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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: February 14, 2017

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

This memo contains an overview of the proposed project at 907 Main Street, the special permits being requested, and related comments.

### **Summary of Proposal**

The applicant is proposing to renovate and construct conforming additions to the existing 4-story building to accommodate a conversion from multifamily housing to a 58-room hotel use, including a new hotel lobby in the first floor, preserving retail space elsewhere on ground floor, providing service areas in the basement, and a bar within the fifth floor addition. No off-street parking is proposed.

### **Requested Special Permits**

The project is located in the Business B (BB) District and seeks a Special Permit to exempt basement area from the calculation of Gross Floor Area and a Special Permit for reduction in parking and loading requirements. 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>
Reduction of parking requirement (Sections 20.304.6 & 6.35.1)	<p>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. <i>(See appendix for details.)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improvements are in conformance with objectives contained in <i>Central Square Development Guidelines and Central Square Action Plan</i> (see below).</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>
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).

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

### Development Goals and Objectives

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. The plan recommends:

- That new development reflect the existing neighborhood by providing a mix of affordable housing opportunities;
- Preserve structures which contribute to the historical fabric of the Square;
- Maintain an active streetscape both during the day and evening;
- Promote compatibility with existing uses; and
- Improve the overall physical and visual environment.

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.

*Relevant Design Principles and Guidelines are summarized in the attached document.*

### **Area Planning and Zoning**

The site is located in the Business B (BB) District within the Central Square Overlay District. BB is a mixed-use district allowing a range of residential and commercial uses at a relatively high density (2.75 FAR non-residential / 3.00 FAR residential) and a maximum height of 80 feet. The site is entirely within Central Square National Register District and the building is considered to be a contributing historic building.

The goals of the Central Square Overlay District include preservation and enhancement of the unique functional environment and visual character of Central Square, mitigation of the functional impacts of new development on adjacent residential neighborhoods, and maintenance of the present diversity of development and open space patterns and building scales and ages. In general, the overlay zoning creates some new development standards in addition to the base zoning (e.g., restrictions on ground

floor uses, height limitations) while providing the Planning Board the ability to grant relief from some requirements (e.g., yard setbacks and parking) by special permit if the proposal is otherwise consistent with the goals of the district. At the time the district was created, it included a set of Development Goals and Objectives and Design Principles and Guidelines to inform the Planning Board's review of special permit applications. In addition, the zoning establishes a Central Square Advisory Committee to review development applications; the committee has reviewed this proposal.

The Central Square portion of the Kendall Square Central Square or "K2C2" Planning Study complemented the goals of the original Central Square Overlay District zoning with the goals of promoting public spaces to build community, diversity in retail, non-profit and cultural institutions, increased housing and residential diversity, connecting people to the square, and encouraging sustainable development choices. That study resulted in its own set of zoning recommendations and design objectives which, while not fully implemented in Central Square, have informed subsequent zoning initiatives including the creation of the Mass and Main Residential Mixed Income Subdistrict in 2015 (located across Columbia Street from this project site). Also, the Sater, et al. "Central Square Restoration" Zoning Petition contains elements of the more recent Central Square planning recommendations, and is currently under consideration by the City Council with possible adoption by the end of February.

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 conforming with regard to use and dimensional requirements. The Applicant has reviewed the proposal with staff at the Cambridge Historical Commission, who have concluded that the project does not require a formal hearing by the Commission. As it proposes new uses totaling at least 25,000 square feet of Gross Floor Area, the project is subject to Green Building requirements.

The proposed renovations and additions will conform to the district zoning requirements in terms of uses, height, setbacks and bicycle parking. With the proposed exemption of basement space, the project will conform to FAR limitations. The main reason for the Board's review is that it will not provide required off-street vehicle parking and loading, which would be difficult to provide on-site without reducing usable open space or making more significant alterations to the existing structure. In all parts of the city, a special permit may be sought to reduce parking requirements based on other transportation-related factors such as availability of public transit and off-site parking. In Central Square, the Planning Board may also waive parking and loading requirements if it results in an urban design outcome that is in keeping with the goals for Central Square, while still taking transportation factors into account.

This project is unique in that it proposes replacing multifamily residential with hotel use, in contrast to the more recent trend toward creating new multifamily housing. Both past and recent planning

initiatives for Central Square have encouraged housing, but also encourage street-level activity and diversity of development types. There are few hotel uses currently in Central Square, and so a new hotel use would contribute positively to the overall mix of uses and would bring a different type of activity providing support for nearby restaurants, retail and cultural institutions.

The building is proposed to have service areas associated with the retail uses and general building services occupying the entire basement. The Planning Board may grant a special permit to exempt these areas from the gross floor area (GFA) calculation if they support the character of the neighborhood or zoning district, which in this case seems to align with the goal of supporting ground-floor retail in the district. The application also notes that the resulting basement space will be brought to code-compliant status. One of the concerns raised during consideration of the Barrett Amendment was that it would encourage basement-level space that may be susceptible to flooding risk. If the space is used primarily for storage or functions that would be more resilient to flooding, 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) regarding potential flood risk at this time.

### **Urban Design**

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. Recapturing the historical character and original details of the existing building is entirely consistent with relevant historic preservation goals found in the previous planning and urban design studies. Staff at the Cambridge Historical Commission is supportive of the project and has informally reviewed various iterations of the design. As much of the success of the project will depend on the attention given to restoration details, such as the replacement window configuration, methods for cleaning and repointing the masonry, and details of the bay windows, it is recommended that continuing review include such design details and also be undertaken with staff at the Commission.

The proposed addition on Columbia Street is also designed to echo the style of the original structure and therefore maintains the character of the Square. The manner in which it relates to the street and its scale, height, massing, form and materials, are all consistent with the existing building. The addition does not appear to diminish the integrity of the historic district and the three foot setback on Columbia Street helps to ensure the primary building façade remains dominant. The rooftop addition, being setback from the principal facades, and clad in lap siding, is also clearly distinguished from the original structure.

The proposed project also meets the Central Square goals of providing active retail frontage along Main Street. A series of new storefronts is proposed for Main Street, with the Toscanini's storefront to remain unchanged. While high levels of transparency and attractive signage are proposed, and the traditional storefront pattern is maintained, the potential to provide an entrance to the new restaurant off Main Street should be considered for activation purposes. The new storefronts on Columbia Street will continue the active street edge around the corner, and will have good relationship with the future Mass & Main project, helping to create a double-sided retail environment.

The potential waiver of the parking and loading requirements, enables the existing curb cut on Columbia Street to be closed and the creation of a wider, more pedestrian-friendly sidewalk. While the building setback supports active use, it is unclear if the expanded sidewalk area will be fully utilized as short-term bicycle parking spaces are located adjacent to the storefront. In addition, the opportunity to improve the health and integrity of the existing street trees, as well as other possible sidewalk improvements on Columbia Street, should be studied.

### **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.
- Review of all exterior materials, colors, façade alterations and restoration details with staff at the Cambridge Historical Commission and CDD.
- Review of bicycle parking by the Traffic, Parking and Transportation Department.
- Review of stormwater management by the Department of Public Works.