



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

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Re: Special Permit **PB #319, 605 Concord Avenue**

This memo contains an overview of the proposed mixed-use project at 605 Concord Avenue (also recorded as 579 Concord Avenue), the special permits being requested, and related comments. Comments from the Traffic, Parking and Transportation Department (TP&T) are provided in a separate memo. The applicant is in communication with Department of Public Works (DPW) regarding stormwater management.

Summary of Proposal

The applicant is proposing to demolish the existing bank building to construct a six-story building with retail use on the ground floor and 49 residential units on five floors above that. This building is described as "Phase II" of the Concord-Wheeler project of which "Phase I" was completed on the neighboring site at 601-603 Concord Avenue (Planning Board case #269). The two buildings will share the parking proposed at grade behind the buildings and in a single level basement garage accessed by two shared driveways, one on Concord Avenue and the other on Wheeler Street. The proposal also includes the addition of balconies and a residential management office to the Phase I building.

Requested Special Permit

The site is located in the Business A (BA) zoning district as well as in an Alewife Overlay District (AOD-5). The proposed project is seeking Special Permits to increase the FAR per Section 20.95.1, increase the building height per Section 20.95.2.5, waive the yard requirements per Section 20.95.34, and reduce the required open space per Section 20.96.3. The project is also seeking a Special Permit to reduce setbacks for on grade open parking facilities per Section 6.44.1. In addition, the project is seeking reduction of the permeable area as of right pursuant to Section 20.96.1 with certification by the City Engineer. 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>
Project Review Special Permit (Section 19.20)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The project will have no substantial adverse impact on city traffic within the study area, upon review of the traffic impact indicators analyzed in the Transportation Impact Study and mitigation efforts proposed. • The project is consistent with the urban design objectives of the City as set forth in Section 19.30 (see appendix).
Increase FAR, increase building height, waive yard requirements, and reduce required open space in Alewife Overlay Districts (Section 20.95.1, 20.95.2.5, 20.95.34, 20.96.3)	<p>The project promotes the general interests of the larger commercial and residential neighborhood noted in Section 20.92 and is consistent with the goals, objectives and guidelines established in the Concord-Alewife Plan (see following page).</p> <p>For increasing FAR:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">For gross floor area exceeding 100,000 square feet on a lot or combination of lots under common ownership, the square footage devoted to non-residential uses shall be at a minimum of 20% and shall not exceed 50%.</p> <p>For increasing building height:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">For residential uses the height may be increased to 85 feet provided the building floorplate above 55 feet is limited to 10,000 square feet or less and those portions of buildings above 55 feet are separated by at least 50 feet.</p> <p>For waiver of yard requirements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The objectives of the Concord-Alewife Plan continue to be met. • The stormwater management objectives for the area continue to be met both on the site and as the site may be a part of a larger system for managing stormwater runoff. • The reduction or waiver of yard requirements provides for more efficient development of land; encourages or facilitates a more logical pattern of buildings, streets, parks and open space; or enhances the urban, pedestrian character of the area as envisioned in the Concord-Alewife Plan. <p>For reduction of required open space:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">The urban design and stormwater management objectives as set forth in the Concord-Alewife Plan continue to be met.</p>
Reduce setback for on grade open parking facilities (Section 6.44.1) (GFA)	The minimum setback requirement of ten (10) feet between the building wall containing windows of habitable rooms may be modified if site specific factors favor such modification.
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).

Concord-Alewife Plan Goals for Shopping Center (intended to provide general guidance)

- Introduce a mix of uses, including housing, in the Shopping Center area.
- Encourage small-scale neighborhood retail.
- Use building and site design to create a vibrant, walkable environment.
- Improve circulation within the Shopping Center with a clearly visible roadway system.
- Enhance overall accessibility to and from the Quadrangle, Alewife Station, the Highlands, and North Cambridge via improved and new pedestrian walkways.
- When the Watertown rail line ceases to be active, create a multiuse path along the right of way and connect it to the rich regional path system created by Linear Park, Minuteman Path, and Belmont Path.
- Encourage improvements within the Shopping Center that support housing as well as a mix of uses.

