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CITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

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To: Planning Board

From: Swaathi Joseph, Associate Zoning Planner  
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Date: January 26, 2017

Re: Special Permit **PB #323, Municipal School at 850 Cambridge Street**

This memo contains an overview of the proposed project at 850 Cambridge Street, the special permits being requested, and related comments.

### Summary of Proposal

City of Cambridge is proposing to construct new buildings to house the King Open and Cambridge Street Upper Schools, the Valente Branch Library and Gold Star Mother's Pool on their current site at 850 Cambridge Street, as well as provide new offices for the city's public school administration. The project includes 105 off-street parking spaces in a below-grade garage, 92 long-term bicycle spaces, 118 short term bicycle spaces, and 2 loading bays.

### Requested Special Permits

The project is located in Residence C-1 (C-1) and is seeking the following special permits:

- Special permit to locate a local government administrative office in Residence C-1 District, pursuant to Section 4.56, Footnote 6
- Special permits to increase building height over 45 feet and waive the front yard setback for a municipal K-8 school pursuant to Section 5.54.2
- Special permit for use of tandem parking spaces pursuant to Section 6.43.5

The project will also require variances from the Board of Zoning Appeal (BZA) for the height and setbacks of the school administrative offices, because the Planning Board cannot approve such modifications by special permit. Applicable sections of the zoning are provided in an appendix.

Requested Special Permits	Summarized Findings <i>(see appendix for zoning text excerpts)</i>
<p>Locate a local government administrative office in Residence C-1 District (Section 4.56, Paragraph 6)</p>	<p>The benefits of the proposed use at that location will outweigh its detriments.</p> <p><i>Benefits</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The building design or site plan would be compatible with the neighborhood.</li> <li>2. The institution would be accessible to or primarily oriented toward neighborhood residents.</li> <li>3. The institution would fulfill an identified neighborhood need.</li> <li>4. The institution would fulfill an identified citywide need.</li> <li>5. Institutional use would be particularly appropriate on the lot given previous use of the lot.</li> <li>6. Institutional use would be particularly appropriate on the lot given institutional use of adjacent or nearby lots.</li> <li>7. Residential development would not be feasible or reasonably practical on the site.</li> <li>8. The proposed institutional use would create a stronger buffer or a more gentle transition between residential and nonresidential areas.</li> <li>9. The proposed institutional use would result in a net improvement to the neighborhood by being more compatible than the previous use of the lot.</li> </ol> <p><i>Detriments</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Development of the institutional use would substantially contravene the objectives of the <i>Cambridge Institutional Growth Management Plan</i>.</li> <li>2. The intensity of the institutional use would be substantially greater than the use intensity of residences in the neighborhood, including traffic, building bulk, parking demands, etc.</li> <li>3. The activity patterns, including pedestrian and vehicle travel to and from the institution would differ from existing neighborhood activity patterns so as to adversely impact the neighborhood.</li> <li>4. Development of an institutional use would eliminate existing dwelling units.</li> <li>5. Development of an institutional use would eliminate nonresidential services or activities which are beneficial to the neighborhood.</li> </ol>

