



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

IRAM FAROOQ
Assistant City Manager for
Community Development

To: Planning Board

From: Swaathi Joseph, Associate Zoning Planner
Suzannah Bigolin, Urban Design Planner
Jeff Roberts, Senior Manager for Zoning and Development

Date: October 12, 2016

Re: Special Permit **PB #318, 55 Regent Street**

This memo contains an overview of the proposed project at 55 Regent 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 repurpose the existing two-story warehouse building into a three-story building with 4 residential units, garage parking for 4 cars, and covered area for 4 long-term bicycle parking spaces. The proposal also includes addition of penthouses and rooftop gardens.

Requested Special Permit

The project is located in the Residence B District and seeks a Special Permit to modify base zoning requirements to convert a non-residential building to residential use, which is allowed pursuant to Section 5.28.2 of the Zoning Ordinance. It also seeks a Special Permit to exempt basement area from the calculation of Gross Floor Area. The project also proposes a rooftop addition that will require variances from the Board of Zoning Appeal for Floor Area Ratio and Gross Floor Area requirements of Article 5.000 and alteration of a non-conforming structure per Section 8.22.3. 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>
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. (See full 5.28.28.1 criteria in appendix)
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 in the Residence B District within North Cambridge. Recently this part of the neighborhood, which is near an active rail line, has experienced some transition from commercial/industrial use to residential use. Porter Square, a main commercial and transit center with Red Line, commuter rail and bus stations, is within walking distance from the parcel. Regent Street connects directly to Massachusetts Avenue, which features a variety of retail, office, and residential uses. The presence of Lesley University in Porter Square also brings the student life to the area.

This area has been zoned Residence B since 1978; prior to that it was Residence C-1. Since then, changes were made to the Residence B zoning district which reduced the allowed density of housing and increased restrictions on building in backyards. While the neighborhood has a mix of housing types, allowed development in Residence B is predominantly single or two-family structures with generous setbacks and open space areas.

The Cambridge Growth Policy for residential neighborhoods promotes maintaining the prevailing pattern of development, building density and scale that has evolved historically. It also recommends conversion of underused industrial use to residential use if there is a demand for housing, especially in areas with good access to public transportation.

Background on Requested Special Permits

Ordinarily, the conversion of a non-residential structure to residential use would trigger many dimensional non-conformities requiring variances. During the Citywide Rezoning in 2001, a provision was added under Section 5.28.2 allowing the Planning Board to approve such non-conformities by special permit, rather than variances, when altering a building originally built for non-residential use to accommodate a residential use. The rationale is to allow existing buildings to be preserved in a way that is economically feasible and generally consistent with the allowed uses in the district, and to maintain some of the historic character of the neighborhoods. Such relief could only be granted for development occurring within the original structure. The provisions of Section 5.28.2 were amended in 2006 and again in 2011, to strengthen requirements related to parking, to limit density, and to provide additional criteria for Planning Board consideration.

The Barrett Amendment, adopted at the beginning of 2016, 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.

Proposed Project

As it exists, the lot is currently non-conforming with regard to use, all setbacks and some other dimensional requirements. The Applicant has reviewed the proposal with staff at the Cambridge Historical Commission, who did not find that a demolition review hearing will be required as more than 75% of the existing building will be retained. The proposed residential development with four three-bedroom units is not subject to Inclusionary Housing requirements or Green Building requirements.

The proposed residential use will be more conforming than the existing non-residential use in this district. Although multifamily development is not allowed in the base zoning district, it may be approved by special permit from the Planning Board when an existing nonresidential structure is converted to a residential use per Section 5.28.2. With all four units being three-bedroom units, the proposal supports the city’s policy (also reflected in the most recent North Cambridge Neighborhood Study Update) to encourage development of units that can accommodate families with children.

The proposed penthouse addition is designed to conform to the base zoning requirements for setbacks and height, but will further increase the non-conforming FAR of the lot, requiring variances. The proposed development exceeds the allowed dwelling unit density of the base zoning district, but the Planning Board special permit may allow a greater number of dwelling units per Section 5.28.22.

Required automobile parking is located in the garage and required long-term bicycle parking is located at grade within a shed attached to the front of the building. The project does not meet the minimum requirement for private open space, which may be reduced by the Planning Board in granting a special permit if the Board finds that full compliance is limited by the existing development of the lot per Section 5.28.25. The existing building footprint covering almost the entire site makes it challenging to create private open space and permeable open space unless the structure is subject to extensive

alteration. The project however provides sufficient open space in the form of private decks and common court.

All units will have finished areas in the basement supplemental to the garage space. 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 other than for one unit, for which it has been designated as storage space. One of the concerns raised during consideration of the Barrett Amendment was that it would encourage basement-level residential space that may be susceptible to flooding risk. If the space is used primarily for storage, the risk may not be a great concern. The applicant is in the process of reviewing the plan with the Department of Public Works (DPW) and therefore comments from DPW regarding potential flood risk are awaited.

Urban Design

The project is unique in terms of its modest scale compared to many of the projects the Planning Board reviews. The proposed adaptive reuse of the building is one that is very much supported by staff. The streetscape will largely remain unchanged except for some minor facade modifications, which generally maintain the historic fabric of the building, while creating opportunities for interior patios, access and daylighting for future residents. Use of obscured glass in the existing brick openings on side elevations also preserves the integrity of the historic fabric and mitigates overlooking impacts on abutting residential properties.

The project maximizes pedestrian and bicyclists improvements to the extent possible given the constraints of the existing buildings. The proposed street edge treatments, including the design of the planters and bicycle parking, should continue to be reviewed as the design develops.

The rooftop addition is well set back from the original building facades, which limits visual impacts of the new structure from the street and neighboring properties, as well as overshadowing. All HVAC units are proposed to be located within the basement, which ensures that the roofline stays clear of obstructions and additional bulk.

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 the planters and bicycle storage locker/shed in the front yard.
- Review of all exterior materials, colors, façade alterations and details with staff at the Cambridge Historical Commission.
- Review of vehicular parking, bicycle parking, access and egress by the Traffic, Parking and Transportation Department.
- Review of stormwater management by the Department of Public Works.