



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

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To: Planning Board  
From: Jeff Roberts, Land Use and Zoning Planner  
Swaathi Joseph, Associate Zoning Planner  
Suzannah Bigolin, Urban Design Planner  
Date: June 21, 2016  
Re: **Special Permit PB #308, 95 and 99 Elmwood Street**

**Update**

Since the last Planning Board meeting, the Applicant has continued to work with staff to respond to comments and questions raised in the initial review of the application. The Applicant’s recent submission consists of an updated tree mitigation plan and a revised set of plans, including additional perspective renderings, proposing minor changes to the building’s internal layout, in addition to revisions to the detached bike shelter, fence details, landscape treatments, and connection to Alewife Linear Pathway from Elmwood Street. This memo comments on the additional information and proposed changes. Previously submitted staff materials are attached.

**Planning Board Action**

As a reminder, the proposal is seeking a special permit to demolish the two existing buildings located on two adjacent parcels, 95 and 99 Elmwood Street, to construct a new building with 34 residential units, underground parking for 34 cars, a shed for 39 long-term bicycle parking spaces, and a small retail space. The proposal also includes addition of sidewalks and street trees on Elmwood Street.

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"> <li>The project is consistent with the urban design objectives of the City as set forth in Section 19.30 (see appendix).</li> </ul>
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).

### **Issues Raised in Original Proposal**

During the May 3, 2016 hearing, the Planning Board recommended that the following elements be further explored.

- Confirmation of details regarding utility source and access to the property
- Landscape treatment details, including tree protection plan, fencing and edge conditions
- Street maintenance and management plan for Elmwood Street
- Opportunities to reconfigure rooftop mechanical units to reduce visual impact
- Additional renderings to show rear views from ground level and to explain the proposed preservation treatment of the existing rear wall
- Reconfiguration of the space between the building and the bike shed to improve circulation and interior views
- Improved access to Linear Park from Elmwood Street
- Community engagement report documenting public outreach extended to adjacent neighborhoods in Cambridge and Somerville
- Building materials samples for review
- Floor plans with accurate layout details showing access to individual units

### **Comments on Proposed Changes**

#### *Site Design*

The revised plans show improved site planning and landscape treatments in response to many of the issues raised above. The site plan identifies existing trees that will be conserved and denotes the pavement materials and types of fences, including a low aluminum fence along Linear Park, which staff feel is an improvement. In addition, the area between the building and the bike shed has been widened with a reconfiguration of the shed and additional plantings.

Further, the pedestrian and bicycle access to Linear Park from Elmwood Street has been detailed with landscape treatments, which include a combination of bollards, cobblestones and vegetation that create an attractive and accessible interface, as well as mitigate the grade change. Staff is aware that there have been ongoing discussions among area property owners and residents (including in Somerville) about other desired improvements to Elmwood Street. In staff's view, the most important improvement associated with this project will be the provision of a publicly accessible pedestrian and bicycle connection to Linear Park. If the Planning Board wishes to leave open the possibility of future improvements by private property owners, the Board could specify in making its decision that such improvements are not precluded by the special permit so long as the requirements for access and maintenance of the pedestrian and bicycle connection continue to be met.

### *Building Design*

With regard to the building design, little has changed since the May hearing as the Planning Board was relatively supportive of the project design. The internal access and stair arrangements for individual units has been clarified. New perspective renderings show the rear elevation and the proposed preservation treatment of the existing rear wall. In addition, an Elmwood Street elevation has been submitted, which helps to understand the project's scale and massing within the context of the changing streetscape.

### **Other Materials**

The Applicant has also provided a report on community engagement activities and outreach to neighbors, including nearby residents and city officials in Somerville.

An accompanying memo from the Traffic, Parking and Transportation Department (TP&T) provides additional comments and recommendations related to a Street & Property Maintenance Agreement that was provided in response to questions about how Elmwood Street would be managed and maintained in the future.

### **Continuing Review**

The following is a summary of issues that staff recommends should be subject to continuing design review by staff if the Board decides to grant the special permit:

- Review of all exterior materials, colors and details.
- Review of landscape details.
- Tree mitigation plans will be subject to final review by the City Arborist.

## Project Review Special Permit – Urban Design Findings

**19.25.2 Urban Design Findings.** The Planning Board shall grant the special permit only if it finds that the project is consistent with the urban design objectives of the city as set forth in Section 19.30. In making that determination the Board may be guided by or make reference to urban design guidelines or planning reports that may have been developed for specific areas of the city and shall apply the standards herein contained in a reasonable manner to nonprofit religious and educational organizations in light of the special circumstances applicable to nonprofit religious and educational activities.