Requested Special Permits	Summarized Findings <i>(see appendix for zoning text excerpts)</i>
<p>Building height above 45 feet and waiver of front yard setback for municipal K-8 school (Section 5.54.2)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planning Board may approve heights of up to sixty-five (65) feet for portions of a building located at least fifty (50) feet from any lot line.</li> <li>• Proposed changes to the lot have been designed to minimize or mitigate adverse impacts on neighboring residential properties, giving consideration to:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Arrangement of building height and bulk within the lot.</li> <li>○ Access and egress for pedestrians, bicycles and motor vehicles, including pick-up and drop-off areas for buses and cars.</li> <li>○ Location and screening of functions such as parking, loading, trash handling and mechanical equipment.</li> <li>○ Current impact of existing buildings and existing patterns of use on the site.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Meet general special permit criteria in Section 10.43.</li> <li>• Meet the citywide urban design guidelines in Section 19.30.</li> </ul>
<p>Use of tandem parking spaces (Section 6.43.5)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maneuvering areas and appropriate means of vehicle access to a street and shall be so designed as not to constitute a nuisance, hazard, or unreasonable impediment to traffic.</li> <li>• A valet parking arrangement is provided for the off-street parking facility.</li> </ul>
<p>General Special Permit Criteria (Section 10.43)</p>	<p>Special permits will be normally granted if the zoning requirements are met, unless it is found not to be in the public interest for one of the following reasons:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Zoning requirements are not met</li> <li>• Traffic or patterns of access/egress would cause congestion, hazard, or substantial change in neighborhood character</li> <li>• Continued operation or development of adjacent uses would be adversely affected by the nature of the proposed use</li> <li>• Nuisance or hazard would be created to the detriment of the health, safety and/or welfare of the occupant or citizens</li> <li>• Proposed use would impair the integrity of the district or adjoining district, or otherwise derogate from the intent and purpose of this Ordinance</li> <li>• New use or building construction is inconsistent with the Urban Design Objectives in Section 19.30</li> </ul>

**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>

## **Area Planning and Zoning**

The site is located within the Wellington-Harrington neighborhood along Cambridge Street and between Willow Street and Berkshire Street in the Residence C-1 District (C-1). The proposed school and other public facilities are subject to the Institutional Use Regulations (Section 4.50) because they are in a C-1 district. As the site is principally a municipal K-8 school, the special provisions of Section 5.54 also apply. These zoning provisions are explained further below.

The parcel was acquired by the City as part of a citywide public space acquisition program in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Over time, the site has been developed to include a variety of public uses including the Harrington Elementary School (which later transitioned to the King Open School), Donnelly Field, Gold Star Mothers Pool, Valente Branch Library and Frisoli Youth Center. Most recently, as part of a major citywide reorganization of the school system, the Cambridge Street Upper School for grades 6-8 was added to the complex. Throughout most of its history as a public use, the site has had a residential zoning designation, except that in 1997 the Donnelly Field portion of the lot was rezoned to Open Space.

In 1981, Cambridge adopted Institutional Use Regulations (IURs) meant to control the encroachment of institutional uses into lower-density residential areas. These regulations were primarily focused on large educational institutions, but they also apply to religious, health care, social service, government and other institutions. In lower-scale residential districts, the IURs might impose a prohibition or require a special permit where an institutional use is replacing a residential use, or where a new category of institutional use is being introduced to a site where other types of institutional uses were present, according to the Table of Institutional Use Regulations in Section 4.56 of the Zoning Ordinance.

In 2012, anticipating a program of school reconstruction associated with the reorganization of the K-8 system, the City adopted a set of zoning changes to provide flexibility in dimensional requirements for public K-8 school sites. The Residence C-1 requirements, which are tailored to smaller-scale residential development, would be onerous for school buildings, which tend to occupy larger areas. The 2012 changes allow for as-of-right redevelopment of existing school sites, up to their pre-existing floor area (or within the density limitations of base zoning), subject to a uniform height limit of 45 feet and setbacks of 10 feet along public streets and 15 feet adjacent to abutting properties. In addition, the Planning Board may grant a special permit to allow, with limitations, additional density up to an FAR of 1.25 and/or height up to 55 feet, or up to 65 feet where portions about 55 feet are set back from abutting lots, and to further modify setback requirements.

## **Comments on Proposal**

### *Planning and Zoning*

The proposal is consistent with the type of redevelopment anticipated by the 2012 school site zoning amendment. All pre-existing public facilities would be reconstructed including the elementary and grade 6-8 schools, library and public pool, and the existing youth center will remain. The school use is allowed in the Residence C-1 district according to the IUR zoning. The school building, along with “uses customarily associated with a municipal K-8 school” including the pool, library and youth center, are also entitled to the dimensional relief provided by the 2012 zoning. However, the proposed inclusion of

administrative offices for the Cambridge Public School Department (CPSD) poses some zoning complications requiring additional relief, as discussed further below.

