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# CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

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To: Planning Board

From: CDD Staff

Date: March 29, 2022

Re: **PB-388, 425 Massachusetts Avenue (Vitality Bowls)**

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Community Development

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Deputy Director  
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## Overview

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Submission Type:	Special Permit Application
Applicant:	ATE Superfoods 2 LLC DBA Vitality Bowls
Zoning District(s):	Business B; Central Square Overlay District
Proposal Summary:	Operate a Formula Business restaurant café occupying approximately 923 square feet in the first floor of the existing building.
Special Permits Requested:	Formula Business (20.304.5(4))
Other City Permits Needed:	n/a
Planning Board Action:	Grant or deny requested special permit.
Memo Contents:	CDD Zoning Report & Urban Design Report
Other Staff Reports:	n/a

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Requested Special Permits	Required Planning Board Findings (summarized)
<p>Central Square Overlay District: Formula Business Special Permit (20.304.5(4))</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The design reflects, amplifies and strengthens the established historical character of existing buildings and storefronts in Central Square.</li> <li>• The particulars of the building or storefront design is 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.</li> <li>• Standard elements of the enterprise defining it as a Formula Business are 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."</li> </ul>
Applicable Criteria	Required Planning Board Findings (summarized)
<p>Central Square Overlay District: Criteria for Issuance of Special Permits (Section 20.300)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proposed development is consistent with the goals and objectives of the Central Square Action Plan:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ encourage responsible and orderly development;</li> <li>○ strengthen the retail base to more completely serve the needs of the neighborhoods;</li> <li>○ preserve the Square’s cultural diversity;</li> <li>○ create active people oriented spaces;</li> <li>○ improve the physical, and visual environment;</li> <li>○ provide retail establishments that serve people of diverse economic and social groups who live in the surrounding neighborhoods.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Building and site designs are consistent with “Urban Design Plan for Central Square” as outlined in the “Central Square Action Plan” and the “Central Square Development Guidelines.”</li> <li>• Building and site designs adequately screen the parking provided and are sensitive to the contributing buildings in the vicinity.</li> <li>• No National Register or contributing building is demolished or so altered as to terminate or preclude its designation (either now or within the past 5 years).</li> </ul>

Requested Special Permits	Required Planning Board Findings (summarized)
<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> <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>



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Zoning Report: **PB-388, 425 Massachusetts Avenue (Vitality Bowls)**

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## Area Planning and Zoning

### *Site Context*

Neighborhood/Area: Central Square

Development Patterns: The site is located at the eastern end of Central Square where Main Street and Massachusetts Avenue converge. Most buildings on Massachusetts Avenue host retail uses on the ground story and office uses on the upper stories. Building heights and sizes vary; most buildings are built to the lot line and do not provide off-street parking.

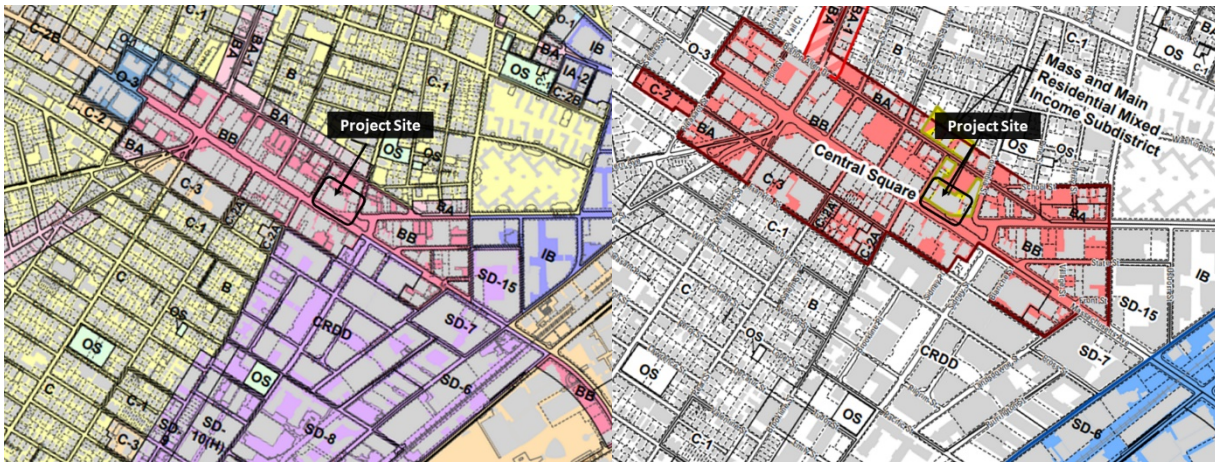
Nearby Features: The site is a few blocks away from the MBTA Central Square Station. There is a Bluebikes station and a stop for the Route 1 MBTA bus in front of the building. Jill Brown-Rhone Park and Lafayette Square create a triangular plaza at the corner where Main Street and Massachusetts Avenue meet.