Concord-Alewife Design Guidelines – Areawide & Shopping Center (intended for general guidance)

- Break up large blocks into smaller blocks, of sizes similar to those in surrounding Cambridge neighborhoods.
- Vary the design of individual buildings to create an architecturally diverse district.
- Street level facades should include active uses such as frequent residential entrances; neighborhood-serving retail; services for public or commercial offices; and community spaces.
- Encourage awnings/ canopies to provide shelter and enliven ground-floor façades.
- Design residential buildings with individual units and front doors facing streets
- Utilize low impact development principles in building and site design.
- Use site design that preserves future rights-of-way identified in the Circulation Concept Plan.
- Improve existing streets to meet City standards, including streetscape improvements.
- Strengthen bicycle and pedestrian links to adjacent areas.
- Provide links that strengthen physical and visual connections to open space resources.
- Screen service areas from major streets.
- Parking below-grade is preferred. If above-grade parking is provided, it should be designed so that it is not visible from public streets and pathways; line structured parking with active uses along important public ways.
- Design and locate lighting and signage in support of the district’s pedestrian-friendly quality.
- Use site design to minimize shadows on other buildings or on public streets, open spaces, parks, and plazas.
- Design residential development to include a range of units of various sizes and with various numbers of bedrooms.
- Provide pedestrian links to create strong physical and visual connections to Danehy Park.
- Improve the pedestrian connection to Alewife Station and to North Cambridge.
- Create a new street network, including a north-south main street.
- Ensure that a significant number of entrances for building(s) face Alewife Brook Parkway and/or new main street.
- Create a strong pedestrian link across the Alewife Brook Parkway to connect the east and west parts of the Study Area.
- Create building height / façade setbacks between 55’ and 85’.

Area Planning and Zoning

The base zoning for the site is Business A (BA), which allows commercial and residential uses by right. The base zoning is modified by the Alewife Overlay District (AOD) zoning, which augments the base district zoning regulations in a way that allows greater density and more flexible dimensional requirements by special permit while imposing additional requirements and standards to respond to the unique issues identified in the Alewife area. This zoning regime of a more restrictive by-right zoning, which can be more permissive by special permit, was one of the results of the Concord-Alewife Rezoning that was recommended in the 2006 *Concord-Alewife Planning Study* (see below).

The site is located along Concord Avenue across from Fresh Pond Reservation. Most of the site, except for a small area in the northeast corner of the lot, is within the Parkway Overlay District as well as the Concord Avenue Parkway Subdistrict. The Parkway Overlay District zoning, enacted in 1981, imposes setbacks and height limitations as well as landscaping and urban design guidelines to guide the character of development along the major parkways in the area such as Concord Avenue, Alewife Brook Parkway, and the areas in Cambridge adjacent to Route 2. In 2000, the Tennis Petition resulted in further reducing allowed heights along Concord Avenue adjacent to Fresh Pond Reservation to 50 feet.

Concord-Alewife Plan

The planning goals that guide development in the area were established in the *Concord-Alewife Planning Study*, completed in 2006. In deciding special permits pursuant to the Alewife Overlay District (AOD) zoning, the key consideration for the Board will be the degree to which the proposal conforms to the Concord-Alewife plan. Attached to this memo is a selected set of materials from the Concord-Alewife report that are most relevant to consideration of a proposal in this area.

The 605 Concord Avenue site lies just within the “Shopping Center” district (classified on the Zoning Map as “AOD-5”), which includes mostly business areas on either side of Alewife Brook Parkway, and historically characterized by retail and commercial uses clustered in the western area, where this site is located. This area has good access to public transit through regional bus service and, somewhat further away, the Alewife MBTA Red Line station. The area is currently experiencing a considerable amount of multi-family housing production.

Future Development Goals

Some of the overall Concord-Alewife goals related to development are to promote a mix of housing and commercial uses throughout the area, to manage traffic demand by supporting walking, bicycling and public transportation as alternative modes of transportation, and to promote stormwater management through increased landscape and permeable area, as well as engineered interventions.

In the Shopping Center in particular, the planning goals strongly encourage transit-oriented development that support housing as well as a mix of uses and small-scale neighborhood retail. The Shopping Center goals also support enhancement of overall accessibility to and from the Quadrangle, Alewife Station, the Highlands residential neighborhood, and North Cambridge via improved and new pedestrian walkways.

