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# CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

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To: Planning Board

From: CDD Staff

Date: June 1, 2021

Re: Special Permit PB #375, 600 & 624 Main Street – Continued Hearing  
(Parcels – 41 Albany Street & 620 Main Street)

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Submission Type: Special Permit Application

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Applicant: The Ragon Institute

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Zoning District(s): Industry B (IB) and East Cambridge TDR District

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Proposal Summary: Construction of a 185,810 square-foot six-story building for technical office and laboratory for research and development use with two levels of below grade parking for 120 vehicles, 41 long-term and 12 short-term bicycle parking spaces, and 4 loading bays.

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Special Permits Requested: Project Review Special Permit (Section 19.20) including modification to Building and Site Plan Requirements (Section 19.50), Special Permit for reduction of required off-street parking (Section 6.35.1), Special Permit to exceed curb cut width (6.43.5(b)), and Special Permit for basement gross floor area exemption (Section 2.000). *A summary of the applicable special permit findings is listed on the following page. Applicable sections of the zoning are provided in an appendix.*

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Other City Permits Needed: Certificate of Appropriateness from Cambridge Historic Commission (CHC), PTDM Plan Approved on 2/22/2021

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Planning Board Action: Grant or deny requested special permits.

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

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Other Staff Reports: Traffic, Parking and Transportation Dept. (TP+T), Department of Public Works (DPW), in separate documents for previous hearing.

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Requested Special Permits	Required Planning Board Findings <i>(Summary - see appendix for zoning text excerpts)</i>
Project Review Special Permit (Section 19.20)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The project will have no substantial adverse impact on city traffic within the study area, upon review of the traffic impact indicators analyzed in the Transportation Impact Study and mitigation efforts proposed.</li> <li>• The project is consistent with the urban design objectives of the City as set forth in Section 19.30 (see following page).</li> </ul>
Special Permit to reduce 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.
Special Permit to exceed allowed curb cut width (Section 6.43.5)	Increased curb cut width will facilitate traffic and safety.
Modification to Building and Site Plan Requirements (Section 19.50)	The project is consistent with the urban design objectives of the City as set forth in Section 19.30.
Special Permit for basement gross floor area exemption (Section 2.000)	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)	<p>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:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) It appears that requirements of this Ordinance cannot or will not be met, or</li> <li>(b) traffic generated or patterns of access or egress would cause congestion, hazard, or substantial change in established neighborhood character, or</li> <li>(c) the continued operation of or the development of adjacent uses as permitted in the Zoning Ordinance would be adversely affected by the nature of the proposed use, or</li> <li>(d) nuisance or hazard would be created to the detriment of the health, safety and/or welfare of the occupant of the proposed use or the citizens of the City, or</li> <li>(e) for other reasons, the proposed use would impair the integrity of the district or adjoining district, or otherwise derogate from the intent and purpose of this Ordinance, and</li> <li>(f) the new use or building construction is inconsistent with the Urban Design Objectives set forth in Section 19.30.</li> </ul>

