



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

To: Planning Board

From: CDD Staff

Date: July 27, 2021

Re: Special Permit PB #373, 698 Massachusetts Avenue (parcel address – 706 Massachusetts Avenue) – Continued Hearing

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Submission Type: Special Permit Application

Applicant: Central Property Limited

Zoning District(s): Business B (BB) / Central Square Overlay District

Proposal Summary: Relocation of an existing branch of the Citizens Bank to a new location across the street on the first floor of 698 Massachusetts Avenue.

Special Permits Requested: Special Permit for a formula business use (20.304.5.4) and Special Permit to waive the limitations on bank frontages in the Central Square Overlay District (20.304.5.3.b). *A summary of the applicable special permit findings is listed on the following page. Applicable sections of the zoning are provided in an appendix.*

Other City Permits Needed: None being sought prior to building permit

Previous Hearing: First hearing was on 3/2/21; CDD memo (2/23/21)

Planning Board Action: Grant or deny requested special permits.

Memo Contents: Review of area planning and zoning, comments on proposal addressing planning, zoning, and urban design.

Other Staff Reports: N/A

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.
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"> • Improvements are in conformance with objectives contained in <i>Central Square Development Guidelines and Central Square Action Plan</i> (see next page). • 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). • Building and site designs adequately screen the parking provided and are sensitive to the contributing buildings in the vicinity.
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.

Update

Since the last Planning Board meeting on March 2, 2021, the Applicant has worked with staff to respond to comments and questions raised in the initial review of the application. The Applicant’s recent submission provides a revised set of plans and additional information about the project in narrative and graphic form. This memo comments on the additional information and proposed changes and is supplementary to CDD’s initial memo on this proposal.

Planning Board Comments from the First Hearing

At the March 2 hearing, Planning Board members inquired about the possibility of limiting the proposed Citizens Bank frontage and incorporating an additional retail space within the building’s frontage along Mass Ave. The Applicant seeks a Planning Board Special Permit under Section 20.304.5(3)(b) to exceed

an individual bank or financial institution's maximum allowable frontage limitation of twenty-five (25) feet in the Central Square Overlay District.

A central focus of the Board's discussion at the March 2 hearing related to the proposed façade and storefront design of the bank. Comments related to the proposed façade included:

- Ability of the bank to reuse the existing sign band from the former Rodney's bookstore
- Removing the proposed white band along the bottom of the storefront windows
- Changing the sign band color to minimize the visual occupancy of the bank along the width of the storefront
- Reevaluating the need for awnings along the storefront
- Minimizing the visual presence of the bank along the storefront
- Changing the proposed signage to be more unique to the character of Central Square and less formulaic to the corporate branding of the bank

CDD Staff Comments on New Materials

Planning and Zoning

Frontage Occupancy

As mentioned above, the Applicant seeks a Planning Board Special Permit to exceed the allowable twenty-five (25) feet building frontage occupancy limitation for an individual bank or financial institution in the Central Square Overlay District. The existing building frontage measures approximately fifty (50) feet, and the Citizens Bank would occupy approximately 80% of the total frontage. The revised materials propose the same amount of bank frontage and do not include any additional retail use or other functions within the space. In the supplemental materials provided by the Applicant, there is no response as to why the bank must exceed the frontage limitations along Mass Ave, or why an additional retail storefront alongside the bank frontage cannot be accommodated in order to meet the requirement.

Proposed Design

The Applicant's revised materials dated June 2, 2021 are responsive to many of the Planning Board's initial concerns. The proposed awnings in the initial proposal have been removed and the white sign band along the bottom of the windows has also been removed. A single internally-illuminated "Citizens" wall sign is proposed above the main bank entry in the same sign band as the existing previous "Rodney's" sign. The new sign will be mounted on a new band of aluminum panels, continuous across the full width of the facade except where interrupted by the brick piers. It is proposed to be painted a warm light grey (Benjamin Moore "Silver Bells") in an effort to better complement the building façade's lighter brick tones. . In addition, an externally-illuminated projecting blade sign is proposed at the left corner of the same entry. The ATM vestibule will remain largely as initially proposed. Additional discussion of the proposed façade changes is included as part of the Urban Design comments below. Review of the proposed signage against the zoning requirements of Article 7 has not yet been completed, but will be required as part of the permit process for any proposed signage. Projecting signage which extends beyond six (6) inches into the public right-of-way will require City Council approval prior to receiving a sign permit.

