements.
- In addition to the above limits, buildings should reflect a rhythm and variation appropriate to the urban context. For example, this can be achieved by expressing bay widths of 16 to 25 feet for residential buildings and 25 to 50 feet for mixed-use and retail buildings.
- Buildings should have a clearly expressed base, middle, and top. This may be achieved through a variety of materials, fenestration, architectural detailing, massing, or other elements.

### *Public streets*

- Taller buildings should be articulated to avoid a monolithic appearance and should emphasize vertically-oriented proportions.
- Set back portions of the building above 65 feet by at least 10 feet from the principal facade where possible.
- Use architectural expression on any portion of the building above 65 feet to prevent continuous massing.
- Corner articulation of buildings is encouraged.

### *Park edges*

- Buildings on parcels facing these open spaces are encouraged to maintain consistent massing and scale that is required for the success of these open spaces (A useful benchmark suggested in the Eastern Cambridge Design Guidelines is that the height of the principal facade of buildings surrounding a park should be no greater than 1/3 the width of the park. For additional height above this limit, buildings should be stepped back by at least ten feet from the principal facade)
- Greater height without setbacks may be appropriate at corners or in specific locations to create architectural variety
- Locate buildings to minimize shadows on North Point Common especially in the afternoon and, where feasible, on other open spaces
- Surround public parks with uses that create an active ground floor environment throughout the day and evening and increase safety for park users, such as:
  - Shops, cafés and other public uses that enliven the parks are encouraged adjacent to open spaces

- For retail and office uses, build to the lot line or provide small setbacks (5 to 15 feet) from the right-of-way for café seating, benches, or small open spaces
- Setbacks used exclusively for ornamental landscaping are discouraged

#### *Rooftops*

- The design of rooftops, including mechanical equipment and cellular installations, should be conceived as integral to the rest of the architecture of the building.
- Screening is encouraged to conceal rooftop mechanicals, and the screening should be in the same idiom as the rest of the architecture
- Rooftop mechanicals may be designed to stand out as machinery, in which case it needs to be carefully arranged to give a pleasing visual image
- It may be possible to use both techniques listed above.
- Rooftop mechanical equipment should be designed in accordance with the Cambridge Noise Ordinance, and attention should be given to the placement and shielding of mechanical equipment so as to reduce the noise experienced by receptors on other parcels.

#### Ground level design and uses

- Street-level facades within the designated retail zone should include active uses such as:
  - Shops, restaurants, and cafes
  - Services for the public or for commercial offices such as fitness centers, cafeterias, daycare centers, etc.
  - Community spaces, such as exhibition or meeting space
  - Art exhibition space/display windows
  - Commercial lobbies and front doors
  - Numerous entrances along principal pedestrian routes are encouraged both for safety and to enhance the pedestrian environment
- Office/ R&D uses are discouraged from occupying extensive ground-floor frontage. Where these uses do occur, they should occupy no more than 200 to 250 feet of continuous frontage along public streets
- Ground floor frontage should generally be permeable, and massing elements and architectural details should be human scaled
- Entrances should be located on public streets, and at or near corners wherever possible. Entrances should relate well to crosswalks and pathways that lead to bus stops and transit stations
- Buildings should have a carefully articulated base of one or two floors with high level of transparency and lightness (30-50 percent transparent) at the ground floors allowing views inward and outward. Blank walls should be avoided along all public streets, courts, and pedestrian walkways.

#### *Ground Floor Retail*

- At least 75% of the street frontage of the proposed retail in “EXHIBIT: 10 CONCEPTUAL RETAIL PLAN” should be occupied by retail uses, including cafes and restaurants.



- Retail entrances should be located on public streets, or primary pedestrian uses and on corners wherever possible
- Retail entrances should relate to crosswalks and pathways that lead to bus stops and transit
- Retail within North Point should be as transparent as possible to maximize visibility of street level uses
- Ground floor facades should permit a clear view from the sidewalk to the interior space of the building (75% transparent surface is encouraged, and reflective glass is discouraged)
- Blank walls should be avoided along all public streets, courts, and pedestrian walkways
- Create a horizontal change in plane as the building approaches the ground plane
- Plan for tenant awnings or canopies that create a sense of enclosure over sidewalks and provide identity for tenants
- Design the building to accommodate changes in retailers and retail store size over time. This may entail making the ground floor retail facade bay structure flexible, so that in the future retail spaces can be demised to include multiple bays or portions of a single bay.
- The design should seek the optimal balance between the architectural identity of the building and that of individual retailers. Where appropriate, provide a facade bay structure that relates to the architecture of the building while allowing for signage, storefront and architecture within each bay that provides an opportunity for the individual expression of each retail storefront.
- Signage and graphics create both retail identity and a lively streetscape. Base building design should consider tenant signage visually as well as structurally. Signage in multi-tenant buildings should be co-ordinated and incorporated into the building's architecture

#### Architectural Character

- Careful articulation of large commercial buildings is critical in establishing a human scale at North Point.
- Create varied architecture and avoid flat facades by using recessed or projected entryways, bays, canopies, awnings, and other architectural elements.
- Vary the architecture of individual buildings to create architecturally diverse districts.
- Where buildings are set back at upper stories, lower roofs may be used as balconies, balustrades, and gardens.
- Utilize architectural articulation such as, varied facade planes, changes in material, fenestration, architectural detailing, or other elements to break down the scale.

#### Parking/Service

- Locate vehicular parking entrances and loading docks on side streets and alleys and provide safe pedestrian access from public streets. Where it is necessary to locate them on the major streets, building design shall try to make them unobtrusive to the pedestrian movement and shall maintain the quality of public realm.
- All parking garages must provide direct pedestrian access to the street.

- The primary pedestrian exit/access to all garages serving non-residential uses should be to the street or a public area.
- Design and locate lighting fixtures in surface parking lots and garages to enhance safety while minimizing light spillover onto adjacent properties and neighborhoods.

Parcel JK Block Guidelines

- The building on Parcel JK will be highly visible from North First Street and also presents a broad facade along the Park. The opportunity to create an iconic presence should be balanced with massing and scale of the building.
- In designing this building, its presence as it is seen from North First Street, North Point Common and Baldwin Park should be carefully considered
- Ground floor of the building should engage the North First Street, North Street and Baldwin Park
- Retail frontage should be maximized along North First Street and western portion of North Street.
- The configuration shall positively use the orientation and exposure to sun and minimize shadows on parks and surrounding buildings.
- Massing and articulation of the base/middle/top and horizontal articulation of the length of the facade are critical in defining character of Dawes and North Street
- Relationship to Parcel EF and I buildings should be carefully studied in creating an overall skyline identity