



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

To: Planning Board

From: CDD Staff

Date: September 14, 2021

Re: Special Permit **PB-382, 10 Wilson Road**

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Overview

Submission Type:	Special Permit Application
Applicant:	Quad 10 Wilson Road, LLC c/o The Davis Companies
Zoning District(s):	Office 1 (O-1); Alewife Overlay District 4 (AOD-4)
Proposal Summary:	Allow the use of a restaurant on the ground floor of the existing office building.
Special Permits Requested:	Retail Business and Consumer Service Establishment Use in Alewife Overlay District (20.94.1) for a Restaurant Use (4.35.f-1)
Other City Permits Needed:	None
Planning Board Action:	Grant or deny requested special permits.
Memo Contents:	CDD Zoning Report & Urban Design Report
Other Staff Reports:	N/A

Requested Special Permits	Required Planning Board Findings <i>(Summary - see appendix for zoning text excerpts)</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •
<p>Special Permit for modifications to permitted uses in Alewife Overlay Districts in base Office district (Section 20.94.1)</p>	<p>For all uses listed in Section 4.35:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual establishment is not exceeding 10,000 sq. ft. in area. • Retail use is located on the first floor or basement of the building. • Total Gross Floor Area of retail uses does not exceed 10% of the total Gross Floor Area of the building. <p>The Planning Board may waive above limitations if the project promotes the general interests of the larger commercial and residential neighborhood noted in Section 20.92.</p>
<p>General Special Permit Criteria (Section 10.43)</p>	<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> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (a) It appears that requirements of this Ordinance cannot or will not be met, or (b) traffic generated or patterns of access or egress would cause congestion, hazard, or substantial change in established neighborhood character, or (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 (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 (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 (f) the new use or building construction is inconsistent with the Urban Design Objectives set forth in Section 19.30.

Requested Special Permits	Required Planning Board Findings <i>(Summary - see appendix for zoning text excerpts)</i>
<p>Special Permit Considerations for Retail or Consumer Service Establishments (Section 10.43.1)</p>	<p>Where a special permit is required for a Retail or Consumer Service Establishment listed in Section 4.35 or 4.36 of this Zoning Ordinance, the special permit granting authority shall consider the following factors when evaluating the criteria in Section 10.43:</p> <p>(a) Anticipated delivery and loading operations, their potential impacts on neighboring uses and the overall neighborhood, and the extent to which those impacts are mitigated;</p> <p>(b) The extent to which neighboring uses would be impacted by environmental nuisance such as dust, fumes, odors, smoke, vapors, noise, vibration, flashing, light trespass, or glare, and the extent to which those impacts are mitigated;</p> <p>(c) The extent to which storefronts and other elements of the façade visible to the public are compatible with the visual character of the surrounding area and conform to the City’s urban design objectives for retail uses in the area; and</p> <p>(d) Where citywide or neighborhood plans have been published by the City that identify types of retail uses that are preferred or desirable in the area, such plans may be considered in support of such identified uses where they are proposed.</p>



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Area Planning and Zoning

Site Context

This site is located in the middle of the Alewife Quadrangle area north of Concord Avenue and west of Alewife Brook Parkway (see Figure 1). The area is comprised of a mix of new office buildings, purpose-built industrial buildings converted to technical office or manufacturing uses, warehouses, and surface parking lots. Most of the buildings are low-lying and extend only one or two stories. The building at 10 Wilson Road is at the northeastern corner of Smith Place and Wilson Road.



Figure 1. Aerial photograph of the area surrounding 10 Wilson Road. (Source: Nearmap, March 27, 2021)

Site Zoning

The base zoning for the site is Office 1 (O-1) which allows professional office uses as well as all types of housing and institutional uses as-of-right. It restricts hotels, motels, and other types of lodging as well as various retail and industrial uses. O-1 permits development at a fairly low scale and intensity, with a height limit of 35 feet and dimensional requirements similar to a Residence C-1 district. In many other parts of Cambridge, O-1 is characterized by smaller-scale residential development types that might have been converted to professional office use at some point. The recent zoning change for Retail or

Consumer Establishments, adopted by the City Council in June, allows many retail uses (including restaurants) in O-1 districts by special permit from the Board of Zoning Appeal (BZA).

In this case, the O-1 serves as the base district for the Alewife Overlay District 4 (Quadrangle Southeast), which modifies the base zoning regarding use, dimensional standards, and parking and loading requirements. The Alewife Overlay Districts allow higher-intensity development and a broader range of uses than the base district by special permit from the Planning Board, if the development supports the general planning objectives for the area. The site abuts the Industry B-2 zoning district and the Alewife Overlay District 2 (Quadrangle Northeast) on the northern edge of the lot.