**19.30 Citywide Urban Design Objectives [SUMMARIZED]**

Objective	Indicators
New projects should be responsive to the existing or anticipated pattern of development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transition to lower-scale neighborhoods</li> <li>• Consistency with established streetscape</li> <li>• Compatibility with adjacent uses</li> <li>• Consideration of nearby historic buildings</li> </ul>
Development should be pedestrian and bicycle-friendly, with a positive relationship to its surroundings.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inhabited ground floor spaces</li> <li>• Discouraged ground-floor parking</li> <li>• Windows on ground floor</li> <li>• Orienting entries to pedestrian pathways</li> <li>• Safe and convenient bicycle and pedestrian access</li> </ul>
The building and site design should mitigate adverse environmental impacts of a development upon its neighbors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Location/impact of mechanical equipment</li> <li>• Location/impact of loading and trash handling</li> <li>• Stormwater management</li> <li>• Shadow impacts</li> <li>• Retaining walls, if provided</li> <li>• Building scale and wall treatment</li> <li>• Outdoor lighting</li> <li>• Tree protection (requires plan approved by City Arborist)</li> </ul>
Projects should not overburden the City infrastructure services, including neighborhood roads, city water supply system, and sewer system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Water-conserving plumbing, stormwater management</li> <li>• Capacity/condition of water and wastewater service</li> <li>• Efficient design (LEED standards)</li> </ul>
New construction should reinforce and enhance the complex urban aspects of Cambridge as it has developed historically.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Institutional use focused on existing campuses</li> <li>• Mixed-use development (including retail) encouraged where allowed</li> <li>• Preservation of historic structures and environment</li> <li>• Provision of space for start-up companies, manufacturing activities</li> </ul>
Expansion of the inventory of housing in the city is encouraged.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Housing as a component of large, multi-building development</li> <li>• Affordable units exceeding zoning requirements, targeting units for middle-income families</li> </ul>
Enhancement and expansion of open space amenities in the city should be incorporated into new development in the city.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Publicly beneficial open space provided in large-parcel commercial development</li> <li>• Enhance/expand existing open space, complement existing pedestrian/bicycle networks</li> <li>• Provide wider range of activities</li> </ul>

## **Update**

Since the last Planning Board meeting on March 23, 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. The changes have also been reviewed by staff at TP+T and DPW, but no new memos are provided – the Board should continue to consider the comments and recommendations from previous memos.

## **Planning Board Action**

The current Application (as revised) is proposing to demolish both existing buildings on the site and build an approximately 185,000 square foot Technical Office & Laboratory building which will be home to the Ragon Institute. The proposed building is a six-story, U-shaped building oriented towards Main Street. The building contains a sloping roof that reaches its peak at 120' at the Main Street/Albany corner of the site, and gradually decreases in height to 90' at the corner of Main Street and Portland Street. The building is pulled back from the Main Street edge to provide for a wide open space area in the front of the building. The building's main lobby entrance is located at the center of the Main Street façade, and is flanked on either side by a colloquium room and seminar rooms. The west entrance to the building along Portland Street contains access to the building's private childcare center use. Along Albany Street are the building's service areas, including a loading dock and entrance to an underground, 120-space parking garage.

The Applicant is seeking Special Permits from the Planning Board as noted in the table above. Applicable sections of the zoning are provided in an appendix.

## **Planning Board Comments from the First Hearing**

Below is a summary of the key comments made by the Planning Board at the March 23 hearing:

- Most Board members felt that the proposed building design was remarkable, even though it does not completely align with the City's Urban Design Guidelines. Some Board Members felt that the proposed building façade appeared solid and contained little articulation and seemed out of context with the mix of uses present within the neighborhood.
- The Planning Board requested that the Applicant conduct more thorough public outreach, and incorporate comments/feedback from these meetings into the building design, open space design, streetscape improvements, and open space operations.
- Board members asked the Applicant to look at the proposed open space design along Main Street and make refinements to ensure it will be an inviting public space.
- Board members suggested the incorporation of a historical plaque or marker that would share the history of the Olmsted-Flint building proposed to be demolished.
- Board members asked the Applicant to explore enlarging the proposed oculus.

- Board members asked the Applicant to share additional details about the amount of sunlight that would be present in the open space areas under the proposed cantilevers.
- Staff and Board members asked that the perforated security barrier around the proposed childcare recreation area be redesigned to make it shorter and more transparent.
- Board members and the public asked the applicants to summarize what benefits the building would present to surrounding community stakeholders and residents.

