



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

To: Planning Board

From: CDD Staff

Date: April 26, 2022

Re: Special Permit **PB-389, 25 Massachusetts Avenue (Planet Fitness)**

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Overview

Submission Type:	Special Permit Application
Applicant:	625 Massachusetts Ave Fitness Group LLC
Zoning District(s):	Business B; Central Square Overlay District
Proposal Summary:	Operate a Formula Business fitness center occupying approximately 17,000 square feet on the ground 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 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>
Central Square Overlay District: Standards for Issuance of Special Permits (Section 20.305)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proposed development is consistent with the goals and objectives of the Central Square Action Plan: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ encourage responsible and orderly development; ○ strengthen the retail base to more completely serve the needs of the neighborhoods; ○ preserve the Square’s cultural diversity; ○ create active people oriented spaces; ○ improve the physical, and visual environment; ○ provide retail establishments that serve people of diverse economic and social groups who live in the surrounding neighborhoods. • 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” (see summary on following pages). • Building and site designs adequately screen the parking provided and are sensitive to the contributing buildings in the vicinity. • 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).
Central Square Overlay District: Special Permit for Formula Business (Sections 20.304.5.4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The design reflects, amplifies and strengthens the established historical character of existing buildings and storefronts in Central Square. • 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. • 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.
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> <p>(a) It appears that requirements of this Ordinance cannot or will not be met, or</p>

Requested Special Permits	Required Planning Board Findings <i>(Summary - see appendix for zoning text excerpts)</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">(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.



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Zoning Report: **PB-389, 625 Massachusetts Avenue (Planet Fitness)**

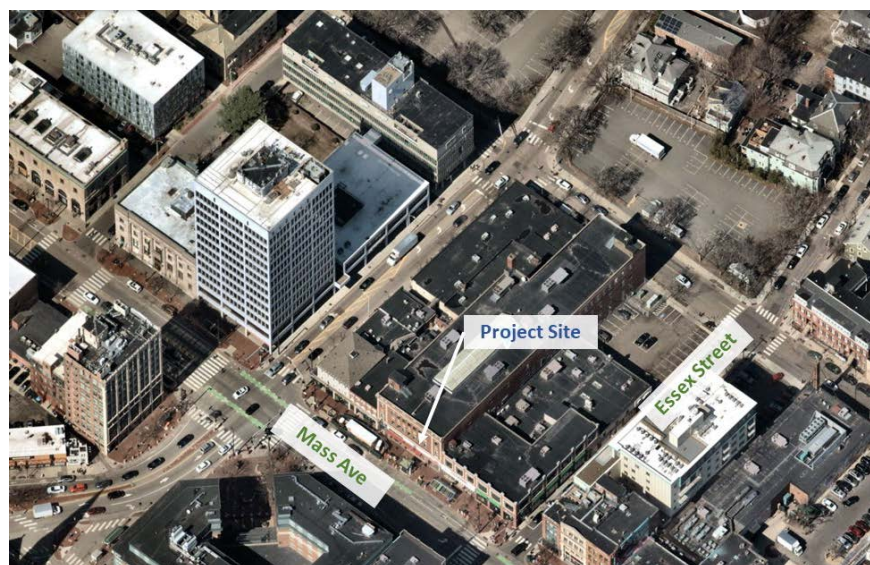
Area Planning and Zoning

Site Context

Neighborhood/Area: Central Square

Development Pattern: The site is located on the north side of the 600 block of Mass Ave, between Prospect Street and Essex Street. The site is part of a 3-story, mixed-use, multi-tenant building that contains a ground-story Walgreens and (previously) Boston Sports Club. The building is located on a block with two-story brick and frame buildings with a mix of retail and consumer service uses, with office space and residential uses above the ground story.

Nearby Features: The site is directly adjacent to the MBTA Central Square station headhouse. There is a MBTA bus shelter for the #1 Harvard Square bus immediately west, and the building is located across the street from Carl Barron Plaza.



Site context for 625 Massachusetts Avenue. (Source: Nearmap March 23, 2022)

Site Zoning

General Description: The base zoning for the site is Business B (BB). Business B allows a wide range of consumer service and retail establishment uses, as well as office and residential uses. The zoning enables higher density development, with maximum heights up to 80 feet and floor-area ratios (FAR) of 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.

