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# CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

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To: Planning Board

From: CDD Staff

Date: August 6, 2019

Re: Special Permit **PB #349, 599 Massachusetts Avenue**

This memo contains an overview of the proposed "Formula Business" at 599 Massachusetts Avenue, the special permits being requested, and related comments.

## Summary of Proposal

The applicant, Santander Bank, is relocating the existing branch of the bank to the first floor of the existing building at 599 Massachusetts Avenue. The applicant currently proposes installing Santander Bank's standardized signage on the exterior of the building and the use of its standard red coloring scheme in the building exterior and 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, requiring review by the Central Square Advisory Committee, whose report is attached to this memo. The business will be located in the existing building, which is a contributing structure within the Central Square National Register District. The Cambridge Historical Commission staff has reviewed the application and provided some comments, including a suggestion for the applicant to meet with them to discuss design details. There are limitations on the building frontage that can be occupied by bank uses in the Central Square Overlay District.

## Requested Special Permits

The project is located in the Business B (BB) District within the Central Square Overlay District and is seeking Special Permits for Formula Business per Section 20.304.5.4 and for waiving the limitations on bank frontage per Section 20.304.5.3.b. 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"> <li>• Design shall reflect, amplify, and strengthen the established historical character of existing buildings and store fronts in Central Square.</li> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• 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.</li> </ul>
Special Permit to waive restricted use of bank frontage in Central Square Overlay District (Sections 20.304.5.3.b)	<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 next page).</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>
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.

Under the same petition, the Council also adopted a specific requirement that without a Special Permit from the Planning Board, an individual bank or financial institution cannot exceed 25 feet of ground floor building frontage facing Massachusetts Avenue and cannot exceed 30% of a lot's aggregate building frontage facing all public streets.

The Central Square Overlay District provides special design standards and greater scrutiny for development projects to advance the planning goals for the area. The specific design guidelines for Central Square are included in the appendix, and include encouraging strong retail frontage for Massachusetts Avenue and providing visual interest and pedestrian orientation in storefront design.

## **Comments on Proposal**

### *Consistency with Planning and Zoning*

This is the second special permit application for a Formula Business since the zoning requirements for such a use were adopted. The bank use itself is not unique since it is being relocated from another location within Central Square. The size of the establishment will be a reduction from its existing location. The relocated bank use is proposed to occupy the entire 28-foot frontage of the existing building, which spans the entire frontage of the parcel on Massachusetts Avenue.

The building at 599 Massachusetts Avenue is a 4-story mixed-use building containing office uses on upper floors and retail space at the ground floor. The building is a contributing structure in the National Register District, and alterations to an existing contributing structure are a factor in the criteria for Planning Board review of special permit applications. The existing stone columns are proposed to be repaired as part of this proposal. No off-street parking or bicycle parking are proposed. The prior use of this particular ground-floor space was a retail shoe store. With the proposed change of use in an existing building, parking requirements are waived by the provisions of the Central Square Overlay District, and no new bicycle parking is required because the change in use does not cause an increase in the required number of spaces.

The current proposal is to install an internally illuminated wall sign on the exterior of the building using the business's standardized lettering and logo, to install a vertical banner sign on one of the exterior columns, and to use business's standardized lettering and logo in certain areas of the interior of the premises where they may 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. The Central Square Overlay District requires that the ground (first) floor facade shall consist of a minimum of 50% clear glass. No alterations are proposed to the existing storefront glazing.

#### *Urban Design*

As mentioned above, the storefront is to remain relatively unchanged, so the city's façade transparency guidelines are met. Exterior signage appears to be more discrete than typical Santander Bank signage, which appears to often include illuminated panel signs. The storefront sign has well-proportioned, individual letters that are positioned within the existing signage band/building entablature. The proposed banner sign is pedestrian-oriented, which is consistent with the *Central Square Development Guidelines*. It is unclear from the application materials if any interior signage, other than the sign behind the tellers, will be visible from the sidewalk. The Cambridge Historical Commission staff has provided detailed façade and signage comments, which will help to further preserve the building's historical character.

An internally-located rolling security door is proposed to separate the ATM vestibule from the rest of the bank outside of branch hours. While the need to create a secured area for ATM access is understood, it would be preferable if something more attractive, such as a glass partition or a decorative grill, was provided.

Details of the rooftop AC unit should be provided, including whether the existing building parapets will adequately screen the equipment.

#### **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 all exterior signage and attachments, and façade alterations and details with staff at the Cambridge Historical Commission.
- Review of rooftop mechanical equipment, and materials and details of any necessary visual/acoustical screening.

## Joseph, Swaathi

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**Subject:** FW: 599 Mass Ave - Santander Bank  
**Attachments:** Mass Ave 595-599 IMG\_20190806\_124647.jpg; Mass Ave 599 storefront IMG\_20190806\_124735.jpg; Mass Ave 599, sign mounting proposal.docx; Mass Ave 599 pilaster IMG\_20190806\_094731.jpg; Mass Ave 599 pavement IMG\_20190806\_094704.jpg

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**From:** Sullivan, Charles M. <csullivan@cambridgema.gov>  
**Sent:** Tuesday, August 6, 2019 4:29 PM  
**To:** Ryan Gazda <rgazda@mqmlp.com>  
**Cc:** Dennis Quilty <DQuilty@mqmlp.com>; Bigolin, Suzannah <sbigolin@cambridgema.gov>; Burks, Sarah <sburks@cambridgema.gov>; Joseph, Swaathi <sjoseph@cambridgema.gov>; Sherva, Elizabeth (SEC) <elizabeth.sherva@state.ma.us>  
**Subject:** RE: 599 Mass Ave - Santander Bank

Ryan,

Thanks for sending the plans.

