



---

# CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

---

**IRAM FAROOQ**

Assistant City Manager for  
Community Development

**SANDRA CLARKE**

Deputy Director  
Chief of Administration

**KHALIL MOGASSABI**

Deputy Director  
Chief of Planning

To: Planning Board

From: CDD Staff

Date: July 31, 2019

Re: **PB #243, Alexandria PUB – 161 First Street Design Review**

The Special Permit for the Alexandria Center Planned Unit Development (PUD) was originally granted by the Planning Board in 2010. Currently, development on all but one of the approved sites is completed or in construction. The Board approved a minor amendment for this PUD in 2015 for parking reduction. Two major amendments (#2 and #3) were approved in 2018. Major Amendment (#3) created two new lots at the 161 First Street site and allowed retention of the existing building as a non-residential use.

The special permit requires that the specific design of each building, including outdoor spaces adjacent to those buildings, shall be subject to Design Review by the Planning Board. Design Review approval is being requested for the 161 First Street site.

The Planning Board's review shall consider the following standards and guidelines:

- Architectural design of building facades, with special attention to the ground level.
- Selection and placement of rooftop mechanical equipment, along with the design of penthouses and other features meant to screen such equipment, and any other exterior features within or surrounding the building site.
- Configuration and design of pedestrian, bicycle, and vehicular access and egress.
- Design of open spaces, landscape elements, and modifications to abutting streets and sidewalks, with attention to pedestrian and bicycle circulation and comfort.
- Any potential impacts on the public realm or on properties outside of the PUD, including but not limited to visual impacts, noise impacts, shadows, and effects on the safety and comfort of pedestrians, bicyclists and motorists in the area.
- Design standards specified in the Final Development Plan and the *Eastern Cambridge Design Guidelines*.

A summary of relevant design guidelines and standards is included in Appendix I.

---

344 Broadway  
Cambridge, MA 02139  
Voice: 617 349-4600  
Fax: 617 349-4669  
TTY: 617 349-4621  
[www.cambridgema.gov](http://www.cambridgema.gov)

---

## Staff Comments

Major Amendment #3 to the Special Permit amended the Final Development Plan to allow:

- Renovation of the existing building at 161 First Street, including demolition of a rear annex, resulting in 30,319 square feet of GFA for office use, of which up to 10,000 square feet may be exempt from GFA limitations as Innovation Office Space in accordance with Section 13.59.11 of the Zoning Ordinance, with the requirement that at least twenty-five percent (25%) of the Innovation Office Space shall be set aside as below market rate space. Design Review shall be conducted by the Planning Board in accordance with the Conditions of Special Permit PB#243 prior to the authorization of approved development or uses at 161 First Street. At the time of Design Review, the Permittee shall provide additional information regarding guidelines for eligible tenants and for determining below market rent for Innovation Office Space.

### Staff comments - Urban design

The project involves renovation of the former Ashton Valve Company building. It will include approximately 8,000 square feet of Innovation Office Space, with at least twenty-five percent of this area set aside as below-market rental space. Renovations will include new windows, masonry repointing, and lowering the front entrance to sidewalk grade, which will have a positive impact on the pedestrian environment. A proposed roof deck will add greenery and activity to the rooftop.

The majority of visible, exterior modifications are associated with the new rooftop mechanical equipment and proposed screening, and the extended elevator shaft and stairwells. The rooftop mechanical equipment is proposed to be set back from street facades, and is well-organized, flanking either side of the pediment above the main entrance. Rather than adding excessive bulk to the rooftop with one large penthouse screen, each element is proposed to be screened separately. The stairwells and elevator headhouse will be clad in standing seam metal panel. The mechanical units will be screened by grey louvers. It appears that some smaller mechanical units will not be screened. While this approach is generally supported by staff as the building has a parapet, it would be helpful if some view studies were provided to make sure the unscreened equipment is not visible from the public realm.

### *Open space, public realm, and pedestrian connections*

Site landscaping and the driveway design are consistent with Major Amendment (#3). A well-screened transformer is to be located between the building and 50 Rogers Street. A terraced open space for tenants will also be provided in the rear yard. The existing concrete sidewalks and street trees will not be impacted by the project.

### *Off site impacts*

Shadow and noise studies have been submitted with the design review application materials. Given the scale of the proposed changes, negligible amenity impacts are envisaged.