The dimensional relief being sought for the school is relatively modest, because the proposal will conform to the density limitations of the underlying base zoning. As designed, the proposal requires additional height above the as-of-right limit to accommodate a three-story building with generous ceiling heights and a partial fourth story set back from the neighborhood in accordance with zoning, reaching a maximum height of about 56 feet. The additional height also allows the program to be accommodated within the approximate footprint area of the existing building, resulting in a slight increase in usable public open space on the parcel. The proposal also seeks a waiver of the 10-foot front yard setback in order to allow a small roof projection at the building's northeast corner to extend to the street line as a design gesture.

The inclusion of the CPSD administrative office presents two complications from a zoning standpoint. First, it is a different category of use than the school itself, and one that is subject to IUR zoning. Because it is in a Residence C-1 district, is outside of the Institutional Use Overlay Districts, and is not a pre-existing institutional use (but is located on the site of a different pre-existing institutional use), it requires a special permit that would normally be granted by the BZA, but in this case can be granted by the Planning Board because other Planning Board special permits are being sought. Compared to the size and intensity of use of the school complex, the administrative offices are unlikely to cause any significant impact. The inclusion of offices on this site also means that any impacts can be better managed than at their current location, which is a non-City-owned building in the East Cambridge neighborhood.

The second complication is that the CPSD administrative office cannot seek dimensional relief from the Planning Board as is the case for the school and customarily associated uses. Therefore, variance relief from the BZA will be required for a portion of proposed administrative office space that does not conform to the required formula front yard setback along Berkshire Street and slightly exceeds the maximum building height of 35 feet allowed in the base district.

The final special permit being sought is for the arrangement of the proposed parking into tandem spaces, which can be allowed where there is a "valet parking arrangement." Although a traditional valet service is not proposed, the proposed use is unique in that the facility will be controlled by the City and used by City employees according to a system (as described in the application documents) that will assign spaces according to staffing schedules and ensure that cars will be moved whenever necessary, thus fulfilling the necessary functions of a valet arrangement.

#### *Urban Design*

CDD staff has been involved in the evolution of the project through representation on the project Steering Committee and attendance at various, collaborative project meetings. The project has also taken shape through a rigorous program of community and user group meetings and events held over many months.

The design approach adopted by the Design Team has resulted in good use of the site, which successfully balances the programmatic needs of the project with the mobility needs of pedestrians, bicyclists, cars and buses. At the same time, the project establishes a strong civic presence within the neighborhood, particularly on Cambridge Street. Through physical and visual permeability the project creates a setting that is welcoming and secure for students, and inviting to the community. Notably, the project enhances the existing east-west connection between Willow Avenue to Berkshire Street through a series of new playgrounds, open spaces with sitting areas and recreation facilities. The building's south elevation also improves this interface with windows at the ground floor, and staff would encourage further opportunities to make the KO gym a more visually appealing presence externally.

Two building wings separate the academic functions associated with both schools and the more shared/community program elements. Clearly, breaking the project up into parts helps create a better fit and relationship with the finer scale of the neighborhood, and the varying edges, interfaces and setbacks help reduce perceptions of bulk. In addition, the four story element associated with the requested increase in height is tucked well into the site, which mitigates visual impacts.

Along Cambridge Street, the sweeping gesture of the two pavilions flanking the new civic plaza and the existing sycamore tree is graceful and welcoming. The academic wing has a more traditional appearance with a gradient colored terra cotta facade and civic-scale windows closest to the street edges, which then transitions to a fun and colorful courtyard space on the west. The public wing, which houses the library and overlooks Cambridge Street, is a transparent and airy glass pavilion with an elegant roofline and extended eaves. This architectural response signals the civic qualities of the project and its identity within the community. The office volume and loading/servicing functions attached behind are all accessed off Berkshire Street, and are clad in brick of varying colors. There is a relatively long stretch of blank, ground floor facade, associated with the loading and garage entry, which staff suggest be further studied to investigate the potential to create a more pedestrian-friendly street edge.

