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CITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

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To: Planning Board  
From: CDD staff  
Date: July 13, 2018  
Re: **PB #179, North Point PUD Parcel I Residential building, retail pavilions and open space**

This memo contains an overview of the proposed project at North Point Parcel I, the relevant design guidelines, and related comments.

### **Update**

Since the March Planning Board meeting, the Applicant has worked with staff to respond to comments and questions raised in the initial review of the design. The Applicant's recent submission includes design changes and additional information about the project in narrative and graphic form.

### **Planning Board Action**

As a reminder, the Special Permit for the North Point Planned Unit Development (PUD) was originally granted by the Planning Board in 2003, and since that time has been modified several times through the PUD amendment process.

DivcoWest is now seeking design review approval for a residential building, two retail pavilions and open space on Parcel I. The special permit requires that each building and its associated park, street segment cross-section, streetscape details, and other associated physical improvements be subject to design review and approval by the Planning Board. The Parcel I design review submission also includes a request for approval of the subdivision of the parcel into three separate parcels for each of the buildings and the open space.

The Planning Board's review of the buildings and landscape design 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.

### Relevant Design Objectives and Guidelines

In addition to the *Eastern Cambridge Design Guidelines*, guidelines specific to the site were developed as part of the original PUD process in 2003 and have subsequently been amended as part of the recently approved Major Amendment. The *North Point Design Guidelines* that are most relevant to Parcel I are summarized in the attached Appendix.

The Special Permit strongly endorses the need to set back the upper floors of tall buildings “in order to celebrate a strong cornice line at lower levels of those buildings.” If the applicant wishes to vary from these provisions, the design rationale for any proposed variation should be clearly presented and should explain how the alternative approach achieves the intent of the guideline.

The Special Permit also calls out the need for buildings along North Street (now Dawes Street), which is designated as a tight, narrow urban street, to receive close attention. “Each design should contribute to the creation of an intimate urban street; the concern is that without careful design of the details of the street itself and of the buildings fronting on it, it might have a crowded and oppressive feel.”

### **Planning Board Comments from March 27, 2018 Meeting**

The following summarizes some of the key comments made by the Planning Board at the March 27, 2018 meeting.

#### *Residential Building*

- The overall massing, open space and retail approach, and handsome façades, are successful.
- Loft-style units on the second floor with balconies are a strong move that catches the eye.
- Reinstate the pergola on the third-floor terrace and review heaviness of the parapet design.
- First Street tower elevation is lifeless and not as interesting as the others – encourage use of the same technique of strips of narrow and wide windows used on other elevations.
- Make the residential entry more interesting and compelling.
- Renderings of the podium and the plan of the podium are not consistent with each other.
- Five inches of relief on a 200-foot tall building is not a lot, and will seem very flat.
- The way the corner of the dark volume comes down and almost gets to the corner of the podium on Dawes Street is an awkward relationship.
- 200 feet of blank façade on Dawes Street only animated by a bicycle room is disappointing.
- Need to see more renderings to better understand the streetwall on Dawes Street. The two-story podium is not enough to necessarily block the towers, although the towers are skewed to the street.
- Applaud penthouse screening approach, but want to see all openings screened – do not want to see mechanicals.
- Clarify requirements for monopole and antenna on roof.
- Bike room needs a curb cut and access to second floor bike room needs to be reviewed.
- Review loading and parking with the Traffic, Parking and Transportation Department (TP&T). Possibly consider redesigning the curb cut to better protect the sidewalk and bicyclists.

### *Retail pavilions*

- Opportunity to be more exciting and respond to staff comments.
- Do more with the roof shape on all four sides of the pavilions.
- Discouraged to see that the 40-foot space between the buildings in December shadow studies is entirely covered in shadow.

### *Open space*

- The ability to view all the way down the open space network is a positive, and the mounding has been handled successfully.
- Pleased with the integration of sand and water play areas for the neighborhood kids.
- Concerned about boulders in the sand play area and kids running across Dawes Street.

### **Staff Comments on New Materials**

The supplemental materials dated July 3, 2018, address many of the concerns that were raised by the Planning Board about the design of the residential building, retail pavilions, and open space design. It is also anticipated that the Applicant's presentation will provide a comparison of before and after images to further explain the design changes.

