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CITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

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To: Planning Board

From: CDD Staff

Date: May 9, 2018

Re: Special Permit **PB #336, 1043-1059 Cambridge Street**

This memo contains an overview of the proposed project at 1043-1059 Cambridge Street, the special permits being requested, and comments related to the materials dated 3/30/18. Comments from Department of Public Works (DPW) are provided in a separate memo. The applicant has been in communication with Traffic, Parking and Transportation Department (TP&T).

### **Summary of Proposal**

The applicant is proposing to demolish the two existing buildings located on two adjacent parcels, 1043 and 1059 Cambridge Street, to construct a new building with commercial space in the first floor, 18 residential units on three floors above, on grade parking within a structure for 13 cars, 18 long-term bicycle parking spaces, and 8 short-term bicycle parking spaces. The proposal also includes a patio and addition of street trees on Webster Avenue. The project will require variances for side yard setback requirements and green area open space requirements from the Board of Zoning Appeal.

### **Requested Special Permit**

The project is located in the Business A (BA) District. The project will require a Project Review Special Permit per Section 19.20 because in the Business A district, such review is required for projects of 20,000 square feet or more. However, the project does not exceed the threshold to require a traffic impact study. Therefore, the Board's approval is based only on the urban design component of Section 19.20. The Applicant is also seeking special permits for reduction of required parking per Section 6.35.1 and for exemption of basement area from the definition of Gross Floor Area pursuant to Article 2.000. Since the proposed on-grade parking facility is entirely within a structure, the project does not need a special permit for modification of parking facility requirements as per Section 6.44.1, which applies only to open surface parking. The applicable special permit findings are summarized on the following page and 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)	Project is consistent with the urban design objectives of the City as set forth in Section 19.30 (see appendix).
Reduction in required parking (Section 6.35.1)	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.
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 Business A (BA) zoning district, which covers the Cambridge Street corridor from Inman Square to Lechmere. 1059 Cambridge Street is a unique lot that has frontage on Elm Street, Webster Avenue, and Cambridge Street. To the north, Webster Ave connects to Union Square in Somerville, with the planned MBTA Union Square Green Line station about a 5-minute walk from the site. Columbia Street to the north extends into an industrial area of Somerville that has become known for small-scale fabrication and food-related businesses. To the south, Columbia Street continues through the Wellington-Harrington and Port neighborhoods leading toward Central Square.

There have been a number of projects that converted former commercial sites to residential buildings in the vicinity of Union Square. This area has an eclectic mix of uses including retail, office, residential, manufacturing and auto-related uses because of its location between rail lines and industrial districts in Somerville and residential neighborhoods in Cambridge. The City’s growth policies suggest that this is a good location for the development of housing at a moderately high urban scale and density due to the close proximity to a future public transit station as well as bus service, retail and other amenities. Also, the inclusion of ground-floor commercial space is critical to support the feeling of a connected urban streetscape from the future MBTA station to the Cambridge Street mixed-use corridor. In general, the project should contribute positively to establishing a safe and attractive pedestrian connection from Cambridge Street to the new station.

This area will likely continue to serve a mix of uses, including commercial uses that are industrial in nature, for some time. While this kind of urban character may be acceptable to some residents, the project’s design should provide a reasonable buffer to residents of the building from noise or other nuisances that may be present in the surrounding area.

While Cambridge's citywide growth policies provide overall guidance for evaluating a proposal of this type, there has been no recent planning study to inform review in this specific area. However, the ongoing *Envision Cambridge* planning process will conduct a more focused analysis of the city's major mixed-use corridors, including Cambridge Street and Massachusetts Avenue.

### **Proposed Project**

The proposal for a mixed-use building, with multiple floors of residential use above ground-floor retail, reflects the prevailing pattern of development along Cambridge Street and is consistent with the intent of the BA zoning for the area. It has been noted over the years that some of the dimensional standards of the BA district make it difficult to design mixed-use buildings of this type. For example, FAR limitations are more generous for residential use than non-residential, while setback requirements are more generous for non-residential use than residential. The height limit of 45 feet, in a four-story building, can also result in a ground floor height that is less than ideal for retail spaces; in some comparable areas of the city, the zoning was changed to allow up to 50 feet in height.

As it exists, the lot is currently non-conforming with regard to setbacks and some other dimensional requirements. The proposed new building would extend into the side yard setbacks to create a more continuous streetwall, which is a desirable outcome from an urban design perspective, but will require relief from the formula side yards applicable to residential development. The proposed development does not exceed the allowed density in the district. The structured parking facility on the ground floor, with 13 parking spaces, is exempt from the calculation of Gross Floor Area per Section 5.25.41(3), which exempts one parking space per unit, up to a maximum of 15 spaces, for multifamily dwellings. The project also requires relief to reduce the number of required spaces from 18 to 13. The application addresses the criteria in Section 6.35.1 but does not include a parking analysis as described in Section 6.35.3.