Infrastructure

Another key component of the Concord-Alewife plan is desired infrastructure improvements to serve public goals. One major piece of infrastructure is an east-west main road connecting the Quadrangle and the Shopping Center to improve traffic conditions at existing intersections and to improve east-west access for bicycles and pedestrians with connections all the way from the Highlands to the shopping center. Another planned improvement is a pedestrian/bicycle bridge providing a more direct connection between the Triangle and the Quadrangle for better accessibility to Alewife Station. The city is currently undertaking a feasibility study for this bridge connection, which is now also considering the possibility of creating a new MBTA commuter rail station along the existing Fitchburg line, which could provide additional transit service to the area.

Other desired infrastructure improvements particular to the Shopping Center include creation of a multiuse pedestrian/bicycle path connection from the existing network of paths in the area to the future path being advanced along the former Watertown Branch rail line by the City and Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR). In addition, the plan identifies public open space as a goal, both to serve community-gathering functions and to assist in stormwater management. The AOD zoning provides mechanisms by which development rights and requirements can be shifted, pooled and transferred flexibly across sites to enable these public improvements.

Comments on Proposal

Overall Consistency with Planning and Zoning

The scale and use of the proposed project are consistent with the AOD zoning requirements, and the project is exceeding the minimum Article 6.000 requirements for parking and bicycle parking. The completed Phase II project will be approximately 57,679 square feet in Gross Floor Area (GFA), with FAR of 1.90 for residential uses that is allowed by special permit in this AOD and FAR of 0.19 for non-residential uses that is allowed by right in the base zone. The Project Review Special Permit requirements (Section 19.20) apply, as the additional GFA is greater than 20,000 square feet. Planning Board approval is required for additional FAR exceeding 1.75, height exceeding 55 feet, and reduction in side setbacks and open space to assess whether such development is in accordance with the objectives of the Concord-Alewife Plan.

Open Space

The project is proposing Open Space area to be more than the required minimum of 15% of the lot area under the Alewife Overlay District requirements. However, the 25 feet wide front yard along Concord Avenue does not consist entirely of Green Area Open Space (Section 20.64.1.2) as the non-vegetated area occupies more than 25% of the open space area. The description in the Application is not entirely clear, but it appears that the proposal requires a divergence from the Parkway Overlay District standards (per Section 20.63.7) regarding landscaped front setbacks, rather than a reduction in the required open space per the Alewife Overlay District requirements. The Planning Board may approve such a divergence by special permit upon finding that the development better meets the objectives of the district, which

include protecting and enhancing the use and enjoyment of public open space resources along the parkways.

The AOD regulations also require a minimum Permeable Area of 25% of the lot area, which may be waived as-of-right if the DPW water management standards are met. The engineering report provided in the Application indicates that those requirements are being considered, but no comment has been provided by DPW to the Planning Board thus far.

Retail Use

The Application does not specify exactly what type of retail use is proposed in Phase II building, though it appears that a restaurant or café use is favored given the proposal for outdoor seating. Most retail uses are allowed as-of-right in the district. Given that the size of the space is over 4,000 square feet, which is appropriate for a restaurant but may be relatively large for most stand-alone retail establishments, it would be helpful to know more about the Applicant's strategy to market that space and whether it may be subdivided if a larger tenant is not secured.

Transportation

The project is subject to the transportation impact standards of Section 19.20, because the GFA is above the 50,000 square-foot threshold. Transportation is a key element of the Concord-Alewife Plan, whose objectives include public infrastructure improvements, transportation demand management (TDM) programs, and other measures to discourage additional automobile trips and encourage a more walkable, bikeable, and transit-oriented neighborhood, which is critical due to the existing traffic issues in the Alewife area. The applicant has submitted a Transportation Impact Study, which is helpful in understanding how the project's transportation characteristics align with the goals in the Concord-Alewife plan. The Traffic, Parking and Transportation Department has provided specific comments on the project and recommendations for transportation enhancements in an accompanying memo.

