



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

To: Planning Board

From: CDD Staff

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Re: Special Permit **PB #340, 624 Massachusetts Avenue**

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This memo contains an overview of the proposed "Formula Business" at 624 Massachusetts Avenue, the special permits being requested, and related comments.

Summary of Proposal

The applicant, Amazon Pickup Points LLC, has operated a storefront retail establishment at this location since June. The applicant currently proposes installing Amazon's standardized signage on the exterior of the building and the use of its standard orange coloring scheme and "smile" logo in certain locations within the interior of the premises. Due to the characteristics of this signage and other design details, the establishment would meet the definition of a Formula Business in the Cambridge Zoning Ordinance.

The site is within the Central Square Overlay District and in the Central Square National Register District. The business is located in a building at 632 Massachusetts Avenue, which received a special permit from the Planning Board in 1998 (PB-133) and is not a contributing structure within the national register district.

Requested Special Permits

The project is located in the Business B (BB) District within the Central Square Overlay District and requires a Special Permit for Formula Business per Section 20.304.5.4. Applicable sections of the zoning are provided in an appendix.

Requested Special Permits	Summarized Findings <i>(see appendix for zoning text excerpts)</i>
Special Permit for Formula Business in Central Square Overlay District (Sections 20.304.5.4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design shall reflect, amplify, and strengthen the established historical character of existing buildings and store fronts in Central Square. • The particulars of the building or storefront design shall be varied from the formula or standard design of the chain in order to reflect the unique character and conditions of Central Square generally or the specific location in particular. • The standard elements of the enterprise defining it as a Formula Business shall be modified to respect and provide unique expressions of Central Square history and traditions as well as innovation in physical design and marketing that will distinguish the Central Square location from other locations of the Formula Business.
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.

Area Planning and Zoning

In February 2017, as part of a package of zoning changes known as the “Central Square Restoration Zoning Petition,” the City Council adopted the following definition of a “Formula Business”:

Formula Business. *An individual Retail or Consumer Service establishment that is required by virtue of a contract, franchise agreement, ownership or other similar legal obligation to conform or substantially conform to a set of common design and operating features that serve to identify the establishment as one of a group of establishments for business, marketing and public relations purposes. Specifically, an establishment shall be considered a Formula Business if it shares at least two (2) of the following three (3) characteristics with ten (10) or more other establishments in Massachusetts or within twenty (20) or more other establishments.*

1. *Trademark, service mark or logo, defined as a word, phrase, symbol, or design or combination thereof that identifies and distinguishes the source of the goods or services from others;*
2. *Standardized building architecture including but not limited to façade design and signage;*
3. *Standardized color scheme used throughout the exterior of the establishment, including color associated with signs and logos.*

Such a business can be established in the Central Square Overlay District only after the issuance of a special permit from the Planning Board with the findings enumerated in the table above. It is primarily intended to ensure that the aesthetic characteristics of the establishment complement the established historical character of Central Square in relation to existing buildings and storefronts.

Comments on Proposal

Consistency with Planning and Zoning

This is the first special permit application for a Formula Business since the zoning requirements for such a use were adopted. The use itself is somewhat unique compared to other retailers in the area, in that it provides services associated with a predominantly online retailer. The size of the establishment and the characteristics of the services that are offered are not detailed in the application. However, it should be noted that the establishment has already received a Certificate of Occupancy as a use that is allowed as-of-right in the zoning district. It is only the aesthetic characteristics of the signage and overall design that are subject to review under the Formula Business special permit provisions.

The building at 632 Massachusetts Ave., often referred to as the “Holmes Trust” building, is a mixed-use building containing residential uses on upper floors and retail space at the ground floor. As it is less than 20 years old, the building itself is not deemed contributing to the National Register District. The building does incorporate a section of the historic façade of the prior building on the side directly facing Massachusetts Ave. (where the CVS store is currently located), but would otherwise not be of historic interest. The project underwent extensive review by the Planning Board under the Central Square Overlay District provisions, which included findings of consistency with the Central Square Development Guidelines. The Planning Board granted an amendment to the original special permit in 2011, allowing the second floor of the building to be converted from its prior office use to additional residential units. The prior use of this particular ground-floor space was a bank, and there have not previously been long-term retail tenants for the space.

The current proposal is to install two internally illuminated wall signs on the exterior of the building (one above each entrance to the establishment) using the business’s standardized lettering and logo, to install decal signs across several windows and doors, and to use the orange color and “smile” logo characteristic of Amazon in certain areas of the interior of the premises where they would be visible to the public through the storefront windows. The proposed signage appears to conform to the standards of Article 7.000 of the Zoning Ordinance and will be reviewed for compliance prior to issuance of a building permit. Vinyl block-out material is proposed on three ground floor windows, which would need to be reviewed for compliance with the Central Square Overlay District requirement that “the ground (first) floor facade shall consist of a minimum of fifty (50) percent clear glass” (Section 20.304.5, Paragraph 1c). Aside from wall signs and window applications, no other alterations are proposed to the exterior façade of the building, which retains the colors and materials that are present throughout the building.

Urban Design

As mentioned above, the storefronts essentially remain unchanged, and a high degree of visual transparency is maintained for the façade immediately adjacent to the sidewalk which is consistent with the urban design objectives for Central Square. The use of vinyl block-out on the display windows facing the building’s entry forecourt is an area of potential concern; while set back from the sidewalk, these windows are highly visible from Carl Barron Plaza and should therefore continue to provide some visual interest to help activate the plaza.

With regard to signage, the proposed window decals are similar to those used throughout Central Square. The two proposed “amazon” identification signs and logos are of a scale similar to other signage in Central Square, but are located above the building’s signage band, which is not consistent with other storefront signage on the ground floor façade. The lower cornice/spandrel panel above the signage band was originally intended for storefront lighting, such as gooseneck fixtures. It would be more compatible with the architectural character of the building and traditional storefront design if the entry signage were located within the 21” channel immediately above the windows and doors. On the other hand, the sign facing Carl Barron Plaza being located above the signage band is obscured by the tree canopy, which makes it less prominent in the square.

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:

- Provide the dimensional form to indicate the size of the proposed formula business.
- Consider relocating the signage above the entry doors to the signage band consistent with other retail tenancies in the building.
- Review the use of vinyl block out material on the north elevation facing the entry forecourt to provide more visual interest.