The 1905 Asa P. Morse building is a contributing structure in the Central Square National Register District, so the Cambridge Historical Commission has an interest in how it is treated.

Sheet A07.03 refers to the façade and the storefront. The storefront is to be repaired and made new, the masonry patched, and signs are to be affixed to the entablature above and to the pilaster at left.

- Our major concern is that the projecting sign or banner should not be attached to the pilaster. Close inspection of the site suggests that it could instead be attached to the approximately 6" wide vertical strip of brick to the left of the stone pilaster. This is part of the 599 building façade, and not part of the neighboring building.
- The faded lettering for the Central Trust Company is an important feature that should be preserved. The proposed Santander sign could be attached over it, either as letters attached to a rack or as a box sign attached to the entablature.
- The masonry at the base of the right pilaster has been quite badly hacked away. We would be interested in working with your mason to ensure an appropriate patch.

- Finally, the existing crazy paving between the storefront and the sidewalk is not addressed in the plans. The current condition is unsightly and potentially unsafe.

The Massachusetts Historical Commission asked our opinion of this project several months ago, so we're glad to have a chance to weigh in before this goes to the Planning Board.

Please get in touch if you'd like to discuss these recommendations.

Charles Sullivan

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Charles Sullivan, Executive Director  
Cambridge Historical Commission  
831 Massachusetts Ave., 2nd Fl.  
Cambridge, Mass. 02139  
ph 617-349-4684; fax 617-349-6165; TTY 617-349-6112  
<http://www.cambridgema.gov/Historic>





Area belongs to 599-601 Mass. Ave,  
not to adjacent building at 603-605.  
Mount sign brackets here.







heby's  
REAL ESTATE

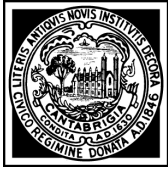
BLUEbikes

CAMBRIDGE  
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NERO  
ESPRESSO  
CAPPUCINO







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CITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

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**IRAM FAROOQ**  
Assistant City Manager for  
Community Development

**SANDRA CLARKE**  
Deputy Director  
Chief of Administration

**KHALIL MOGASSABI**  
Deputy Director  
Chief of Planning

**To:** City of Cambridge Planning Board  
**From:** Central Square Advisory Committee  
**Date:** April 30, 2019  
**Re:** Santander Bank – 599 Mass Ave

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The Central Square Advisory Committee (the “Committee”) met on Wednesday, April 17, 2019 to review and comment on the Santander Bank (the “Applicant”) proposal to operate as a Formula Business in the Central Square Overlay District (the “District”) at 599 Massachusetts Avenue. This meeting was conducted pursuant to the provisions outlined in Section 20.300 of the Cambridge Zoning Ordinance. The Committee is appointed by the City Manager to undertake all large project reviews of variances and special permits for activities within the Central Square Overlay District, and to monitor the progress of the Central Square Non-Zoning Recommendations of the 2013 K2C2 Study (the “Study”).

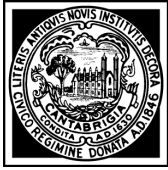
The establishment triggers two of the three characteristics contained within the definition of a Formula Business. The Applicant seeks a Special Permit to install its standardized signage on the exterior of the building and to use its corporate color and logo. The Cambridge Zoning Ordinance defines a Formula Business (Section 20.304.5) as an establishment that has a:

1. *trademark, service mark or logo, defined as a work, phrase, symbol or design or combination thereof that identifies and distinguishes the course 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*

\* \* \*

Consistent with the Study, the Committee’s questions and comments generally focused on enriching the District’s public realm, by prioritizing people, then spaces, then buildings. A key principle of formula business regulations is to regulate the design characteristics of a use, a building, or a site, and designs that might be considered “generic” in ways that impact the character of a district. The Committee’s concerns were how a given use, building, or site contributes to or takes away from the public realm and life on the streets.

The Committee viewed this proposal favorably as a positive lateral movement of an existing institution to an existing location, adding that the size of this new location at 599 Mass Ave is more appropriate for a bank. A comment was made regarding branch management and their involvement with the community. There could be some great opportunities to collaborate with other business and/or with clients, and even sponsor nonprofit organizations in and around the Square.



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CITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

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**IRAM FAROOQ**

Assistant City Manager for  
Community Development

**SANDRA CLARKE**

Deputy Director  
Chief of Administration

**KHALIL MOGASSABI**

Deputy Director  
Chief of Planning

Committee Members Present

- Joel Altstein
- Melissa Greene
- Esther Hanig
- Michael Monestime
- Robert Winters

Committee Members Absent

- Tahir Kapoor
- Christopher Sol Gully

***The following are comments made by member(s) of the public in attendance:***

- ***The criticism of banks and phone stores is always about activation. You seem to be addressing this through the nook and the artwork on display. I don't know how successful this has been in other locations. but I'm curious to hear your thoughts on how successful that's been in other locations and how that might be different now.***
  - It's all about the community, especially now that online banking is more of a thing. How do you involve and engage people in the area around the bank? We've had success in Brooklyn with this model. We also think about seminar and classes about mortgages, banking, etc. These wouldn't take place in the nook, per se, but in the common area of the bank.
- ***Is there any intention to use the setback that you've been given in a way that benefits the experience in the public realm? Sometimes, banks will have a physical element outside of their facility that brings a level of activity into the public space. For example, Citizens Bank has a large clock outside their building.***
  - Not at this time, but we will look into it further.

submitted on behalf of the Committee,

**Wendell Joseph, Neighborhood Planner**  
Community Development Department