Area Plans and Studies

- [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.
- [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.

Comments on Proposal

Project Description

The proposal involves the establishment of a Formula Business establishment for a fitness center use at 625 Mass Ave, occupying all of the space previously occupied by Boston Sports Club. While this use is allowed as-of-right in the Zoning Ordinance, the applicant is a Formula Business and therefore needs a special permit from the Planning Board.

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. Planet Fitness has

over 75 locations in Massachusetts alone, and close to 2,000 locations worldwide. Planet Fitness also operates under franchise agreements in which franchisees are required to adhere to certain standards and practices common across all Planet Fitness locations. Finally, Planet Fitness has a regular brand and logo design which it deploys throughout its locations and in its advertising and print materials.

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. As part of this proposal, the Applicant notes that the proposed signage in association with the use will be distinguished from the signage design employed at other Planet Fitness locations, and that the character of the building façade will be unaffected by the signage proposal.

Community Engagement

The application includes a summary of three pre-application community meetings held by the Applicant in October 2021, November/December 2021, and January 26, 2022. Community engagement was conducted through a combination of direct phone calls to abutters, mailings, in-person meetings and hybrid meetings. The Application notes that support for the proposal was unanimous, with additional comments related to the lighting and security of the space, particularly along the Essex Street entrance.

This application was also heard at the February 2, 2022 Central Square Advisory Committee (CSAC) meeting. The proposal received unanimous support from the Committee, whose report is included herein for the Board.

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 establishment of a Fitness Center (Section 4.35.i.2). The Board's approval of this Formula Business would not be transferrable to a different use or tenant, and would not be transferrable to the same business at a different location.
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. Staff would recommend that any future changes to permanently installed signage would be subject to Planning Board approval; however, any changes to temporary signage applied to the windows would not require Planning Board approval, provided it conforms to the applicable requirements of Article 7.000.



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Urban Design Report: **PB-389, 625 Massachusetts Avenue (Planet Fitness)**

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 625 Massachusetts Avenue building partially contributes to this pattern with its pleasant pedestrian scale, appropriate materials, and glazed storefronts, although existing window signage does block some façade transparency.

The proposed Planet Fitness storefronts maintain a high degree of visual transparency with no changes proposed to glazing, which is consistent with the urban design objectives for Central Square. The design replicates the previous tenant's storefront and signage approach. However, it is unclear how the proposed storefront designs vary from the Applicant's standard approach and how this location has been uniquely designed to fit into the Central Square context.

The proposed business identification signage on Massachusetts Avenue is of a similar scale to the previous tenant's signage. The main sign is pin mounted to the signage band and externally lit by a horizontal lighting track below the sign, which appears to create a subtle lighting effect in the renderings. It will be important to ensure that this sign is aligned with existing signage on the building and that the lighting does not create unnecessary light spill due to the proposed uplighting. The blade sign is also externally lit and appears to be located above the Walgreens storefront. A black awning with signage on the valance is proposed to replace the previous tenant's red awning. From a pedestrian wayfinding perspective, it would make more sense if the awning only extended to the pilaster on the left of the storefront entrance, rather than across to the Walgreens store. Similarly, the blade sign should move closer to the Applicant's storefront entrance rather than being positioned above Walgreens. This modification may necessitate reducing the sizes of the signs so they can fit comfortably within the storefront zone.

The Essex Street signage is also similar to the previous tenant's signage; however, a new blade sign and a new black awning are proposed. Like Massachusetts Avenue, the blade sign should be moved closer to the entrance to assist with pedestrian wayfinding. It would also be less visually overwhelming if the length of the awning was reduced to relate to the storefront zone between the two brick piers. The height of the awning above the sidewalk should also be reviewed as 92 inches may feel a little low for pedestrians.

All signage will require review for consistency with Article 7.000 of the Zoning Ordinance prior to the issuance of a sign permit, and the projecting signage (blade sign, and potentially awning) will require City Council approval prior to installation.

Continuing Review

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

- All exterior signage and awning details, including changes to the location of the blade signs and awnings, aligning the Massachusetts Avenue signage with the existing building signage, and awning heights.
- All exterior lighting details, including mitigating any potential light spill associated with the uplighting especially on Essex Street.