Staff has collaborated with the City's urban design consultants, Over, Under, to review the revised materials and provides the following comments regarding the key issues that were raised.

### **Residential Building**

#### *Dawes Street and podium height*

Several significant design changes have been made to address the Board's comments about Dawes Street. The layout, including bicycle room and back-of house functions, has been reconfigured so that more retail frontage is provided and the extent of dead zone is reduced. The awkward relationship between the corner of the tower and podium has been rectified by stopping the streetwall short of the tower's corner so that the tower continues visibly to grade. The resulting break in the podium gives welcome variety to the streetscape and provides opportunities for additional seating.

While there have been improvements, the two-story podium scale and relationship of the building to Dawes Street remains a concern for staff. The podium is now set back from the street corner, rather than framing and anchoring the intersection, which further weakens the streetwall in its role of defining the street. At the corner of the tower, the stepped façade creates two recessed, triangular areas where the building retreats from the sidewalk and build-to-line. Further study of the podium volume at the corner of North First Street and Dawes Street is recommended to better define this intersection. Increasing the podium height at this location would also create some diversity amongst nearby buildings; the proposed uniform two-story podium height across several buildings lacks visual interest and urban character. Staff note a discrepancy between the elevations and ground floor plan with regard to windows in the expanded retail space.

As recommended by Board members, the pergola and third floor railing have been reinstated. Some increase in the dimension of the balcony handrail would help make a more impactful scaling element for the podium.

#### *Residential entry*

In response to comments from the Board, the residential entry design has been revised. The entrance has been further recessed, and given a greater sense of depth and height. The canopy design has been strengthened and given a wood-lined soffit, which also enhances the residential identity of the entry. Staff suggest further study of whether some additional street trees could be added to the right of the entry.

#### *Façade depth and character*

Additional details regarding the architectural character of the tower façades have been provided. These show an additional inch of depth between the face of the glass and the precast face, further architectural reveals, extended mullion caps, and additional balconies. These changes are significant improvements that provide additional visual relief, shadow lines, and texture. Staff would also encourage more depth to occur along all first and second floor levels, including at the new exposed tower corner along Dawes Street and along the base of the smallest of the three towers. The addition of balconies to the north façade should also be considered.

The fenestration patterns on the larger two masses are responsive to the request by the Planning Board for more lively patterning. The tallest volume appears to have been given a clearer façade logic without losing its dynamic quality. Staff note that the top two residential floors and the mechanicals on the eastern façade do not have the same window treatment. The logic on the middle, lighter volume does not seem to have changed though, and staff would encourage further study to make the window pattern more legible and composed.

#### *Roof screen wall*

The roof screen wall at the top of the tallest volume remains an area for development. The open frames appear to have been given greater thickness and the structural supports are better disguised; however, the frames remain open. The addition of louvers, perforated panels or other screening should be considered to better respond to the Board's comments.

#### *Loading, parking and bicycles*

Comments on the Applicant's response to various transportation issues, including loading operations, bicycle access and parking, are provided by TP&T.

#### **Retail Pavilions**

Some additional design changes have been made to respond to Planning Board and staff comments. The Board suggested additional folds for the roof at the ends of the two pavilions. The revised scheme adds a second fold to the original, and increases the roof overhang facing the multi-use path and the interior

plaza. While these are enhancements, and the second fold successfully celebrates the open space interface, the potential to include a third roof fold on the larger pavilion should be considered to further answer the Board's concern that the pavilions are not exciting or individual enough.

Changes to some of the materials and details create additional façade texture, variety and transparency. While these changes further articulate the pavilions, additional detail on the nature of the proposed concrete block is needed. Staff is concerned that this material may not have sufficient scale or texture when it is exposed to view.

### **Open space**

The Board was very positive about the open space design. Minor refinements, which staff feel enhance the public realm, have been made. The sand play area is now buffered by additional landscaping and the quantity of boulders has been reduced.

The change in podium design has created an additional open space area/gathering place at the corner of North First Street and Dawes Street. While the reconfiguration of this corner provides additional seating, the stone block wall could use some further refinement. Adding an additional pedestrian opening; considering reducing its height in some areas, in part, so it can be used for seating, should be further studied.