Sustainable Design

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, which is currently Version 4 (although projects have been allowed to register with the U.S. Green Building Council using a prior version of LEED, this will no longer be allowed starting in November, and therefore the City has been requiring all new projects in the pre-approval stage to transition to using Version 4). The project will be subject to continuing Green Building review by CDD staff prior to receiving a Building Permit and Certificate of Occupancy.

As a result of the 2015 Net Zero Action Plan, the City is developing a proposal to increase the sustainable design standards for new buildings, with a particular focus on energy performance and enhanced commissioning. The Net Zero Action Plan also recommends that new buildings be "solar ready," meaning that the building includes rooftop space with maximum solar access (i.e., located to the south of any equipment that might cast a shadow) and designed to accommodate the future installation of solar energy equipment such as photovoltaic panels. While this is not required, staff highly recommends pursuing this objective, and it is included in the proposed design. Also, the City is currently conducting a

public process to develop a Climate Change Preparedness Plan to mitigate and adapt to climate change impacts, which includes preparing for increased flooding over time and mitigating urban heat island effects.

Urban Design

Characterized as the second phase of the residential project located next door, this infill project will redevelop an underutilized one-story bank and parking lot site and complete the streetscape between Wheeler and Fawcett Streets. This new building will also help create a stronger retail presence on the street, and will bring more activity to Concord Avenue and Fresh Pond.

Scale and massing

As shown in the perspectives, the design directly reflects the features of the Concord-Alewife Design Guidelines by modulating the massing, with a lower volume that cantilevers over the ground floor relating well to the abutting buildings, and the taller volume setback behind. The site plan also continues the approach utilized in the first phase, with parking both below grade and at grade to the rear of the site, and appropriately screened by active use.

Architectural character

Color and choice of materials are other aspects of the proposed composition that help to mitigate the scale of the building and celebrate its modulation. The architect, who has used similar strategies in other projects, including the Phase I design, utilizes a color scheme that accentuates the lower volume with a white tone, while the taller volume appears to recede into the background in a dark green. Pops of color are used to provide further interest across the façades and to celebrate various design features, such as the balcony screens and columns at the rear. The use of fiber cement panels and siding of varying exposures, and the systematic approach to placement of exhaust vents, also helps to create a smaller scale. More detailed elevations should be provided to clarify material transitions and fenestration details as the printed renderings do appear stark and dark, which may simply be a graphics production issue.

The vertical arrangement of inset balconies and windows across the Concord Avenue façade creates a fine-grained rhythm and helps to vary the pedestrian experience along the length of the site. The balconies are also useful to activate the façade and encourage “eyes on the street”. The roof decks with cedar trellises enliven and soften the top of the building, and also complement the Phase I design.

Public realm and streetwall

At the ground floor, the project continues the active street edge and modulated façade of Phase I. Parking is well-screened by a modest corner lobby, which mirrors the earlier building, and a substantial retail space. While the landscape plan is well detailed with terraces, outdoor seating areas, and a range of plantings, the ground floor façade is not clearly articulated in the renderings. It would be helpful to see more detail regarding the texture and quality of the storefront windows, and perhaps use of warmer

elements to make the lobby and retail more inviting and brighter as these spaces will be overshadowed by the volume above.

There also remains a considerable extent of paving throughout the site, and opportunities to “green” the interior, including application of Low Impact Development approaches, such as green roofs, bio-swale and filter strips, should be explored.

Architectural details

Mechanical and service functions are arranged in a logical way that reduces their impact on the public realm. Rooftop mechanical equipment appears to be well organized and screened by the parapet with individual A/C units proposed to be sited along the middle of the roof. An area for solar panels has also been identified on the roof plan, which supports the City’s Net Zero Action Plan goals. The view down the central driveway to the trash storage area is somewhat ambiguous, so further details regarding the design of that structure are needed. Further information about other utility services, such as gas meters, and access to the transformers at the rear of the site, should also be provided.

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 and plantings in the front yard, and opportunities to further green the interior of the site.
- Design details of the at-grade trash storage building at the rear of the site.
- Design and details of the elevator and stair headhouses.
- Review of all exterior materials, colors, and details, including a clearer representation of the building’s structure, and construction details such as windows and material transitions.
- Revision of the shadow study to differentiate between existing and new shadows and gain a better understanding of impacts on the abutting residential property to the north.
- 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.