



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

To: Planning Board

From: CDD Staff

Date: January 7, 2020

Re: Special Permit **PB #356, 56 Creighton Street**

IRAM FAROOQ
*Assistant City Manager for
Community Development*

SANDRA CLARKE
*Deputy Director
Chief of Administration*

KHALIL MOGASSABI
*Deputy Director
Chief of Planning*

This memo contains an overview of the proposed project at 56 Creighton Street, the special permit being requested, and related comments.

Summary of Proposal

The applicant is proposing to repurpose the existing two-story commercial printing building into a three-story building with 3 residential units, on grade open parking for 6 cars, and covered area for 3 long-term bicycle parking spaces.

Requested Special Permit

The project is located in the Residence B District and seeks a Special Permit to modify base zoning requirements to convert a non-residential building to residential use, which is allowed pursuant to Section 5.28.2 of the Zoning Ordinance. The project also requires a Special Permit for locating parking spaces within five feet of the property line pursuant to Section 6.44.1(b) of the Zoning Ordinance. The Board of Zoning Appeal would typically grant that special permit, but since the proposal requires Planning Board review, the Planning Board may grant all necessary special permits per Section 10.45. The applicable special permit findings are summarized below. Applicable sections of the zoning are provided in an appendix.

Requested Special Permits	Summarized Findings <i>(detailed zoning text on following pages)</i>
Conversion of non-residential structures to residential use (Section 5.28.2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased number of dwelling units will not increase on-street parking demand in the neighborhood. • The location, orientation, and use of the structure and yard of the new housing use will not impact the privacy of residential neighbors. • Due consideration has been given to address the impacts of reduction in private open space. • Reasonable efforts have been taken to address concerns raised by abutters and neighbors.
Special Permit for locating parking space within 5 feet of the property line (Section 6.44.1.b)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The placement of the parking space within 5 feet of the side property line will only be a minor modification.
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

The site is located in the Residence B District within North Cambridge. Recently this part of the neighborhood, which is near an active rail line, has experienced some transition from commercial/industrial use to residential use. Porter Square, a main commercial and transit center with Red Line, commuter rail and bus stations, is within walking distance from the parcel. Creighton Street connects directly to Massachusetts Avenue, which features a variety of retail, office, and residential uses. The presence of Lesley University in Porter Square also brings the student life to the area.

This area has been zoned Residence B since 1978; prior to that it was Residence C-1. Since then, changes were made to the Residence B zoning district which reduced the allowed density of housing and increased restrictions on building in backyards. While the neighborhood has a mix of housing types, allowed development in Residence B is predominantly single or two-family structures with generous setbacks and open space areas.

The Cambridge Growth Policy for residential neighborhoods promotes maintaining the prevailing pattern of development, building density and scale that has evolved historically. It also recommends conversion of underused industrial use to residential use if there is a demand for housing, especially in areas with good access to public transportation.

Ordinarily, the conversion of a non-residential structure to residential use would trigger many dimensional non-conformities requiring variances. During the Citywide Rezoning in 2001, a provision was added under Section 5.28.2 allowing the Planning Board to approve such non-conformities by special permit, rather than variances, when altering a building originally built for non-residential use to accommodate a residential use. The rationale is to allow existing buildings to be preserved in a way that

is economically feasible and generally consistent with the allowed uses in the district, and to maintain some of the historic character of the neighborhoods. Such relief could only be granted for development occurring within the original structure. The provisions of Section 5.28.2 were amended in 2006 and again in 2011, to strengthen requirements related to parking, to limit density, and to provide additional criteria for Planning Board consideration.

Comments on Proposal

The project is proposed to include two parcels. As it exists, the lot containing the structure is currently non-conforming with regard to use, all setbacks and some other dimensional requirements. The proposed residential development with three units is not subject to Inclusionary Housing requirements or Green Building requirements.

The proposed residential use will be more conforming than the existing non-residential use in this district. Although multifamily development is not allowed in the base zoning district, it may be approved by special permit from the Planning Board when an existing nonresidential structure is converted to a residential use per Section 5.28.2. With all three units being four-bedroom units, the proposal supports the city's policy to encourage development of units that can accommodate families with children. The proposed development does not exceed the allowed dwelling unit density of the base zoning district.

Required automobile parking and long-term bicycle parking are located at grade in the parcel adjacent to the MBTA property along the railroad tracks. Zoning requires access to the bike parking to be at least 5 feet instead of the proposed 4 feet. It seems that it is proposed to be 4 feet to protect two existing trees. However, as per Section 6.103.2.c this project is exempted from bicycle parking requirements since the conversion of the existing building is to create only 3 dwelling units. The parking spaces are aligned parallel to the linear parcel without the required 5 feet buffer from the lot line. Since the property is at the end of the street and buffered by the MBTA property along the tracks, this will have minimum impact on the neighborhood. The city has envisioned a multi-use path along the railroad tracks. The development has proposed a future access to that multi-use path through the western side of the site, separate from the parking area. Staff strongly supports the location of the future access as proposed.

The project does not meet the minimum requirement for private open space, which may be reduced by the Planning Board in granting a special permit if the Board finds that full compliance is limited by the existing development of the lot per Section 5.28.25. The existing building footprint covering almost the entire parcel it is located on makes it challenging to create private open space and permeable open space unless the structure is subject to extensive alteration. The project however provides open space in the form of terraces and private roof decks.

Urban Design

The proposed adaptive reuse of the commercial building is supported by staff. While the streetscape will change as a result of the new cladding system, the scale and massing of the building will remain unchanged. The creative design approach adopted by the architect inserts the residential program into the shell of the existing building, while carefully creating opportunities for interior terraces, access and

daylight. By lowering the first floor closer to grade and reducing the floor heights of the original building, three floors can be provided within the shell of the building. New windows are strategically located based on unit layouts and privacy needs. Glass block will be used in the windows directly abutting the closest residential abutter, which minimizes overlooking impacts.

The project provides pedestrian and bicyclists improvements with the addition of long-term bicycle parking, landscaping, and additional street activation associated with the ground floor residential entrances and new windows. If the existing sidewalk has a width of at least 6-feet, it is recommended that new street trees be provided along the front of the property. Additionally, upgrading the sidewalk so that vehicles cannot park on it, as occurs in the current condition, and to create continuity with the brick sidewalks in the neighborhood, would also benefit the pedestrian realm. The proposed landscaping and street edge treatments, including specific plantings, hardscape materials, fence designs and details, and trash enclosures, should continue to be reviewed as the design develops.

According to the narrative, HVAC units are proposed to be located near the center of the roof and will be screened by a slatted screen. A Roof Plan should be submitted to confirm the location of all rooftop appurtenances.

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 a Roof Plan.
- Review of landscape details, including plant species, pedestrian access pathways, sidewalk design, hardscape materials, exterior lighting, fencing and trash enclosure details.
- Review of all exterior materials, colors, façade alterations and details.