### **Sustainability**

The residential and retail buildings are required to meet the City's current Green Building Requirement to design to a LEED Silver level. Staff has reviewed the submitted green building materials and has found that all buildings are on track to meet LEED Silver standards. The residential building is currently projecting a 15% improvement in cost savings over the baseline building, but has not yet established and reported an energy performance target pursuant to LEED's Optimize Energy Performance credit. Staff requests that the Applicant establish this energy performance target and submit relevant supporting documents. While a LEED Narrative was submitted for the residential building, a narrative for the retail building has not been submitted.

The North Point Design Guidelines encourage consideration of the City's Net Zero Action Plan, including projects being built "net-zero ready", or providing a technical narrative for transitioning to net zero in the future. A brief, technical narrative has been submitted for each building. This narrative addresses several challenges for achieving net-zero energy on site; however, Staff would be interested to further understand what the technical pathways could be to achieve net zero emissions in the future.

While there are no plans to install Photovoltaics (PVs) at this time, the residential building and retail pavilions have been designed to be "solar ready". The residential building also includes a green roof, and high albedo roofing.

Staff also encourage the Applicant to consider and pursue available technical and financial incentive packages that can assist in achieving higher levels of building performance to better satisfy the City's goals of promoting environmentally sustainable and energy-efficient design.

### **Continuing review**

The following is a summary of issues that staff recommends should be further studied by the Applicant, either in preparing revised materials if the Planning Board continues the review to a future date, or as items for ongoing design review by staff if the Board decides to approve the design review:

- Revised plans and elevations to address façade discrepancies.
- Further information on the transparency and reflectance of glazing, with a particular focus on the visibility of tenant interiors.
- Review of all building mechanicals and appurtenances, including the need to ensure parking exhaust and ventilation is located away from the public realm.
- Review of all exterior materials, colors, and details, including a materials mock-up for each building on the site prior to any exterior materials being ordered.
- Provision of outstanding LEED information, and study and assessment of available energy incentives.
- Review of potential opportunities to improve projected building energy performance through envelope design, or other measures.
- Review of recommended measures to improve pedestrian wind conditions at specific locations based on intended pedestrian usage.
- Review of all proposed public realm, open space and streetscape design details, including study of additional street trees adjacent to front entry and the stone block wall adjacent to the gathering place.

The following continuing review issues have been assembled in consultation with TP&T:

- Review of details of the proposed bicycle racks, including type(s), dimensions and clarification that City standards are being met.
- Review of parking, loading, bicycle parking, access and egress, and sidewalk design details by the TP&T and DPW.

## Appendix: Relevant North Point Design Guidelines

The *North Point Design Guidelines* integrate and incorporate all North Point-related text of the City's adopted *Eastern Cambridge Design Guidelines* document with the Applicant's suggested elaborations.

The urban design goals for the district are:

- Create a lively new mixed-use district with strong visual, bicycle and pedestrian connections to East Cambridge
- The new district should be a place to live, work, and enjoy a variety of parks and public spaces
- Establish a new east-west street through the center of North Point, connecting East Cambridge and North Point Park
- Extend First Street into North Point to connect existing and new neighborhoods
- Create a major new public park easily accessible from the relocated Lechmere T station, First Street, and O'Brien Highway
- Form a new retail edge near the relocated Lechmere T station at the intersection of First Street, Cambridge Street, and O'Brien Highway that will complement, rather than compete with, the existing retail on Cambridge Street

### Siting, Scale and Massing

- The layout of the North Point neighborhood is driven in large part by the desire to create a contiguous public realm, which is also well integrated into with the surrounding neighborhoods
- Orientation of buildings is suggested to take advantage of exposure to sun and views to the green spaces and surrounding attractions.
- Buildings should avoid continuous massing longer than 100 feet facing residential streets and 200 feet facing mixed-use and retail streets. If massing extends beyond this length it should be made permeable and visually articulated as several smaller masses using different materials or colors, vertical breaks, bays, or other architectural elements.
- In addition to the above limits, buildings should reflect a rhythm and variation appropriate to the urban context. For example, this can be achieved by expressing bay widths of 16 to 25 feet for residential buildings and 25 to 50 feet for mixed-use and retail buildings.
- Buildings should have a clearly expressed base, middle, and top. This may be achieved through a variety of materials, fenestration, architectural detailing, massing, or other elements. Includes:
  - A line of expression at the second floor to humanize the scale of the buildings
  - The mid-section of the building should consider light penetration, continuity and consistency of built mass while allowing for individual architectural detailing
  - The base and middle should be built to the street line with courtyard openings and setbacks for cafes, where appropriate
  - Use variations in height and architectural elements such as parapets, cornices and other details to create interesting and varied roof lines and to clearly express the tops of buildings
- Taller buildings should be articulated to avoid a monolithic appearance and should emphasize vertically-oriented proportions. This should be achieved by setting back the taller portions from