### **Staff comments – Transportation**

Because this building has zero lot-line setback, providing short-term bicycle parking spaces on the site is problematic. In cases where an Applicant can demonstrate the infeasibility of placing short-term racks on private property, zoning allows developers to contribute to bicycle parking in lieu of providing the short-term bicycle parking spaces on site (Zoning Ordinance Section 6.104.2b).

Protocols are that the city will install bicycle racks on public property, including sidewalks, so that staff can make sure any new racks are installed correctly, meet city guidelines and are recorded and managed by the city without being linked to any specific project's zoning requirements. City staff recognize that the Applicant has requested that the public bicycle racks be placed on the sidewalk near the front entrance of the building. Staff will take this into consideration when analyzing space for new bicycle racks in the area.

### **Staff comments - Economic Development**

Page 5 of the narrative provides some information on the innovation office space, including details on how below-market rents will be determined. It would be helpful to see how the first and second floor "innovation tenant" spaces are designed to be used by multiple businesses as the current plans appear to show space for a single tenant. It is recommended that CDD Economic Development staff review the innovation tenant space design prior to tenant move-in to ensure that the space is designed for multiple businesses.

### **Staff comments - Sustainability**

The project is subject to the Alexandria PUD green building requirements, which requires projects to be designed to LEED Silver under the version of LEED currently in effect, LEED v4. The design is currently meeting this requirement with 54 "Likely" credit points under the LEED Core & Shell program.

### **Continuing Design Review**

The following is a summary of issues that staff recommends as items for ongoing design review if the Board decides to approve the design:

- Further information on the visible light transparency and reflectance of all windows.
- Review of building renovation details (including masonry restoration, and window details and colors) with the Cambridge Historical Commission staff.
- Review of any changes to rooftop mechanical equipment, including any additional mechanical units required by future tenants.
- Review of tenant fit-outs, including details of how the innovation tenant space is designed for multiple businesses.
- Review of all landscaping details.

**Appendix I:**

**Relevant principles from the Eastern Cambridge Design Guidelines – Transition Areas**

*Street-level Uses and Design*

1. New buildings should contribute to the character of the existing street.
2. Street-level facades should include active uses such as:
  - Residential entrances
  - 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
3. Major 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
4. Transparent materials and interior lighting should be used to maximize visibility of street level uses. Ground floor facades should be at least 30 to 50 percent transparent.
5. Blank walls should be avoided along all streets and pedestrian walkways.

*Building Height and Orientation*

*Binney Street and First Street*

1. Set back any portion of the building above 65' by at least 10' from the principal facade.
2. 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 not permitted but may be allowed to accommodate street furniture, street trees, or generous sidewalks. Awnings and canopies are encouraged to provide shelter and enliven the ground floor facade
3. Awnings and canopies are encouraged to provide shelter and enliven the ground floor facade.
4. Driveway turnaround and vehicle drop-off facilities are strongly discouraged along public streets.
5. Locate loading docks on side streets or service alleys, and away from residential areas.
6. In use, design, and entry, orient buildings towards corners.

*Rogers Street*

1. If the prevailing height of surrounding buildings is 65 feet or less, establish a cornice line that matches the prevailing height of surrounding buildings. For additional height above the cornice line, provide a setback of at least 10 feet from the principal facade.
2. 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 not permitted.
3. Locate loading docks on side streets or service alleys, and away from residential areas.

### *Scale and Massing*

1. For new development sites, the block size should be similar to the existing East Cambridge blocks. An attempt should be made to reduce the distance that pedestrians have to walk to a crosswalk in order to safely cross the street.
2. Avoid continuous massing longer than 200 feet facing mixed-use and retail streets. If massing extends beyond this length, it should be made permeable and visibly articulated as several smaller masses using different materials or colors, vertical breaks, bays, etc.
3. Buildings should reflect a rhythm and variation appropriate to the urban context. E.g., expressing bay widths of 16 - 25' along residential streets and 25' - 50' along mixed-use streets.
4. Buildings should have a clearly expressed base, middle, and top.
5. Use variations in height and architectural elements such as parapets, cornices and other details to create interesting and varied rooflines and to clearly express the tops of buildings.
6. Emphasize corners using taller elements such as towers, turrets, and bays

### *Architectural Character*

1. Create varied architecture and avoid flat facades by using recessed or projected entryways, bays, canopies, awnings, and other architectural elements.
2. Vary the architecture of individual buildings to create architecturally diverse districts.
3. Where buildings are set back at upper stories, lower roofs may be used as balconies, balustrades, and gardens.

