



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

To: Planning Board

From: Harvard Square Advisory Committee

Date: May 11, 2021

Re: **1290 Massachusetts Avenue - Financial Institution Frontage Special Permit Application (PB-378)**

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Assistant City Manager for
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Overview

The Harvard Square Advisory Committee (the "Committee") met on Thursday, April 29, 2021 to discuss the Planning Board Special Permit application PB-378 by Santander Bank N.A. to exceed the permitted frontage for a financial institution in the Harvard Square Overlay District for a Santander Bank branch at 1290 Massachusetts Avenue. This meeting was conducted pursuant to the provisions of Section 20.50 of the Cambridge Zoning Ordinance. Committee members present were Allison Crosbie, Lauren Curry, Frank Kramer, Kari Kuelzer, Alexandra Offiong, and Matt Simitis. After discussion, the Committee decided unanimously to forward a report to the Planning Board with a negative recommendation.

Proposal Description

The applicant proposes to relocate an existing Santander Bank branch in Harvard Square that is currently located at 1420 Massachusetts Avenue to the proposed location at 1290 Massachusetts Avenue. The applicant does not propose to change the façades, footprint, or interior layout of the current building. The applicant also is not required to provide vehicle or bicycle parking on-site.

The proposed location will include approximately 36 feet of ground floor frontage on Massachusetts Avenue and approximately 70 feet of frontage on Linden Street. The proposed relocation would result in Santander Bank occupying approximately 50% of the building's combined Massachusetts Avenue and Linden Street frontages. As a result, the proposal significantly exceeds the 25' and 30% maximums set in Section 20.54.9.

The applicant proposes a suite of signage that reflects the corporate branding for Santander Bank, including a logo, font, and color. This includes wall signs, a blade sign extending over the sidewalk, signage around the ATM, and a vinyl film on the door of the Massachusetts Avenue entrance. The applicant also proposes placing "privacy film" along the lower areas of the windows along Massachusetts Avenue and Linden Street, except for the southernmost bay on Linden Street, which will feature a window graphic instead. None of the proposed signs will extend higher than 20 feet above grade. It's unclear whether the proposed signage meets the zoning standards since the solid red panels could be considered corporate or brand identification. However, as noted above, the Harvard Square Overlay District essentially waives this requirement.

Committee Comments

Overall, members of the Committee expressed a belief that the applicant’s proposal violates the spirit of the Harvard Square Overlay District and does not constitute a minor increase in frontage. Many Committee members noted that the proposal is in contradiction to the desire by various people in the community to limit the presence and prominence of banks and other financial institutions in Harvard Square that led to the recent change to the Zoning Ordinance. While they appreciated the inclusion of a community meeting space in the proposed bank branch, Committee members ultimately found that the proposal does not meet the zoning standards and fundamentally objected to the intent of the building use.

Several Committee members noted that the building is not a good fit for the proposed use, given its prominent corner site and its location in the middle of a busy retail area. They expressed concern that the lack of activity generated by the bank would negatively impact nearby businesses. Committee members expressed support for maintaining a branch of Santander Bank in Harvard Square, but found that other locations would be more suitable and in line with the guidelines for development in the Harvard Square Overlay District.

Committee members also expressed concern with the design and amount of proposed signage. Many members characterized the signage as overwhelming and out of context. Others noted the importance of supporting a unique and active pedestrian environment along Massachusetts Avenue, which would be diminished by the privacy film and opaque window graphics.

Given the Committee’s discussion, a motion was made and seconded to forward a report to the Planning Board with a negative recommendation. All six members present voted in favor.

Respectfully submitted for the Committee,

Sarah Scott

Sarah Scott

Associate Zoning Planner

Community Development Department