## **CDD Staff Comments on New Materials**

### ***Planning and Zoning***

#### Overall

Since the last Planning Board meeting, the Applicant has made several revisions to the building design, open space design, and building programming in response to comments received from staff, Planning Board members, and the public. The Applicant held an additional community meeting on April 15, 2021, the notes of which are summarized in the applicant's revised submission. The proposed revisions and associated commentary are summarized further below:

#### Building Design Changes

The building has been redesigned such that the area of the proposed oculus has increased approximately 20% in order to allow more natural light to reach the ground plane and make the building entrance more visible. To further illuminate the open space areas underneath the proposed cantilevers, the applicants have proposed both recessed soffit lighting on the underside of the cantilevers as well as strategic uplighting along the building façade. In order to increase the transparency into the first-floor colloquium and seminar rooms, the applicants have proposed tree species with canopies that will, at maturity, begin at least seven (7) feet above grade.

Staff and the public made comments regarding the proposed off-street parking in the basement of the building, and whether more spaces could be dedicated to electric vehicle charging. The spaces have been redesigned such that additional electric vehicle spaces are included in the parking area (6.7% of total parking spaces compared to 2% before), and electric infrastructure will be established such that up to 50% of the parking area can be converted to electric charging spaces.

The applicant has also made revisions to the roof plan in order to be compliant with the recently-adopted [Green Roofs Zoning Petition](#). This amendment requires that qualifying developments of 25,000 gross square feet or more dedicate at least 80% of the available roof area (excluding some portions used for mechanical equipment and other areas that must be kept clear) to contain green roof systems. The new roof plan illustrates the available roof area and anticipates that the Green Roofs Ordinance will require at least 20,028 square feet of green roof area. The applicant is proposing 20,145 square feet of green roof area, which exceeds the minimum 80% requirement (80.45% proposed).

#### Open Space Design Changes

Members of the public and Planning Board members expressed concerns related to the design of the proposed open spaces along Main Street and whether they could be designed to be more inviting to the public. Part of the concern was that the open space was previously proposed to be divided between

publicly-beneficial open space and private open space and it was somewhat unclear how the division between the two would be managed by Ragon staff. The applicant has since revised the proposed open space such that 100% of the open space along the Main Street frontage will be publicly beneficial open space. At the northeastern and northwestern corners of the site, the landscaped islands have been redesigned to specifically draw the public into the open space rather than be a physical and visual buffer. Proposed pop-up food and retail uses are now proposed as part of the site plan. While these changes are positive and responsive to previous concerns about activating the space, they would constitute new principal land uses. The [retail zoning changes](#) currently under review by the City Council (for possible adoption on or after June 7) would permit food service uses and temporary open-air retail as-of-right in the zoning district, but the Planning Board should explicitly authorize such uses in the special permit if they are approved. The applicant should also prepare a revised dimensional form that incorporates these open space changes and newly proposed uses to ensure continued zoning compliance.

Staff and the Planning Board raised concerns about the proposed height of the perforated security barrier around the childcare recreational area at the confluence of Portland and Albany Streets. Initially, the applicant reduced the height of the barrier from eight (8) feet to six (6) feet, but has since revised plans to show the height to be four (4) feet. Further, the applicant is exploring a partnership with neighborhood-based art organization Community Art to explore the possibility of including public art along the barrier.

#### Programming/Operations Changes

The Applicant reported on comments received at a community meeting held on April 15, 2021, which covered topics including availability of childcare spaces to neighboring residents, public accessibility to the building, ownership of the site, making the open space feel inviting to the public, the building's massing compared to neighborhood context, and the streetscape and public improvements that would occur as part of the project. In the revised materials, the Applicant has since committed that five (5) childcare spaces reserved for area residents will be prioritized specifically for Newtowne Court/Washington Elms residents. It is not specified whether these childcare spaces will be subsidized, or whether the set-aside will be in perpetuity or only for a defined period of time during building operation.

#### Traffic, Parking & Transportation Comments

The Traffic, Parking & Transportation (TP&T) Department summarized its initial comments in a memo dated March 18, 2021 for the Planning Board's hearing on March 23.