Urban Design

The new submission responds to many of the comments from the Planning Board from the first hearing on March 2, 2021 and the staff memo dated February 23, 2021. The formula business branding of the signage and façade design is much more subtle; the amount of green has been reduced. As documented by comparisons to other Citizen's Bank installations, the proposed design is differentiated from Citizens Bank's standard branding. It has much less of the green branding color and the signage is much more low-key. The previous submission's awning has been removed and building-mounted signage is proposed. The bank use, however, still occupies about 80% of the ground floor facade's overall 50-foot width, and roughly 35 feet of its glazing.

Instead of the green awning originally proposed, a building-mounted sign is now proposed above the shopfront glazing, in the same location that had been used for the previous business's sign. The sign band's proposed off-white color is similar to that of the nearby 1369 Coffee House. The graphic representation of the proposed sign band's vertical dimension varies between different drawings in the application. A field check indicates that the narrower band shown on the dimensioned drawings, (e.g.: Package F page 4 and Package D page 1) is correct. The narrower proportions are preferable.

The application states that the bottom zone of applied translucent vinyl bands on the shopfront windows has been deleted, in response to Planning Board comments. It is still shown, however, on some of the drawings (e.g. Package C's sheet 2 and Package E's sheet 3). It would be preferable to eliminate at least the lowest band, if not all of the bands. A sample of the whitish translucent film for the lower part of the shopfront glass was sent to CDD staff. It appears to be fairly subtle, more like the views in Package E's pages 2 and 3 than the bold white depicted on the application's views in Package B's pages 3 and 4.

The ATM vestibule/entry lobby is shown with Citizens Bank's standard strong green branding color and supergraphics. While this is an interior space, it will be highly visible to the public. Consideration could be given to using a more subdued color, as was shown in the presentation materials for the Planning Board hearing on March 2, 2021.

The application includes light fixtures to illuminate the blade sign proposed on the easternmost brick pier, and states that the fixtures will be "... placed on either side, 36" set back from the face of the blade sign". The elevation drawings do not show these light fixtures. Note that 36" to the east of the blade sign shown on Package C's page 2 would be on the adjoining building, and that 36" to the west of the blade sign would be in the off-white sign band or the recess at the entry doors. Consideration should be given to eliminating these light fixtures, or replacing them with smaller ones, more appropriate to the dimensions of the brick pier.

Staff understands from earlier communications with the applicant that the paint that had originally been proposed on the brick piers has been eliminated as requested by CDD and Cambridge Historical Commission staff. This is reflected on package D's page 1 and Package E's page 2, but not on Package C's page 2.

The Massachusetts Avenue sidewalk between Western Avenue and Pleasant Street has fairly consistent street trees except for right in front of the proposed bank, where there is a broad area of unshaded sidewalk. Consideration should be given to adding a tree or trees if possible, in coordination with the Department of Public Works.

Continuing Review

The following is a summary of issues that staff recommends as conditions for ongoing design review by staff if the Board decides to grant the special permit:

- Review of exterior materials and colors.
- Review of exterior lighting.
- Review of all exterior signage and attachments.
- Review of proposed design drawings for changes to the building's exterior.
- Review of façade alterations and details with staff at the Cambridge Historical Commission.
- Review of site plan.
- Review of proposed floor plan.
- A plan for anticipated loading and delivery operations of the bank.
- A plan for bicycle parking for employees and patrons of the bank.
- A maintenance plan for the sidewalk in the area surrounding the proposed ATM vestibule.