The project will 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. The project will be subject to continuing Green Building review by CDD staff prior to receiving a Building Permit and Certificate of Occupancy.

The residential section with shared amenities is proposed to contain units of a variety of sizes, with mostly two-bedroom units, some one-bedroom units, and some studios. Many of the two-bedroom units are "duplex" units spanning the third and fourth floors. The project will provide affordable units in accordance with Inclusionary Housing requirements.

### **Urban Design**

At the site planning level, the proposal will transform an underutilized street corner into a more pleasant and pedestrian friendly environment, with a mix of amenities that is more fitting for such a prominent location. Modest in scale, the proposal addresses the constraints of the site with a clear architectural concept and relatively successful site layout that minimizes vehicle access and parking, and provides open space improvements.

The overall massing strategy includes a series of volumes combined with a single-story podium, which breaks down the overall scale of the project. While the massing is a response to the zoning, the potential to establish a stronger streetwall treatment on Cambridge Street and more presence on the corner, should be considered. The step back between the first and second floor on Cambridge Street is particularly discordant in terms of the surrounding urban fabric, which is built to, and encloses, the street with a strong streetwall condition that reinforces the grid pattern. The parking garage also appears more prominent because of the building setbacks. Further study, with additional ground level perspectives that clearly show the project in context with neighborhood buildings would be helpful.

The more contemporary, architectural aesthetic seems appropriate given the mix of building styles nearby and the industrial character of the area. Windows are grouped across the façades, which establishes a rhythm and hierarchies at important places on the façade. Roof decks and terraces are proposed at the upper floor setback and the roof top, which will help foster a sense of animation, and connection between the public and private realms. Proposed materials support the project's massing concept and are contemporary in nature, while still complementing the neighborhood character. The depth of window reveals and other façade details will be an important component of the continuing review by staff.

The corner patio will have good solar access, complements the open space on the opposite street corner, and will provide a vibrant open space opportunity for the streetscape. Opportunities for the planters, or patio edge, to provide for seating should be considered. Similarly, the potential for a trellis or some form of vertical emphasis might help to give the corner more stature and integrate the patio into the design of the building itself. It would also be helpful to understand how the patio will be maintained and visually interesting during the colder months

The Cambridge Street frontage provides a high degree of transparency, which meets the city's urban design objectives. A more granular level of detail at the ground floor would provide more character and texture to the storefront and residential entrance. This might include awnings or canopies, decorating lighting, attractive signage, additional entrances, operable façades, etc. Material joints, panel patterns, or cladding attachments, could also help reinforce a more human-scaled expression. While not optimal, a floor-to-floor height of around 14-feet is achieved for the retail, which is reasonable given the zoning envelope. Further details regarding mechanical louvers and kitchen exhaust should be provided. In addition, opportunities to improve the visual character of the blank garage walls facing Webster Avenue should be studied.

The project proposes street edge improvements to Webster Avenue, including new sidewalks and landscaped areas with shade trees to improve pedestrian access on Webster Avenue. The existing curb cut on Webster Avenue is proposed to be modified and relocated, but the width of the proposed curb cut is unclear from the materials. In addition, the sidewalk width appears quite narrow on Webster Avenue, which is expected to become a busier pedestrian connection once the Union Square Green Line extension is completed. Thus, sidewalk expansion should be further studied to determine if some additional width can be provided, particularly as this building will set the precedent for future development to the north.

All rooftop mechanical equipment will be well-screened, being located on top of the middle, three-story volume in the center of the building. Three possible transformer locations are shown in the submitted materials. The preferred location is that shown at the rear of the building, which would be accessed through the garage. The site shown on the Ground Floor Plan (A101), adjacent to the residential entrance on Webster Avenue is not supported by staff, and every effort should be made to avoid this location.

### **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:

- Updates to materials to rectify the discrepancies between the photorealistic rendering, and the elevations and perspective views.
- Review of landscape details, including pavers, planters, and fences.
- Review of the proposed siting and appearance of the transformer.
- Review of the final location of short-term bicycle racks, to ensure conformance with City standards.
- Review of sidewalk improvements and street trees (with DPW and TP&T).
- Review of façade design details, including louvers and exhaust vents, window reveals and other ground floor details.
- Review of all exterior materials and colors, including a materials mock-up of all wall assemblies on the site.