The outdoor spaces, including the more formal plaza on Cambridge Street and a reading garden, are well designed, offering a variety of different scales, settings and activities, which also relate well to Donnelly Field. The project also proposes to rectify the existing pedestrian, vehicular and bicyclist conflicts associated with school pick-up and drop-off on Cambridge Street. This will occur through redesign of Cambridge Street, which will include a raised, separated bicycle lane adjacent to the school sidewalk. The agreed concept plan for this work is most accurately reflected in the attached plan.

With regard to details often of concern to the Board, the mechanicals are proposed to either be internally located or in sunken wells, as the entire roof will hold an array of solar panels. Electrical infrastructure and trash are proposed to be housed internal to the building with access off of Berkshire Street. An attractive palette of materials that has warmth, and adds color and character to the building, is proposed. The materials will be durable and easily maintained.

#### *Sustainability*

The zoning minimally requires this project to meet the current Green Building Requirements, which require the project to be designed to a LEED Gold level (Section 20.307.11). Staff has reviewed the

submitted green building materials with the Applicant's consultant and has found that the project is on track to fulfill the requirements.

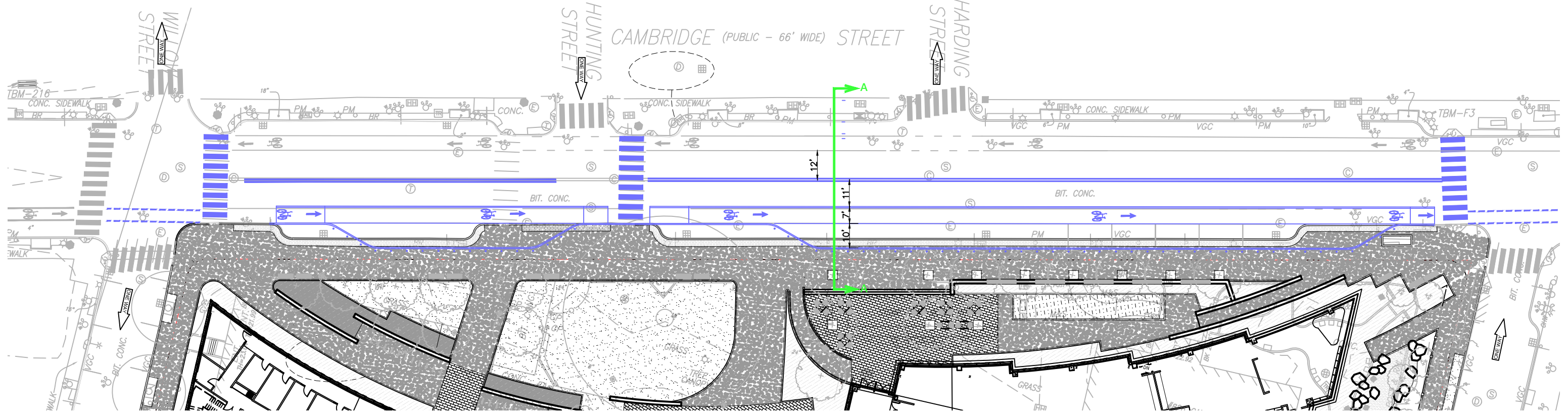
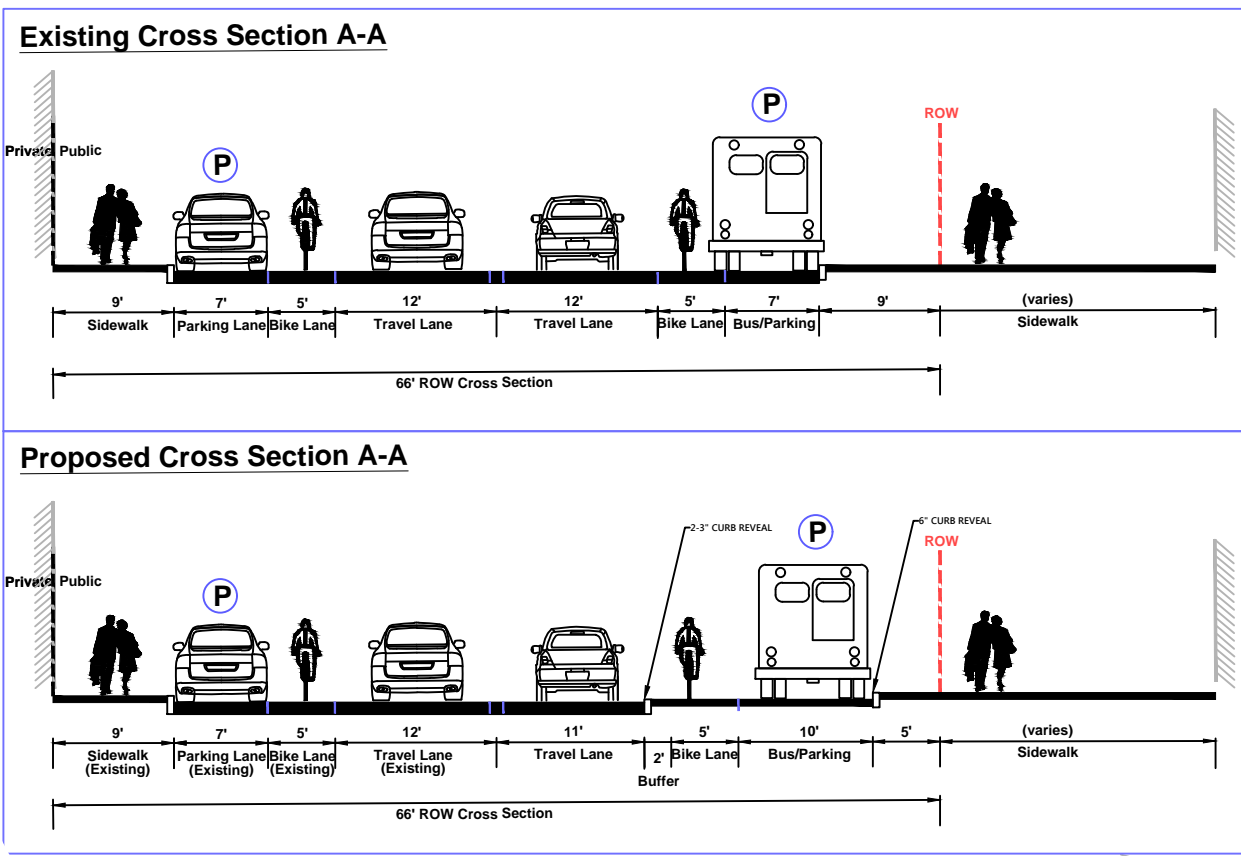
Furthermore, in accordance with the City's own priorities for public buildings, the project incorporates "net zero emissions" principles with a target of minimizing energy consumption and maximizing production of on-site renewable energy. To offset any remaining energy demand, there is the possibility of purchasing energy from renewable sources. CDD staff commends the Design Team for adopting these principles and for helping the City achieve its goal of becoming a "net zero community."

### **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, particularly associated with plantings, edge treatments, fences, and hardscape design and materials.
- Review of sidewalk design and Cambridge Street redesign, bicycle parking, and parking by the Traffic, Parking & Transportation Department.
- Review of stormwater management by the Department of Public Works.





**vhb** Figure 12.b.1  
 Preferred Separated Bicycle Lane Concept  
**King Open/Cambridge Street Upper Schools & Community Complex Project**  
**Cambridge, Massachusetts**