



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

To: Planning Board

From: CDD Staff

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Re: Special Permit **PB #288 Amendment 1, 40 Thorndike Street**

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This memo contains an overview of the proposed modifications to the previously approved project at 40 Thorndike Street (PB-288), the special permits being requested, and related comments.

Background

In 2014, the Planning Board granted special permits to convert the former Sullivan Courthouse building at 40 Thorndike Street to a mixed-use building with 476,303 square feet of Gross Floor Area occupied by commercial office and retail uses and 24,066 square feet occupied by 24 residential units. The project included demolition and removal of the top two stories of the existing building, removal of the existing building façade and replacement with new materials, installation of new mechanical systems at the roof level, reconfiguration and reconstruction of interior spaces, most notably at the ground level where new building entries will be created, installation of bicycle parking facilities within the below-grade portion of the building and on outdoor portions of the site, replacement of an existing at-grade parking facility with a publicly beneficial open space along Spring Street, and construction of outdoor open spaces on portions of the building roof. As approved, accessory parking would be provided by maintaining 92 parking spaces in the existing on-site parking facility below-grade, and by securing a long-term lease arrangement to provide 420 spaces from the municipal parking garage on First Street.

Special permit PB-288 was the subject of a multi-year appeal process and was ultimately upheld. In 2019, as part of the procedures for disposition of municipal property, the Planning Board reviewed and made a positive recommendation on the disposition of a leasehold interest in the required number of parking spaces as well as the retail space on the First Street side of the garage.

The Permittee committed to a set of public benefits in its bid for the leasehold interest, and agreed to additional commitments at the request of the City Council prior to the Council's approval of the disposition. Those additional commitments included seeking a special permit to reduce the project's parking by 150 spaces and to double the number of residential units to 48 units, all of which would be affordable. Other commitments included making a good faith effort to lease childcare space to a local non-profit and to make a \$3.5 million donation to the Cambridge Affordable Housing trust with 18 months of occupancy.

Summary of Requested Modifications

To fulfill the commitments made to the City Council, this application seeks a Special Permit pursuant to Section 6.35.1 to reduce the required amount of off-street parking by 150 spaces and a Special Permit pursuant to Section 5.28.2 for dimensional relief to convert an additional 24,000 (approximate) square feet of approved office space to residential use in order to create an additional 24 total dwelling units. The required findings are summarized below.

Requested Special Permits	Summarized Findings <i>(see appendix for zoning text excerpts)</i>
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.
Conversion of non-residential structures to residential use (Section 5.28.2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased number of dwelling units will not increase on-street parking demand in the neighborhood. • The location, orientation, and use of the structure and yard of the new housing use will not impact the privacy of residential neighbors. • Due consideration has been given to address the impacts of reduction in private open space. • Reasonable efforts have been taken to address concerns raised by abutters and neighbors.
General special permit criteria (Section 10.43)	<p>Special permits will be normally granted if the zoning requirements are met, unless it is found not to be in the public interest because the proposal would (unlike uses or development otherwise allowed in the district) either:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • not comply with the Zoning Ordinance; • cause traffic congestion, hazard, or substantial change in established character; • adversely affect the continued operation or development of adjacent uses; • create nuisance or hazard to the detriment of health, safety and/or welfare; • impair the integrity of the district or adjoining district or otherwise derogate from the intent and purpose of the Zoning Ordinance; or • be inconsistent with the Urban Design Objectives set forth in Section 19.30.

The granting of these special permits would modify the development plan approved in PB-288 by increasing the number of residential units from 24 to 48, by reducing the amount of non-residential Gross Floor Area from 452,237 square feet to 428,203 square feet, and by reducing the amount of off-street parking spaces in the project from 512 spaces to 362 spaces (85 spaces on site and 277 spaces in the First Street Garage). Condition 6 of the original Special Permit Decision would be modified to require a lease of at least 277 spaces rather than 420, and Condition 9 would be modified to allow all residential units to be Affordable Units.

