



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

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To: Planning Board

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Re: Special Permit **PB #317, 300 Putnam Avenue & 357-363 Allston Street**

This memo contains an overview of the proposed project at 300 Putnam Avenue and 357-363 Allston Street, the special permit being requested, and related comments. The applicant is in communication with Traffic, Parking and Transportation Department (TP&T) and Department of Public Works (DPW).

Summary of Proposal

The applicant is proposing to demolish the existing single-story non-residential buildings on the two corner lots to construct two new three-story buildings, each with 8 residential units, above-grade parking for 16 cars, and two sheds for 16 long-term bicycle parking spaces. The proposal also includes addition of landscaped yards along the sidewalks on River Street, Putnam Avenue, Allston Street, and Fairmont Avenue.

Requested Special Permit

The site is mostly located in Residence C-1 district and partially in Business A-3 district (which has the same dimensional standards as Residence C-1 for residential development). The project seeks a Multifamily Special Permit for the construction of a multifamily dwelling containing 12 or more units per Section 4.26 *Multifamily Special Permit Applicability*. It is also seeking a Special Permit to exempt basement area from the calculation of Gross Floor Area. The applicable special permit findings are summarized below. Applicable sections of the zoning are provided in an appendix.

Requested Special Permits	Summarized Findings <i>(see appendix for zoning text excerpts)</i>
Construction of Multifamily Dwelling in Residence C-1 & Business A-3 Districts (Section 4.26.1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key features of natural landscape are preserved. • New buildings relate sensitively to existing built environment. • Open space provides visual benefits to abutters and passersby and functional benefits to occupants. • Parking, access and egress are safe and convenient. • Intrusion of onsite parking is minimized. • Services such as trash collection and utility boxes are convenient yet unobtrusive. <p>(See full 10.47.4 criteria in appendix)</p>
Exemption of basement area in the calculation of Gross Floor Area (GFA)	The uses occupying such exempted GFA support the character of the neighborhood or district in which the applicable lot is located.
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 within the Cambridgeport neighborhood and is comprised of two parcels: 300 Putnam Avenue, located mostly in the Residence C-1 District except for the first 100 feet along Putnam Avenue located in the Business A-3 District; and 357-363 Allston Street, located entirely in the Residence C-1 District. Residential development in Business A-3 District is subject to the requirements of Residence C-1 District. The site has frontage on River Street, Putnam Avenue, Allston Street, and Fairmont Avenue.

Residence C-1 zoning is typical of many neighborhoods in the city that were built before the Zoning Ordinance was enacted. As reflected in the City’s growth policy, the zoning in residential neighborhoods is meant to maintain the prevailing pattern of development, building density and scale as had evolved historically. Larger multifamily developments are subject to special permit review to assess the proposed site design and to mitigate visual or environmental impacts on neighbors.

Proposed Project

As it exists, the lot is currently non-conforming with regard to front and side setbacks and some other dimensional requirements. The Applicant has reviewed the proposal with staff at the Cambridge Historical Commission, who did not find the existing buildings to be significant and therefore no demolition review hearing will be required.

The proposed residential use will be more conforming for the entire site than the existing non-residential use. The proposed new residential building is designed to conform to the base zoning

requirements, including FAR, unit density, height, setbacks, parking and bicycle parking. Although it is a split-zoning lot, the entire lot is subject to the requirements of Residence C-1 district for the residential project. The proposed development does not exceed the allowed density in the district. Required automobile parking is located at grade and required long-term bicycle parking is located at grade within two sheds located behind the buildings. The project meets the minimum requirement for open space with landscaped areas, decks, and patio areas.

The project proposes landscaped front yards on all street frontages to improve the streetscape. The existing curb cut on Putnam Avenue will be preserved for vehicular access to the development. The residential buildings are proposed to contain all three-bedroom units, consistent with the City's policy of promoting housing sized for families with children. The project will provide affordable units in accordance with Inclusionary Housing requirements. The project is not subject to Green Building requirements.

