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CITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

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To: Planning Board

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

Date: September 27, 2017

Re: **PB #324, 907 Main Street Special Permit Amendment 1**

This memo contains an overview of the proposed changes to the project at 907 Main Street, the amendments being requested for the Special Permit PB-324, and related comments.

### **Summary of Proposed Amendment**

In February 2017, the Board reviewed this project at 907 Main Street to renovate and construct conforming additions to the existing 4-story building within Central Square Overlay District to accommodate a conversion from multifamily housing to a 58-room hotel use. The project would create a new hotel lobby on the first floor, preserve retail space elsewhere on ground floor, provide service areas in the basement, and create a new fifth-floor addition with a bar. Special Permit PB-324 was issued in March, 2017, to allow an exemption of basement area from the calculation of Gross Floor Area and to waive parking and loading requirements as no on-site parking was proposed.

The scope of the project has been modified, with additional gross floor area accommodating an increase in the number of hotel rooms to 67, and the addition of a guest suite on the fifth floor of the addition. The changes also increase the total building height from the previously approved 55 feet to 59.5 feet. The Cambridge Historical Commission has approved the proposed revision.

### **Requested Amendment**

The project is located in the Business B (BB) District within the Central Square Overlay District. In addition to the special permits previously granted, this amendment seeks an additional Special Permit to exceed a building height of 55 feet in the Central Square Overlay District. As per Section 20.304.2.2(a), the building height could be increased up to 80 feet upon issuance of a special permit by the Planning Board. The applicable special permit findings are summarized below.

Requested Special Permits	Summarized Findings <i>(see appendix for zoning text excerpts)</i>
Increase in building height (Section 20.305)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building and site designs are in conformance with the goals, objectives and urban design plan contained in <i>Central Square Development Guidelines and Central Square Action Plan</i>.</li> <li>• No National Register or contributing building is demolished or altered as to terminate or preclude its designation (either now or within the past 5 years).</li> <li>• Building and site designs adequately screen the parking provided and are sensitive to the contributing buildings in the vicinity.</li> </ul>
Reduction of parking requirement (Sections 20.304.6.3 & 6.35.1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lesser amount of parking will not cause excessive congestion, endanger public safety, substantially reduce parking availability for other uses or otherwise adversely impact the neighborhood; or will provide positive environmental or other benefits to the users of the lot and the neighborhood, including assisting in provision of affordable housing units.</li> </ul>
Exemption of basement area in the calculation of Gross Floor Area (GFA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The uses occupying such exempted GFA support the character of the neighborhood or district in which the applicable lot is located.</li> </ul>
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.

**Central Square Action Plan and Development Guidelines, 1987– Summary of Goals and Objectives**

<p><u>Development Goals and Objectives</u></p> <p>The main goal of the Central Square Action Plan is to strengthen the retail environment while maintaining a culturally and economically diverse neighborhood shopping area.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Encourage responsible and orderly development;</li> <li>▪ Strengthen the retail base to more completely serve the needs of the neighborhoods; • preserve the Square’s cultural diversity;</li> <li>▪ Create active people oriented spaces;</li> <li>▪ Improve the physical, and visual environment;</li> <li>▪ Provide retail establishments that serve people of diverse economic and social groups who live in the surrounding neighborhoods;</li> </ul>
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- Encourage the development of new mixed income housing; and
- Promote compatible retail adjacent to residential uses.

The objectives of the urban design plan for Central Square are as follows:

- Preserve, through restoration, rehabilitation and/or reuse all Potential Landmark and Potentially Significant buildings as identified by the Cambridge Historical Commission.
- Encourage new construction compatible with predominant materials, setbacks, scale, height, and massing of pre-1950 Central Square buildings.
- Encourage the building height along Massachusetts Avenue to step down as it approaches a residential area.
- Create an animated and active environment both in the day time and evening hours.
- Provide safe and inviting links between the business area and neighborhoods.
- Develop pedestrian amenities in public areas using the same materials and colors used in the MBTA and Central Square Enhancement projects.
- As storefronts are upgraded and new signage developed, ensure that storefronts and sign design is compatible with the historic character of the building.
- New signage should be oriented towards the pedestrian and not the automobile.

## Zoning

The proposal remains in general conformance with the Central Square Overlay District requirements, with the hotel being an allowed use in the district, and the preservation of the existing building encouraged because it is a contributing building within the Central Square National Register District. The changes mainly result from amendments to the Central Square Overlay District adopted earlier this year (Ordinance #1389) to allow a higher floor area ratio (FAR) and lower parking requirements for residential and hotel uses.