Zoning

The proposed changes will not include any changes to the approved building area or its footprint. The changes are limited to the reduction in parking, increase in residential units, and reduction in the amount of office use within the building.

Past planning studies for this area, including the Eastern Cambridge Planning Study (ECaPS), encourage mixed-use where allowed in order to contribute to the liveliness of the area throughout the day and week. The proposed changes are also supported by the Cambridge Growth Policy and the more recent Envision Cambridge planning process, both of which promote an increase in the City's housing stock with a focus on affordable housing, and which support reduced reliance on automobile travel in favor of other modes.

The intent of Section 5.28.2 is to provide a way to grant comprehensive dimensional relief when needed to create new residential units in a building originally built for non-residential use. The approval criteria are intended to ensure that potential impacts on neighbors are reviewed and mitigated where necessary. In this case, the new residential units are being created adjacent to non-residential uses, so the conversion to residential is not expected to cause adverse impacts.

Section 6.35.1 provides a process for reducing parking requirements below the minimum standards required by zoning based on an analysis of the parking needs for the site and alternate transportation and parking options in the area. The proposed reduction in parking spaces will result in 339 spaces for office use, 23 for residential use, and 19 for other non-residential uses while the minimum parking requirements are 296 for office use, 48 for residential use, and 23 for other non-residential uses. The accompanying memo from the Traffic, Parking, and Transportation Department provides commentary on the requested reduction and the supporting analysis prepared by the Applicant. In general, the parking ratios currently proposed are typical of recent mixed-use development in the area and are consistent with the City's recommended parking ratios in other areas undergoing redevelopment.

Urban Design

The increase in residential units within the building podium has resulted in some modest changes to the appearance of the façades. The podium façades have been given a more uniform treatment with a regular fenestration pattern that addresses changes associated with stacking office use over residential use. The previous design had more variety in window pattern and treated the Third Street end of the building differently because it accommodated all the housing units. Windows on the 2nd and 3rd floors are proposed to have lower and upper shadow box details, while the office level windows will only have an upper shadow box. This appears to address concerns associated with energy use and window-to-wall ratios, and provides a useable sill height inside the housing units.

In the earlier façade design, the variety of window sizes created more of a vertical emphasis and more differentiation between the buildings ends and its long south front. The former plan also included recessed, vertical glass slots that broke the expanse of terracotta and horizontality of the podium while the new design uses a lighter color of terracotta in place of those glass slots. While the design changes are practical and the new façades remain quite handsome, an effort might be made through the continuing staff review process to restore some of the more elegant and interesting elements of the

earlier façade design. This would include more differentiation in the window patterns along Third and Second Streets, the potential for a deeper recess to achieve a more apparent change in plane between the two different colors of terracotta, more variation in the cornice detail, and restoring projections above the fourth floor windows to reinforce the cornice of the podium.

The office lobby entries have been simplified and a large area of grey metal panel is used to demarcate each entrance. Since the plane of both entries is well recessed from the red terracotta facades, this material change seems reasonable and better relates to the corporate nature of the office use. The retail space at the northwest corner of the building is now proposed to be recessed behind an arcade. As this occurs on the north side of the building, and the arcade further separates the retail from the sidewalk, this condition should be reviewed.

The landscape plan remains largely unchanged from the 2014 version. At the time of the Special Permit approval, there was extensive community input into the design of the landscaped frontage on Spring Street, which resulted in a well-received outcome. Staff note that the City's standard size Bluebike Station cannot fit within the current layout, so some changes will be required as part of the continuing design review process to ensure it will be functional.

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:

- Review of façade design details, especially the ground floor details, material transitions and reveals, and glass specifications: ground floor glazing and upper floor glazing.
- Review of all exterior materials and colors, including a materials mock-up of all wall assemblies on the site prior to any exterior materials being ordered.
- Review of the location and size of shared bicycle station.
- Review of all landscape details, including plantings, pavers, planters, benches, fences, structures, exterior lighting, etc.