Area Plans and Studies

Concord-Alewife Plan

The planning goals that underlie the current zoning in the area were established in the Concord-Alewife Planning Study, completed in 2006. In deciding special permits pursuant to the Alewife Overlay District (AOD) zoning, the key consideration for the Board will be the degree to which the proposal conforms to the [Concord-Alewife Plan](#) and accompanying [design guidelines](#).

Envision Cambridge Alewife District Plan

The Concord-Alewife Plan was updated with the completion of the [Alewife District Plan](#) in 2019, which sets a vision for the entire Alewife area as well as various subdistricts within it. Most of the goals of the Alewife District Plan are shared with the Concord-Alewife Plan, and the more recent plan recommends more specific measures that will help achieve those goals. The Alewife District Plan lists the following specific goals for the Quadrangle area:

- Preserve and enhance light industrial businesses, and community-focused businesses that require light industrial space, that provide good-paying, low-barrier-to-entry jobs;
- Create a significant new linear open space and smaller open spaces internal to blocks;
- Create a “Main Street” on Wilson Road with active ground-floor uses, including showrooms or retail space for light industrial uses;
- Create a connected network of streets and pathways;
- Encourage a variety of housing types including townhouse and live-work units;
- Maintain the stability and character of the Cambridge Highlands neighborhood; and
- Encourage small-scale neighborhood supporting retail on Concord Avenue and Smith Place.

Comments on Proposal

Project Description

The applicant proposes to convert an existing accessory employee cafeteria into a full-service restaurant. The size of the use will remain 2,164 square feet and the location will remain on the first floor. No major building or site alterations are proposed as part of the project. The applicant does propose installing a wall sign for the café use on the Wilson Road building elevation, which will require approval from the Community Development Department before the project can receive a building permit.

Consistency with Planning and Zoning

The applicant is seeking a special permit under [Section 20.94.1](#) of the Zoning Ordinance, which allows the Planning Board to permit all uses listed in [Section 4.35 - Retail Business and Consumer Service Establishments](#) that are not otherwise allowed under base zoning, provided that no individual establishment exceeds 10,000 square feet in area, the retail use is located on the first floor or basement of a building, and the total Gross floor Area (GFA) devoted to retail uses may not exceed 10% of the GFA of the buildings on the lot.

Prior to the adoption of the new [Retail or Consumer Service Uses Zoning Ordinance](#) in June, restaurants were not allowed in Office 1 base zoning districts. However, the ordinance now allows restaurants in Office 1 with a special permit from the Board of Zoning Appeal (BZA). Most retail uses are now generally allowed in Office districts if they are on the ground floor or basement, are within a building or lot containing residential or office uses, and occupy less than 25% of the building, though the BZA can approve modifications by special permit.

The applicant has decided to seek a special permit from the Planning Board under the AOD zoning instead of from the BZA under the new Section 4.35 zoning, which is reasonable given the Planning Board's purview over much of the development in the Alewife Overlay Districts. The restaurant use will occupy 2,164 square feet of GFA in the 75,984-square-foot office building, which is approximately 3% of the building's total GFA. It will also be located on the first floor of the building. As a result, the proposal meets all three criteria for the Section 20.94.1 special permit.

Regarding the broader considerations for approval of a conditional retail use, the Alewife District Plan explicitly supports small-scale retail and active uses at this location. Given the commercial character of the area, and given that the food service function has been in existence for some time already, it is not expected to generate impacts that are incompatible with other activities in the neighborhood.

The property has a Parking and Transportation Demand Management (PTDM) plan for the existing office use. The proposed change of use from cafeteria to restaurant does not trigger a PTDM Amendment for the change of use of two parking spaces from employee to customer or a change in the TDM program.



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Urban Design Report: **PB-382, 10 Wilson Road**

Urban Design Comments

The conversion from an employee cafeteria to a public-facing restaurant will be a positive addition to the Alewife area as it continues to grow into a mixed-use district. This new public retail amenity will help with the City's ongoing goals to improve retail and public spaces in the district, including the Alewife District Plan goal of creating a "Main Street" on Wilson Road with active ground-floor uses.

The location of the restaurant on the corner, with its own entrance, canopy and signage helps give it a separate identity and a neighborhood focus. The outdoor dining, patio and operable garage doors also help to animate the streetscape.

To further enliven Wilson Road and create a more typical "Main Street" experience, it would be preferable if the primary café entrance and outdoor dining faced the street, rather than the parking lot. Over time, consideration could also be given to allowing the outdoor dining to spill out towards the sidewalk, in front of the building, and to further define and landscape the front setback area in accord with the *Envision Alewife Design Guidelines*. Such design enhancements could be considered in the future as development occurs and as demand for food and beverage establishments increases.

Continuing Review

The following are additional recommendations for ongoing design review by staff if the Board decides to grant the special permit:

- Review of any façade and landscape design modifications.