The proposal's FAR increased from 2.75, which was previously the maximum, to 3.14, which is still within the allowed FAR of 4.00 for residential uses. Parking requirements are still waived as-of-right for existing buildings, applying only to new buildings and additions, and the recent zoning amendment reduced the parking requirement for hotels from 0.5 spaces per sleeping room to 0.25 spaces per sleeping room, so the number of spaces required for the project remains at five. Because the total project is less than 90% of the allowed building area, the Planning Board may waive the parking without requiring an "in-lieu-of" payment into a parking fund.

No bicycle parking is required to be added, as the proposed use will require less bike parking than the existing use. However, two long-term and four short-term spaces are proposed, though these are fewer than in the six long-term and six short-term spaces previously proposed.

The project is still a five-story building, though the fifth story has been enlarged such that the total height exceeds the as-of-right threshold of 55 feet, which was not changed in the recent zoning amendment. The Planning Board may grant a special permit approving heights up to 80 feet, which was also unchanged by the recent amendment.

## **Urban Design**

As mentioned in previous staff comments, renovation and rehabilitation of the existing building is a positive urban design outcome which enhances the image for Central Square and helps to re-establish the Square's unique historic identity. The proposed project meets the Central Square goals of providing active retail frontage along Main Street and Columbia Street, and the new rooftop terraces will also add to the vitality of the square. The waiver of the parking and loading requirements enables the existing curb cut on Columbia Street to be closed and to create a wider, more pedestrian-friendly sidewalk.

Since February, the publicly visible facades of the project have been further developed with minor changes resulting from detailing of the storefront windows and door openings. The proposed building wing on Columbia Street is relatively unchanged, and thus maintains an appropriate relationship to the street and the existing building.

Regarding the increase in building height, the attached summary of relevant design principles and guidelines provides some useful guidance. While expanded in size, the fifth floor addition remains set back from the street corner and the principal façades, which helps to maintain the prominence of the original building volume. Existing and reconstructed chimneys also preserve the character of the original roof line and add variety. Rooftop mechanical equipment appears to be well organized, screened, and sufficiently set back from building facades. The earlier design did have a lower profile than the revised addition, so it would be helpful to see some street-level perspective views and sightline sections to assess the visual impacts of the addition. Perspective renderings would also help to clarify the massing changes, as well as exterior materials and fenestration pattern for the fifth floor, which are a little unclear in the drawings.

## **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:

- Street-level perspective renderings and sightline sections.
- Review of landscape details.
- Review of all exterior materials, colors, façade alterations and restoration details with staff at the Cambridge Historical Commission and CDD.
- Review of proposed bicycle parking by the Traffic, Parking and Transportation Department.
- Review of stormwater management by the Department of Public Works.

**Central Square Action Plan and Development Guidelines, 1987 – Summary of Relevant Design Principles and Guidelines**

<p><u>Land Use</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Encourage strong retail frontage for Massachusetts Ave. and Main Street.</li><li>▪ Create a focal point or "anchor" at Lafayette Square that will strengthen pedestrian and retail activity.</li></ul>
<p><u>Building height</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Height of buildings should be consistent within the overall context of surrounding properties.</li><li>▪ Whenever possible, the greatest height and bulk of the building should be placed on Massachusetts Avenue with a diminution in height and bulk as the project approaches the lower residential uses in abutting areas.</li><li>▪ Height and bulk should also be arranged to protect sight lines of significant historic structures.</li><li>▪ In street wall situations, it is desirable to relate architectural elements of new construction to the significant architectural elements including cornice heights on adjacent buildings.</li></ul>
<p><u>Building scale</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ The heavy pedestrian activity in the Square must be recognized in renovations and new construction projects.</li><li>▪ Treatment of the ground floor plane should relate to the human dimension and be rich in detail to enhance the pedestrian experience.</li></ul>
<p><u>Building massing</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Continuation of a strong, unbroken linear retail frontage on Massachusetts Ave. and Main Street is critical to preserving the strength and historic character of the commercial district.</li><li>▪ Adjacent structures should build to a common party wall; alleyways between buildings are not encouraged.</li></ul>
<p><u>Streetwalls and Setbacks</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Building walls along Massachusetts Ave. and Main Street should be maintained at the property line with alcoves minimized so as not to create unsupervised areas, which encourage loitering.</li><li>▪ Setbacks along narrow side streets are encouraged to provide non-continuous building surfaces to avoid the creation of "canyons" and expanded sidewalk widths; a minimum of eight feet is desirable to allow the planting of street trees.</li></ul>
<p><u>Stores and Storefronts</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Storefronts should be oriented to the pedestrian and provide visual interest both day and night along Massachusetts Avenue and Main Street.</li><li>▪ Pedestrians should be encouraged to window shop by the provision of varied and interesting display areas.</li></ul>

- Every effort should be made to facilitate access into the store and to create an individual building or store identity.