the base and middle. Where appropriate the top sections of the buildings should be designed to emphasize variety within the development.

*Public streets*

- Set back portions of the building above 65 feet by at least 10 feet from the principal façade where possible.
- Use architectural expression on any portion of the building above 65 feet to prevent continuous massing.
- Corner articulation of buildings is encouraged.

*Park edges*

- Buildings on parcels facing these open spaces are encouraged to maintain consistent massing and scale that is required for the success of these open spaces (A useful benchmark suggested in the Eastern Cambridge Design Guidelines is that the height of the principal façade of buildings surrounding a park should be no greater than 1/3 the width of the park. For additional height above this limit, buildings should be stepped back by at least ten feet from the principal façade)
- Greater height without setbacks may be appropriate at corners or in specific locations to create architectural variety
- Locate buildings to minimize shadows on North Point Common especially in the afternoon and, where feasible, on other open spaces
- Surround public parks with uses that create an active ground floor environment throughout the day and evening and increase safety for park users, such as:
  - Shops, cafés and other public uses that enliven the parks are encouraged adjacent to open spaces
- For retail and office uses, build to the lot line or provide small setbacks (5 to 15 feet) from the right-of-way for café seating, benches, or small open spaces
- Setbacks used exclusively for ornamental landscaping are discouraged

*Rooftops*

- The design of rooftops, including mechanical equipment and cellular installations, should be conceived as integral to the rest of the architecture of the building.
- Screening is encouraged to conceal rooftop mechanicals, and the screening should be in the same idiom as the rest of the architecture
- Rooftop mechanicals may be designed to stand out as machinery, in which case it needs to be carefully arranged to give a pleasing visual image
- It may be possible to use both techniques listed above.
- Rooftop mechanical equipment should be designed in accordance with the Cambridge Noise Ordinance, and attention should be given to the placement and shielding of mechanical equipment so as to reduce the noise experienced by receptors on other parcels.



### Ground level design and uses

- Street-level façades within the designated retail zone should include active uses such as:
  - Shops, restaurants, and cafes
  - Services for the public or for commercial offices such as fitness centers, cafeterias, daycare centers, etc.
  - Community spaces, such as exhibition or meeting space
  - Art exhibition space/display windows
  - Commercial lobbies and front doors
  - Numerous entrances along principal pedestrian routes are encouraged both for safety and to enhance the pedestrian environment
- Office/ R&D uses are discouraged from occupying extensive ground-floor frontage. Where these uses do occur, they should occupy no more than 200 to 250 feet of continuous frontage along public streets
- Ground floor frontage should generally be permeable, and massing elements and architectural details should be human scaled
- Entrances should be located on public streets, and at or near corners wherever possible. Entrances should relate well to crosswalks and pathways that lead to bus stops and transit stations
- Buildings should have a carefully articulated base of one or two floors with high level of transparency and lightness (30-50 percent transparent) at the ground floors allowing views inward and outward. Blank walls should be avoided along all public streets, courts, and pedestrian walkways.