Since that time, TP&T has continued to work with the applicant on the Project. The proposed curb cut width to the loading area has been slightly narrowed following Planning Board and previous staff comments. The applicant has stated that they do not expect to receive loading/deliveries from vehicles exceeding thirty (30) feet in length, and that the proposed loading dock will be able to accommodate up to two loading vehicles up to forty (40) feet in length. Further, the applicant has stated they will have a Facilities Director who will manage the schedule of deliveries and day-to-day loading operations. The applicant has committed to no deliveries occurring during morning and evening rush hours.

### ***Urban Design***

Staff thanks the applicant and designers for their responsiveness to suggestions.

#### Main Street Site Plan and Architecture

The open space along Main Street has been revised to make it more open and inviting to the public: the sense of a landscape buffer between the Main Street sidewalk and the building has been somewhat reduced, and the arrangement of the paved paths is more open.

- The reduced size of some of the planters and widened paths between them, the creation of a diagonal path leading into the site from the intersection of Portland and Main streets, and the substitution of a boardwalk for the planter at the front of Oculus Plaza all reduce the sense that pedestrians on the Main Street sidewalk are separated from the building by planters and narrow pathways.
- The new wood paved seating and circulation area at the front of Oculus Plaza will facilitate flexible use of that space.
- The enlarged oculus opening in the second-floor terrace is welcome, as is the situation of the tree planter more directly under it.
- The raised area under the east overhang has been redesigned to feel more public: the openings at its east and west ends widened, and the vegetation that previously screened it from the public removed.
- The addition of “community vendor areas” under the eastern overhang and in front of the Oculus Plaza will increase the “public feel” of the open space.
- The main building entry off the Oculus Plaza has been relocated to a more central location facing the plaza., where it will be visible from both east and west.

As final refinements are being made to the landscape and architectural design facing Main Street, consideration could be given to:

- Providing a wider public sidewalk along Main Street.
- Widening the paths between planted areas, including the diagonal path at the northwest corner of the site.
- Designing the planted areas to allow more flexible use.
- Further reducing the width of the planting strip along the colloquium room or eliminating it.
- Selecting the plant species proposed under the overhangs for appropriate height at maturity and shade tolerance.
- Selecting the species and the precise location of the trees planted near the edges of the overhangs so that they don’t lean out toward the light as they grow.
- More strongly emphasizing the main entrance at the Oculus plaza.
- Further refinements to the design of the fountain under the east overhang to help invite pedestrians onto the elevated terrace behind it.
- Using the same soffit material on the east and west overhangs facing Main Street as at the underside of the second-floor terrace at Oculus Plaza, to create more continuity for pedestrians along the Main Street frontage.

### Portland Street Site Plan and Architecture

Positive changes have been made in response to suggestions:

- The height of the fence around the play area has been reduced.
- A new path across the site's narrow southwest point responds to the pedestrian desire line from Albany Street to Portland street.

### Albany Street Architectural Design

- To reduce the uninterrupted façade length, consideration could be given to extending the vertical windows at the stairs on the south side of the building up to the top of the facade, and to recessing them back from the façade plane.

### **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:

- The street section on Main, Portland, and Albany Streets, including the separated bicycle lane, street trees, curb locations, crosswalk locations, curb cuts, details, and the size and position of drop off areas.
- Landscape design of the publicly accessible open space and setbacks along Main, Portland, and Albany Streets, including species and planting standards for trees and other vegetation, locations of trees, and details of hardscape, benches, fences, etc.
- Clarification of responsibility for the maintenance of the sidewalks and street trees.
- Participation in the city's ongoing program to provide signage to convey that the open space along Main Street is open to the public.
- Coordination with city staff to review any "pop-up" food and related retail uses.
- Review of exterior lighting.
- Review of all exterior materials, colors, and details, including a materials wall mock-up of the addition on the site prior to any exterior materials being ordered.
- Review of ground level and upper level façade design.
- Submission of a revised dimensional form illustrating the most up-to-date design of the building and associated open space uses.