### **19.30 Citywide Urban Design Objectives**

The following urban design objectives are intended to provide guidance to property owners and the general public as to the city's policies with regard to the form and character desirable for new development in the city. It is understood that application of these principles can vary with the context of specific building proposals in ways that, nevertheless, fully respect the policies' intent. It is intended that proponents of projects, and city staff, the Planning Board and the general public, where public review or approval is required, should be open to creative variations from the detailed provisions presented in this Section as long as the core values expressed are being served. A project need not meet all the objectives of this Section 19.30 where this Section serves as the basis for issuance of a special permit. Rather the permit granting authority shall find that on balance the objectives of the city are being served. Nor shall a project subject to special permit review be required to conform to the Required Building and Site Plan Requirements set forth in Section 19.50.

Further indicators of conformance with these policy objectives shall be found in planning documents and plans developed for specific areas of the city or the city as a whole, to the extent that they are not inconsistent with the objectives set forth in this Section 19.30. These documents include the *Harvard Square Development Guidelines*, the *Central Square Action Plan*, the *Central Square Development Guidelines*, the *North Massachusetts Avenue Urban Design Guidelines Handbook*, the *University Park at MIT Urban Design Guidelines*, the *North Point Policy Plan and Design Guidelines*, the *Cambridge Institutional Growth Management Plan*, the *East Cambridge Riverfront Plan*, the *Eastern Cambridge Plan*, the *Eastern Cambridge Design Guidelines*, the *Alewife Revitalization, Alewife Urban Design Study Phase II* and its Draft update of 1991, and *Toward a Sustainable Future: Cambridge Growth Policy Document*.

**19.30 Citywide Urban Design Objectives [SUMMARIZED]**

Objective	Indicators
New projects should be responsive to the existing or anticipated pattern of development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transition to lower-scale neighborhoods</li> <li>• Consistency with established streetscape</li> <li>• Compatibility with adjacent uses</li> <li>• Consideration of nearby historic buildings</li> </ul>
Development should be pedestrian and bicycle-friendly, with a positive relationship to its surroundings.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inhabited ground floor spaces</li> <li>• Discouraged ground-floor parking</li> <li>• Windows on ground floor</li> <li>• Orienting entries to pedestrian pathways</li> <li>• Safe and convenient bicycle and pedestrian access</li> </ul>
The building and site design should mitigate adverse environmental impacts of a development upon its neighbors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Location/impact of mechanical equipment</li> <li>• Location/impact of loading and trash handling</li> <li>• Stormwater management</li> <li>• Shadow impacts</li> <li>• Retaining walls, if provided</li> <li>• Building scale and wall treatment</li> <li>• Outdoor lighting</li> <li>• Tree protection (requires plan approved by City Arborist)</li> </ul>
Projects should not overburden the City infrastructure services, including neighborhood roads, city water supply system, and sewer system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Water-conserving plumbing, stormwater management</li> <li>• Capacity/condition of water and wastewater service</li> <li>• Efficient design (LEED standards)</li> </ul>
New construction should reinforce and enhance the complex urban aspects of Cambridge as it has developed historically.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Institutional use focused on existing campuses</li> <li>• Mixed-use development (including retail) encouraged where allowed</li> <li>• Preservation of historic structures and environment</li> <li>• Provision of space for start-up companies, manufacturing activities</li> </ul>
Expansion of the inventory of housing in the city is encouraged.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Housing as a component of large, multi-building development</li> <li>• Affordable units exceeding zoning requirements, targeting units for middle-income families</li> </ul>
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"> <li>• Publicly beneficial open space provided in large-parcel commercial development</li> <li>• Enhance/expand existing open space, complement existing pedestrian/bicycle networks</li> <li>• Provide wider range of activities</li> </ul>

## General Criteria for Issuance of a Special Permit

- 10.43** *Criteria.* Special permits will normally be granted where specific provisions of this Ordinance are met, except when particulars of the location or use, not generally true of the district or of the uses permitted in it, would cause granting of such permit to be to the detriment of the public interest because:
- (a) It appears that requirements of this Ordinance cannot or will not be met, or
  - (b) traffic generated or patterns of access or egress would cause congestion, hazard, or substantial change in established neighborhood character, or
  - (c) the continued operation of or the development of adjacent uses as permitted in the Zoning Ordinance would be adversely affected by the nature of the proposed use, or
  - (d) nuisance or hazard would be created to the detriment of the health, safety and/or welfare of the occupant of the proposed use or the citizens of the City, or
  - (e) for other reasons, the proposed use would impair the integrity of the district or adjoining district, or otherwise derogate from the intent and purpose of this Ordinance, and
  - (f) the new use or building construction is inconsistent with the Urban Design Objectives set forth in Section 19.30.