### Ground Floor Retail

- At least seventy-five percent of the street frontage of the proposed retail should be occupied by retail uses, including cafés and restaurants
- Retail entrances should be located on public streets, or primary pedestrian areas and on corners wherever possible
- Retail entrances should relate to crosswalks and pathways that lead to bus stops and transit stations
- Retail within North Point should be as transparent as possible to maximize visibility of street-level uses
- Ground floor façades should permit a clear view from the sidewalk to the interior space of the building ( seventy-five percent transparent surface is encouraged, and reflective glass is discouraged)
- Blank walls should be avoided along all public streets, courts, and pedestrian walkways
- Create a horizontal change in plane as the building approaches the ground plane
- Plan for tenant awnings or canopies that create a sense of enclosure over sidewalks and provide identity for tenants

- Design the building to accommodate changes in retailers and retail store size over time. This may entail making the ground floor retail façade bay structure flexible, so that in the future retail spaces can be demised to include multiple bays or portions of a single bay
- The design should seek an optimal balance between the architectural identity of the building and that of individual retailers
- Where appropriate, provide a façade bay structure that relates to the architecture of the building while allowing for signage, storefront and architecture within each bay that offers an opportunity for the individual expression of each retail storefront
- Use signage and graphics to create both retail identity and a lively streetscape
- Base building design should consider tenant signage visually as well as structurally
- Signage on multi-tenant buildings should be coordinated and incorporated into the building's architecture

#### Stand Alone Retail Buildings

- The architectural language of these buildings should be distinctive from the overall architecture of North Point and should belong to and enhance the character of the public realm
- These structures should have interesting roofscapes as they will be highly visible from the majority of the buildings at North Point
- Ground floor and second floor terraces are encouraged to engage and activate the public realm
- Restaurants and cafes are encouraged in stand-alone retail buildings.
- Special attention should be given to the location of commercial kitchen exhaust vents and mechanical equipment, as these can cause noise and other environmental impacts, such as odor, that negatively impact the public realm.
- Design the building to accommodate changes in retailers and retail store size over time
- Make the ground floor retail façade bay structure flexible, so that in the future retail spaces can be demised to include multiple bays or portions of a single bay

#### Architectural Character

- Careful articulation of large commercial buildings is critical in establishing a human scale at North Point.
- Create varied architecture and avoid flat façades by using recessed or projected entryways, bays, canopies, awnings, and other architectural elements.
- Vary the architecture of individual buildings to create architecturally diverse districts.
- Where buildings are set back at upper stories, lower roofs may be used as balconies, balustrades, and gardens.
- Utilize architectural articulation such as, varied façade planes, changes in material, fenestration, architectural detailing, or other elements to break down the scale.

Residential architecture should follow the below guidelines.

- Create varied architecture and avoid flat façades by using bays, balconies, porches, and other projecting elements
- Maximize the number of windows facing public streets to increase safety
- Where buildings are set back at upper stories, lower roofs may be used as balconies, balustrades, and gardens
- Utilize architectural articulation such as varied façade planes, changes in material, fenestration, architectural detailing, or other elements to break down the scale of large buildings

#### Parking/Service

- Locate vehicular parking entrances and loading docks on side streets and alleys and provide safe pedestrian access from public streets. Where it is necessary to locate them on the major streets, building design shall try to make them unobtrusive to the pedestrian movement and shall maintain the quality of public realm.
- All parking garages must provide direct pedestrian access to the street.
- The primary pedestrian exit/access to all garages serving non-residential uses should be to the street or a public area.
- Design and locate lighting fixtures in surface parking lots and garages to enhance safety while minimizing light spillover onto adjacent properties and neighborhoods.

#### Parcel I Block Guidelines

- The building on Parcel I should resolve multiple geometries that converge on this site to create an iconic top of the building that also becomes a visual landmark for North Point
- In designing the top of the building, its presence as it is seen from First Street in East Cambridge, North Point Common and Water Street Park should be considered
- The building design shall give special consideration to the streetscape, scale and character of the park at the end of Water Street, North First Street, Dawes Street and the retail plaza
- Retail frontage should be maximized along North First Street and the retail plaza
- Building configuration shall positively use the orientation and exposure to sun by means of balconies, terraces and bay windows and minimize shadows on parks and surrounding buildings
- Top portion of the building should be set back from the retail plaza and open space to create a comfortable human scale along the plaza and in relationship to small retail buildings
- Massing and articulation of the base/middle/top and horizontal articulation of the length of the façade are critical in defining the character of Dawes and North First Street
- Relationship to Parcel JK and Parcel D buildings should be carefully studied in creating an overall skyline identity
- The design should recognize that the building on this parcel abuts public open space, and take into consideration views, shadows, noise and the public character of these open spaces