Site context for 425 Massachusetts Avenue. (Source: Nearmap March 27, 2021)

### **Site Zoning**

**General Description:** The base zoning for the site is Business B (BB). Business B allows a wide range of typical neighborhood business uses, as well as office and residential uses. The district development standards allow higher-density development, with maximum heights up to 80 feet and floor-area ratios (FAR) up to 3.00. The site is also in the Central Square Overlay District, which modifies base zoning provisions both as-of-right and by special permit.



Zoning Map (left) and Overlay Zoning Map (right). (Source: City of Cambridge)

### **Development Plans and Guidelines**

- [Central Square Overlay District](#). The Central Square Overlay District (CSOD) was created in 1989 following a planning study that established development goals and guidelines for the area; it was most recently amended in 2017. There are a variety of plans and guidelines focused on Central Square, including the [Kendall Square Central Square Planning Study - K2C2 \(2013\)](#), the [Central Square Action Plan](#), and the [Central Square Development Guidelines](#). Overall, these documents envision a Central Square with a strong retail base made up of local, independent retailers; an active arts community; vibrant public spaces; new and historic buildings that are compatible with each other; and more housing options.
- [Mass and Main](#). The zoning that led to the development of Mass and Main, now called Market Central, was adopted in 2015. As part of their zoning and special permit conditions, the developer of Market Central agreed to provide various public benefits, including a commitment to recruit and retain local, independent businesses.
- [Formula Business](#). The definition of “Formula Business” was added to the Zoning Ordinance in 2017 with the adoption of the Central Square Restoration Zoning (Sater, et al.) Petition. At the same time, the Central Square Overlay District zoning was amended to allow Formula Businesses by special permit. While there were discussions about whether to remove the Formula Business provisions from the zoning petition, they were ultimately included.

### **Current Proposal**

#### **Overview**

The Application by Vitality Bowls proposes to open a Quick-Service Food Establishment in the Market Central development at 425 Massachusetts Avenue, occupying 923 square feet. While this use is

allowed as-of-right by the Zoning Ordinance, the applicant is a Formula Business and therefore needs a special permit from the Planning Board. The applicant does not propose any changes to the building exterior, besides signage.

### ***Special Permits***

#### **Formula Business Special Permit**

The zoning defines a Formula Business as “an individual Retail or Consumer Service establishment that is required by virtue of a contract, franchise agreement, ownership or other similar legal obligation to conform or substantially conform to a set of common design and operating features that serve to identify the establishment as one of a group of establishments for business, marketing and public relations purposes.”

The zoning effectively creates a two-part test to determine if a business is a Formula Business: the number of establishments and the amount of standard language, signage, and design. Vitality Bowls has close to 80 locations throughout the United States. There are currently no locations in Massachusetts, though the applicants plan to open one in Watertown in addition to Central Square. Vitality Bowls operates under franchise agreements, so franchisees are required to follow certain standard practices.

The criteria for granting a Formula Business special permit in the Central Square Overlay District focus on the extent to which the proposal is unique to Central Square. The Application notes that the proposed exterior signage is more understated than the typical Vitality Bowls establishment. It also notes that the standard Vitality Bowls color scheme and logo will be used for the interior of the premises. The Urban Design report includes additional commentary on the proposed building design and signage.

### ***Community Engagement***

According to the applicant’s community engagement summary, they held a community meeting on May 1, 2022. It is unclear if anyone attended the meeting. The Application was also reviewed by the Central Square Advisory Committee on May 2, 2022. Members of the Committee had no objections to the proposed signage.

### **Special Permit Conditions**

If the Board decides to grant the special permit, the following list summarizes the general categories of conditions recommended for this development based on the requested special permits:

1. Approved Development. Authorized development would need to conform with the submitted application materials. An Approved Dimensional Form would be attached as an Appendix.
2. Permitted Uses. The special permit would authorize the uses proposed in the application. Specifically, the permitted use would be Fast Order or Quick-Service Food Establishment (Section 4.35o). The Board’s approval of this Formula Business would not be transferrable to a different use.
3. Design Review. CDD staff would review and approve design details at the construction documents phase, prior to issuance of a building permit, to certify that the plans conform to the Planning Board’s approval. Board members may cite specific areas of focus for detailed review, based on the Urban Design Report and Board discussion.



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## Urban Design Comments

Central Square is characterized by businesses with relatively narrow ground floor street frontages, creating a varied experience for pedestrians. The ground floor façade of the Mass & Main residential building (PB#321), with its pleasant pedestrian scale, appropriate materials, and highly glazed storefronts contributes to this pattern.

The proposed Vitality Bowls storefront essentially remains unchanged. A high degree of visual transparency is maintained, which is consistent with the urban design objectives for Central Square and the Mass & Main Special Permit approval. Signage is subtle and the proposed window decals are small in scale to maintain transparency, which represents a divergence from the Applicant's typical retail signage approach. The proposed business identification sign is of a similar scale to other signage in Central Square. It is located above the canopy on the louver band, which is appropriate for the storefront design. The sign will be internally illuminated with LEDs. While such lighting is permissible under zoning, halo lighting could be considered an alternative as it would have a more understated visual effect than internally lit signage.

## Continuing Review

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

- Review of exterior lighting.
- Review of all exterior signage and attachments.