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## CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

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To: Planning Board

From: CDD Staff

Date: June 25, 2020

Re: **Special Permit PB #179, North Point (Cambridge Crossing) East and West Station Plazas - Design Updates**

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The designs for the East and West Station Plazas, located on North Point Parcels Q1, Q2 and R, adjacent to the new Lechmere Station, were approved by the Planning Board on October 15, 2019. At that meeting, the Planning Board made comments about both plazas, but particularly focused on the geometry of the West Plaza, including the granite retaining walls, and accessibility concerns between the plaza and abutting sidewalks.

The Applicant recently submitted revised materials for both plazas in response to the comments made by the Board and CDD staff.

The Planning Board's review of the open space designs is guided by the conditions of the special permit, which includes the goals and objectives of the *Eastern Cambridge Planning Study*, the guidelines established in the *Eastern Cambridge Design Guidelines*, and utilization of the *North Point Design Guidelines* as a design reference.

## Staff Comments on New Materials

### Station Plaza West

- Relatively modest changes have been made, including modifications to the stone planter, plant beds and improvements to the orientation of brick pavement bands so that they more closely align with pedestrian desire lines.
- Information on the phasing of landscape works has been provided, which appears sensible based on when construction of the Lechmere Station and nearby buildings will take place.
- The pedestrian path at the corner of the Q1 building/lockers area remains quite narrow, which may be too tight for the expected pedestrian flow in the area.
- The design of the space between the Q1 and Q2 buildings still seems disconnected and unresolved. It should be further studied so that improved connections with the MBTA drop-off area and the main plaza are achieved.
- The plaza design continues to rely primarily on stone walls for seating. Some benches with backs (possibly built into the stone walls) should be considered.
- While relocating all the bike racks to the west of the station headhouse (as proposed by the Applicant), enhances connectivity between the plaza and northern T-entrance, some racks should remain within close to proximity to the entrance for functional purposes.

### Station Plaza East

- More substantive changes have been made to the plaza in order to respond to the Board's comments.
- The accessibility concerns between the plaza and sidewalks on North First Street and Monsignor O'Brien Highway have been addressed. The plaza will no longer be sunken, and the stone retaining wall has been relocated to wrap around the MBTA bike storage, so direct access is possible.
- Sloped walks are proposed on the northern and southern edges of the plaza, which help to successfully address the grade changes across the site without requiring any safety railings. The sloped walk on the north also provides a better interface with the future building on Parcel R.
- As the plaza itself will no longer be depressed the clearances below the new Green Line viaduct, and particularly the viaduct beam, are lower. To address staff concerns about the beam clearance, benches seats have been added below the structure.
- Some of the brick pavement bands have been re-oriented. While improved, additional refinements could help provide more alignment with pedestrian desire lines.
- Consideration should be given to providing a more direct connection between the MBTA bicycle storage and the plaza, instead of the circuitous route around the stone wall. A possible opening in the stone retaining wall should be studied.
- The potential to add some short-term bicycle racks to the edges of the plaza for people to utilize while enjoying some of the planned plaza activities should be explored.

- The Bluebikes Station has been enlarged to accommodate anticipated future bike share needs in the neighborhood. In plan, the station appears to float in the middle of the North First Street sidewalk zone. Since no perspectives of this sidewalk view are provided, rather than find a solution now, staff suggest going out on site with the Applicant during installation to help select the most appropriate location.
- Some consideration should be given to providing a transit screen within this plaza to display real-time transit information and neighborhood news (e.g. special events, etc.).

### **Continuing Design Review**

The following is a summary of issues that staff recommends as items for ongoing design review:

- The width of the pedestrian pathway at the corner of the Q1 Building to ensure it is wide enough to be welcoming to pedestrians.
- Updates to the Station Plaza West Plan to clearly show the bus stop location on North First Street and to determine if additional weather protection is needed.
- Detailed design of the space between the Q1 and Q2 buildings (as part of the design review for Q2).
- Review of construction drawings for all proposed public realm, open space and landscape design details, including concrete pavement details and patterns, brick pavement bands, plantings, lighting, and consideration of more comfortable seating options, including benches with backs.
- Further study of bicycle rack locations in both plazas, including consideration of locations closer to the norther T-entrance and the edges of the East Plaza.
- Review of the proposed Bluebikes location on site with the Applicant and CDD Transportation Staff.
- Review of programming plans to make the plazas more inviting and animated. Possible ideas to consider include art and lighting installations, play elements, provision of free wi-fi, wayfinding, etc.