All units will have finished areas in the basement. The Planning Board may grant a special permit to exempt these areas from the gross floor area (GFA) calculation if the Board finds that the uses occupying such exempted GFA support the character of the neighborhood or zoning district. The proposed use of the basement areas have not been specified in the proposal. The recently adopted Barrett Amendment modified the definition of Gross Floor Area to state that basement space could be excluded from the definition upon the granting of a special permit. Part of the stated aim of that amendment, which was citywide in scope, was to provide opportunities to make full use of existing built space in Cambridge. Since this site is located in the vicinity of Charles River, it is recommended to check if it is susceptible to flooding, especially if habitable spaces are proposed in the basement. Comments from Department of Public Works (DPW) regarding potential flood risk are expected as the applicant is in the process of reviewing the plan with DPW.

The Traffic, Parking and Transportation Department (TP&T) is currently in discussion with the applicant regarding the location of the curb cut to provide safe vehicular access to the site and also to reduce conflict between pedestrian and vehicular circulation at the intersection of streets. It is recommended that the site plan be finalized after the details regarding parking access and egress, maneuverability of loading trucks and trash collection trucks have been approved by TP&T.

Urban Design

At the site planning level, breaking the project into two separate buildings is a positive move as it allows for a varied urban form, provision of a central access aisle to parking, and creation of a strong urban edge along all four streets. The site's corner location also deserves special attention, particularly given the lack of streetwall and the sea of parking at the Rite Aid site. The proposed robust brick corner form of Building 2, which is modestly set back from the sidewalk provides a good balance between reinforcing the street edge and anchoring the corner, while providing an appropriate fit with the neighborhood. In contrast, Building 1 has a softer neighborhood scale, which is entirely appropriate given its more residential context. Vehicular parking is accessed via the existing curb cut and does not immediately abut the street edge; however, further consideration should be given to the design of this interior space, as well as better ways to screen the parking and break up the extent of paving.

While maintaining the streetwall is important, it is also important to have buildings with breaks, front yards, and recesses that reinforce the character of the neighborhood and provide a variety of landscaping and built form. The two proposed buildings do just that with a rhythm of architectural scaling elements that reduce the appearance of the length of building façades. These “townhouse-scale” design elements, such as changes in wall plane and roof form, height, and varied materials, also help the buildings respond to the neighborhood context and enhance the pedestrian experience.

The individual entries to each unit activate the street edges, which further helps to create a residential character and feel. The project also provides a successful transition between the residential use and the sidewalk with the vertical separation provided by the stoop and the landscaped front yards. There are perhaps further opportunities to provide more visual interest on Putnam Ave by defining the entrances, and providing weather protection and more generous stoops for Building 2. Similarly, the horizontal expression lines of this building are a little unclear, which appears to create some discordant proportions across the facade. Pedestrian access to Unit 8 is also indistinguishable in the materials submitted, and should be defined to help provide a sense of identity for that unit.

The proposed interior trash and recycling room is well concealed from public view behind Building 2. Another positive site planning move is the proposed siting of the transformer below grade, which staff hope is an approach that is supported by the DPW and Eversource. If not, an alternative transformer location, which is similarly hidden from the public realm will need to be found. Further details regarding HVAC and mechanical equipment are needed to ensure that any rooftop units are not visible from adjoining streets. Access to the covered bicycle storage areas also needs to be clarified.

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 and opportunities to minimize the perceived extent of paving associated with the driveway and parking.
- Confirmation that the siting of the transformer below grade is supported by DPW and Eversource.
- Details of any rooftop HVAC or mechanical equipment, including proposed siting and screening approaches.
- Review of all exterior materials, colors, and details.
- Review of parking, bicycle parking, access and egress by the Traffic, Parking and Transportation Department.
- Review of stormwater management by the Department of Public Works.