



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

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To: Planning Board

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Re: Special Permit **PB #316, 305 Webster Avenue**

This memo contains an overview of the proposed project at 305 Webster Avenue, the special permit being requested, and related comments. The applicant is in communication with Traffic, Parking and Transportation Department (TP&T) regarding transformer location in relation to the driveway access and with Department of Public Works (DPW) regarding stormwater management.

Summary of Proposal

In 2015, the Planning Board had issued a Special Permit to combine the existing commercial structure with a new conforming addition for a mixed use development consisting of 35 residential units and a small commercial space on the ground floor on this site. The same applicant is currently seeking a new special permit for that project with a proposal to demolish the existing structure due to structural deficiencies limiting its adaptive reuse and to construct a new mixed use structure to match the street-edge setbacks of the existing structure on all sides of the property, with retail use on the ground floor and residential use on the ground floor and the floors above. The Board of Zoning Appeal has granted a variance for setback relief to build the proposed structure at the property line. The new building is proposed to have the same built area for residential and non-residential uses as approved by the Planning Board in 2015.

Requested Special Permit

The project is located in the Business A (BA) District. The modified project will require a Project Review Special Permit because in the Business A district, the review threshold is 20,000 square feet. However, the project does not exceed the threshold to require a traffic impact study. Therefore the approval is based only on consideration of the urban design component of Project Review. The applicable special permit findings are summarized on the following page and applicable sections of the zoning are provided in an appendix.

Requested Special Permits	Summarized Findings <i>(see appendix for zoning text excerpts)</i>
Project Review Special Permit (Section 19.20)	Project is consistent with the urban design objectives of the City as set forth in Section 19.30 (see appendix).
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).

Area Planning and Zoning

The site is located in the Business A zoning district, which covers the Cambridge Street corridor from Inman Square to Lechmere. It is a unique triangular lot that does not directly front Cambridge Street, but sits at the Y-shaped intersection of Webster and Columbia Streets. To the north, Webster Ave connects to Union Square in Somerville, with the planned MBTA Union Square Green Line station about a 5-minute walk from the site. Columbia Street to the north extends into an industrial area of Somerville that has become known for small-scale fabrication and food-related businesses. To the south, Columbia Street continues through the Wellington-Harrington and Port (formerly Area Four) neighborhoods leading toward Central Square.

There have been a number of projects that converted former commercial sites to residential buildings in the vicinity of Union Square. This area has an eclectic mix of uses including retail, office, residential, manufacturing and auto-related uses because of its location between rail lines and industrial districts in Somerville and residential neighborhoods in Cambridge. The City’s growth policies suggest that this is a good location for the development of housing at a moderately high urban scale and density due to the close proximity to a future public transit station as well as bus service, retail and other amenities. Also, the inclusion of ground-floor commercial space is critical to support the feeling of a connected urban streetscape from the future MBTA station to the Cambridge Street mixed-use corridor. In general, the project should contribute positively to establishing a safe and attractive pedestrian connection from Cambridge Street to the new station.

This area will likely continue to serve a mix of uses, including commercial uses that are industrial in nature, for some time. While this kind of urban character may be acceptable to some residents, the project’s design should provide a reasonable buffer to residents of the building from noise or other nuisances that may be present in the surrounding area.

Proposed Project

As it exists, the lot is currently non-conforming with regard to setbacks and some other dimensional requirements. The Applicant has reviewed the proposal with staff at the Cambridge Historical Commission, who have approved the demolition of the existing structure owing to structural instability. The proposed new building is designed to extend to the limits of the existing structure with the variance granted for setbacks. The proposed development does not exceed the allowed density in the district.

Required automobile parking and required long-term bicycle parking are located below grade within the building itself. The project exceeds the minimum requirement for open space with landscaped areas and green roofs.

The project will also be subject to the Green Building requirements per Section 22.20. The requirement is to design to a minimum “Certified” standard under the latest LEED rating system in effect. The project will be subject to continuing Green Building review by CDD staff prior to receiving a Building Permit and Certificate of Occupancy.

The project proposes street edge improvements to Webster Avenue and Columbia Street, including new sidewalks, landscaped areas with shade trees and crosswalks to improve pedestrian access from Cambridge Street to Webster Avenue.

The residential section with shared amenities is proposed to contain units of a variety of sizes, with three-bedroom units, two-bedroom units and one-bedroom units. The project will provide affordable units in accordance with Inclusionary Housing requirements.

Urban Design

The project generally follows the same design approach as the original Special Permit. A buff brick one and two story base is proposed along the street edges, which generally has the same scale and massing as the existing buildings. The four-story interior volume, clad in clapboard and metal shingle, remains a triangular form, which is unchanged from the first proposal. All of the positive aspects of the project are maintained, including the open space at the apex of the triangle, the small retail node, the storefront windows along each street, and the streetscape improvements mentioned above. Such design features have the potential to significantly improve pedestrian connections around the site.

Staff has worked with the applicant to ensure that there is a similar level of detail and texture provided along the ground floor frontage as was evident in the original structures. It is anticipated that the brick and window details will continue to be refined as the project advances. While the introduction of box awnings helps to differentiate the more commercial nature of Webster Avenue and provides weather protection for pedestrians, it is important to ensure that these elements are not bulky or visually obtrusive. With regard to the interior volume, perhaps there is an opportunity to create a stronger presence now that the historical structures are no longer being preserved.

The sidewalks are relatively narrow around the site and should be further studied to determine if some additional width can be provided, particularly as this building will set the precedent for future development to the north. The landscaping details associated with the open space and the transformer screening on Columbia Street, are particularly important and should continue to be reviewed.

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 landscape details, including pavers, planters, and fences.
- Investigation of opportunities to improve the siting and appearance of the transformer.
- Review of the final location of short-term bicycle racks, to ensure conformance with City standards.
- Review of sidewalk improvements and street trees (with DPW and TP&T).
- Review of the building exterior, including materials, colors, and details.