### *Environmental Guidelines*

1. Rooftop mechanical equipment should be sited and shielded to protect neighboring uses from noise impacts.

### *Open Space*

1. The provision of open space of diverse sizes and use is encouraged.
2. The provision of interconnected series of open spaces is encouraged to provide connections to neighborhoods and to encourage pedestrian movement.
3. Locate new open spaces to create linkages and connect to existing parks and open spaces, where possible.

### *Streets and sidewalks*

1. Use streetscape elements such as trees, benches, signage, and lighting to support active pedestrian uses and to reinforce the character and identity of each district.
2. Design streets to encourage pedestrian and cycle activity, and to control vehicle speed in residential areas.
3. Where appropriate, establish, preserve and highlight views from public streets and spaces to important civic landmarks such as the Charles River cable-stayed bridge and the clock tower in Kendall Square
4. Provide pedestrian- scale lighting to enhance pedestrian safety.

5. Refer to the Cambridge Pedestrian Plan and the Cambridge Bicycle Plan for additional guidance on creating a safe and pleasant environment for pedestrians and bicyclists.
6. Provide safe pedestrian crossings at Binney Street.

*Connections and Transportation*

1. Preserve rights of way for future Urban Ring project.
2. Integrate retail and other public activities with any new transit stations.
3. Provide safe pedestrian and bicycle connections to future regional pathways.
4. Provide strong pedestrian, bicycle and visual connections to the Charles River and public parks through view corridors, signage, and/or art installations.
5. Provide safe pedestrian and bicycle connections to existing and new bus stops. and to transit stations including Kendall Square, Lechmere, Community College and North Station T stations.
6. Provide safe pedestrian crossings at Binney Street.
7. Provide pedestrian crossings/phases at all major intersections.
8. Provide bicycle lanes on major streets.

**19.30 Citywide Urban Design Objectives [SUMMARIZED]**

<b>Objective</b>	<b>Indicators</b>
New projects should be responsive to the existing or anticipated pattern of development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transition to lower-scale neighborhoods</li> <li>• Consistency with established streetscape</li> <li>• Compatibility with adjacent uses</li> <li>• Consideration of nearby historic buildings</li> </ul>
Development should be pedestrian and bicycle-friendly, with a positive relationship to its surroundings.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inhabited ground floor spaces</li> <li>• Discouraged ground-floor parking</li> <li>• Windows on ground floor</li> <li>• Orienting entries to pedestrian pathways</li> <li>• Safe and convenient bicycle and pedestrian access</li> </ul>
The building and site design should mitigate adverse environmental impacts of a development upon its neighbors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Location/impact of mechanical equipment</li> <li>• Location/impact of loading and trash handling</li> <li>• Stormwater management</li> <li>• Shadow impacts</li> <li>• Retaining walls, if provided</li> <li>• Building scale and wall treatment</li> <li>• Outdoor lighting</li> <li>• Tree protection (requires plan approved by City Arborist)</li> </ul>
Projects should not overburden the City infrastructure services, including neighborhood roads, city water supply system, and sewer system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Water-conserving plumbing, stormwater management</li> <li>• Capacity/condition of water and wastewater service</li> <li>• Efficient design (LEED standards)</li> </ul>
New construction should reinforce and enhance the complex urban aspects of Cambridge as it has developed historically.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Institutional use focused on existing campuses</li> <li>• Mixed-use development (including retail) encouraged where allowed</li> <li>• Preservation of historic structures and environment</li> <li>• Provision of space for start-up companies, manufacturing activities</li> </ul>
Expansion of the inventory of housing in the city is encouraged.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Housing as a component of large, multi-building development</li> <li>• Affordable units exceeding zoning requirements, targeting units for middle-income families</li> </ul>
Enhancement and expansion of open space amenities in the city should be incorporated into new development in the city.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Publicly beneficial open space provided in large-parcel commercial development</li> <li>• Enhance/expand existing open space, complement existing pedestrian/bicycle networks</li> <li>• Provide wider range of activities</li> </ul>