The following elements are encouraged:

- large window areas for display or for looking into a store with lighting to facilitate night viewing awnings and/or canopies
- signage which is attractively integrated into the window area, awnings, canopies and architecture of the building
- street grade entrances which continue a strong linear edge along Massachusetts Avenue and Main Street
- window boxes
- restoration of details in historically contributing or significant buildings
- retail businesses should provide rest room facilities for customers
- small projecting signs which are compatible with the architecture of the building

The following elements are discouraged:

- small window areas that do not promote or encourage viewing into the store
- overpowering signage
- alcoves or recesses in the building wall that encourage loitering
- loading docks along Massachusetts Avenue and Main Street
- parking entrances and exits along Massachusetts Avenue and Main Street
- below or above grade store entrances
- non-retail uses on Massachusetts Avenue

### Exterior Treatments

#### Renovations

- Contributing and historically significant buildings should be renovated whenever possible.
- Materials should be consistent with the materials used when the structure was originally built.
- Original details should be preserved and restored whenever possible.

#### New Construction

- Pedestrian level treatments must be rich in detail and help to reinforce human scale through the use of architectural elements such as trim, sills, lintels, awnings and canopies.
- The use of durable materials, granite or limestone will help to add interest and variation to facades.
- Windows should be large and illuminated from within to create interesting display or viewing areas for retail space.
- New construction should be compatible and sensitive to adjacent historic structures with respect to scale and massing.
- Building materials to be compatible with the historic character of Central Square.
- Use of stucco, or stucco style panels and concrete blocks are discouraged.

- As a general rule, new buildings should be faced with wood or masonry with "punched operable windows to complement the older structures in the Square.
- Brick should be a full size brick with a color which is compatible to adjacent structures.
- The building walls above the ground floor should be articulated with bays, setbacks, cutouts, flower boxes, balconies, etc. to eliminate boxy type structures.
- Care should be taken to ensure that automobile headlights and street light glare are shielded from residential windows.
- Signs should be designed to fit on the building and be integrated with windows and awnings and not overlap or cover building details. Signage should be legible, unobtrusive and not overpowering.
- Use of color should be appropriate to the historic character of the Square, such as subtle highlighting of details on awnings, and trim, etc. Overpowering, gaudy, or trendy colors are discouraged.
- All mechanical penthouses and other projections should be integrated into the building form.

#### Streets, Sidewalks and Open Space

- Continue MBTA and Central Square Enhancement improvements. Suggested improvements include:
  - Fill in private vaults within sidewalk areas
  - Street trees, bicycle racks
  - Trash containers, Kiosks
  - Washington Post lights or other fixture as approved by the City along Massachusetts Ave.
- Create pedestrian links between neighborhoods and Massachusetts Avenue wherever possible;
- Strengthen the tie between Lafayette Square and the "Heart" of Central Square;
- Widen sidewalk areas on side streets to a minimum of eight feet connecting Bishop Allen Drive and Green Street to Massachusetts Avenue and improve the condition of existing sidewalks.
- Upgrade lighting along Bishop Allen Drive, Green Street and the streets connecting them to Massachusetts Ave.
- The appearance of secondary public ways such as Green street, Bishop Allen Drive, Temple street, Norfolk Street, etc. should be improved by repairing sidewalks, signage, lighting and where possible provide new trees.

#### Parking and Service Areas

- Service areas are to be located to allow vehicles access onto the site and off of the public ways and away from residential windows.
- Commercial tenants should take advantage of the area's good access to public transportation facilities and therefore reduce the need for on-site parking facilities.
- Entrances to both parking and service areas must be constructed to minimize disruption to adjacent uses. Entries should be kept away from street intersections as much as possible.



## CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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Kyle Sheffield, *Alternate*

September 26, 2017

To: Swaathi Joseph, Community Development Department

From: Charles Sullivan *CNS*

Re: 907 Main Street

The building historically known as Whitney's Block at 893-907 Main Street was built in 1870-71 and is a contributing structure in the Central Square National Register District.

Although the Cambridge Historical Commission has no jurisdiction over the premises, Patrick Barrett has repeatedly consulted with me about the preservation and restoration of the exterior features of the historic façades. The proposed adaptive reuse as a hotel will involve restoration of the brick masonry and bay windows and installation of period-appropriate window sash.

I am satisfied that the project will be completed to an appropriate historic preservation standard, and I appreciate Mr. Barrett's concern for these aspects of the project.