



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

PLANNING BOARD

CITY HALL ANNEX, 344 BROADWAY, CAMBRIDGE, MA 02139

Date:	February 12, 2024
Subject:	Initial Report of Affordable Housing Overlay (AHO) Design Consultation
Project Location:	87-101 Blanchard Road
Date of Planning Board Meeting:	January 30, 2024

Overview

The Planning Board (the “Board”) met on Tuesday, January 30, 2024 to review and comment on the design for 87-101 Blanchard Road, a residential development by B’nai B’rith Housing, Inc. (the “Applicant”) under the Affordable Housing Overlay (“AHO”) in Section 11.207 of the Zoning Ordinance. The Board reviewed a plan set submitted by the Applicant dated November 29, 2023, as well as memos from the Community Development Department (CDD) staff, which are attached.

Proposal Description

The proposal involves the demolition of an existing, two-story commercial building and the construction of an approximately 100,000 square-foot, 6-story, L-shaped building consisting of 110 affordable dwelling units for seniors and approximately 8,000 square feet of non-residential space on the ground story. The project parcel contains a four-story residential development separated into two distinct buildings at the back of the site. The project will consist of all one-bedroom units and thirty new off-street parking spaces.

Board Comments

Board members were very supportive of the proposed use and acknowledged that affordable senior housing is a critical need in Cambridge and the broader metro area. Overall, the Board supported the scale and massing of the building, as well as its proposed siting along Blanchard Road in order to help create an activated streetwall and be sensitive to the lower-scale residential development to the south.

As the proposal continues to develop, Board members urged the Applicant to focus on the following program and design elements:

Site Design

- Board members had varying opinions about the number of planned off-street parking spaces. Some Board members felt that the site, as proposed, would contain more off-street parking spaces than what may be necessary. Other Board members noted, however,

that seniors may be more inclined to drive than to use alternative modes of transportation that may be available. Board members generally agreed that the proposed design of the parking should be reviewed to see if it is possible to:

- Reduce the overall amount of paving on the site; and
- Eliminate or reduce the area underneath the building footprint designated for parking at-grade.
- Explore opportunities to add additional trees – both on the interior of the site in the proposed parking area, as well as along Blanchard Road to help create a double allée of trees along the sidewalk.
- Consider opportunities for expanding outdoor open space and recreation areas, which could include expanding the proposed outdoor deck area or creating additional green spaces on the site, such as an area for a community garden.
- Provide more information on the proposed amenity spaces and the planned programming to link outdoor areas with indoor spaces.
- Provide information to illustrate that the proposed drop-off area on the interior of the site has enough width to accommodate passenger vehicles as well as vans and shuttle buses.

Building Design

- Consider opportunities to further increase the articulation of the façade, through techniques such as adding balconies to units.
- Consider reducing the number of materials planned for the façade and relying more on neighborhood context for material options.
- Explore opportunities to better connect the ground-story unit on the northeastern corner of the building to the rest of the residential areas of the building.
- To address some of the site design comments above, consider reducing the building's footprint, balanced by increases in height in certain parts of the building, to preserve the overall number of planned units.

In addition to these topic areas, the Board supported comments made in the staff memos for the proposal and asked that they be considered to refine the project's design.

Submitted for the Planning Board,

Swaathi Joseph

Representative to the Planning Board, authorized by Mary Flynn, Chair.



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

To: Planning Board

From: CDD Staff

Date: January 17, 2024

Re: Affordable Housing Overlay Design Consultation **AHO-7, 87-101 Blanchard Road**

IRAM FAROOQ
Assistant City Manager for
Community Development

SANDRA CLARKE
Deputy Director
Chief of Administration

Overview

Submission Type: Affordable Housing Overlay (AHO) Advisory Design Review

Applicant: B'nai B'nai Community Development, LLC. (BBH)

Zoning District(s): Residence C-1; Business A (BA)

Proposal Summary: Construction of senior housing in place of an existing 2-story commercial building to create hundred and ten (110) new rental units under the AHO.

Planning Board Review and comment on conformance with AHO

Action: Development Standards, City Development Guidelines for the proposal area, Design Guidelines for AHO, and Citywide Urban Design Objectives.

Memo Contents: CDD Zoning Report & Urban Design Report

Other Staff Reports: None

AHO Design Guidelines

Site Design Objectives	
Response to Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design site layouts to harmonize with the neighborhood context.
Open Space & Landscape Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design open space to enhance the lives of residents and the broader community by offering aesthetic and environmental benefits. • Offer useful amenities to residents, provide opportunities to minimize the impact of new development on neighbors' privacy and quality of life, and contribute to the beauty of the city.
Circulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote non-motorized mobility by prioritizing pedestrian-friendly and bike-accessible site design.
Parking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimize the impact of parking and driveway.
Utilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimize the visual, acoustical, and environmental impacts of essential utilities and services.
Outdoor Lighting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide lighting for safety and functionality while minimizing energy use, light pollution, and other negative impacts.
Public Art	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enrich the visual environment and strengthen the sense of place by incorporating art.
Building Design Objectives	
Massing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Configure massing for compatibility with the prevailing or desired pattern of neighboring buildings and open spaces. In established neighborhoods, relate to the existing pattern of streets and other open spaces, and prioritize compatibility with existing buildings. In evolving areas, configure new developments to help realize the City's vision for urban form.
Facades	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design facades to enhance and enliven the public realm. In established areas, emphasize compatibility and reinforce sense of place. In evolving residential and commercial districts, contribute to the transformation of urban form by setting precedents for design excellence. • Where appropriate, incorporate ground level retail spaces and common areas to foster a lively enliven the urban environment. • Provide daylight to interior spaces, avoid excessive energy use, and protect the privacy of residents of neighboring buildings. • Design facades to relate to the residential scales and patterns of Cambridge's diverse and historic neighborhoods. • Design street facades to offer a sense of civic presence and human scale, and visual interest as appropriate to their role in defining public space.

Architectural Details, Materials, Color, and Finishes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use materials that are warm, inviting, and compatible with surrounding existing buildings and the neighborhood context. Develop building facades of high-quality, durable materials and with colors, finishes, and textures appropriate to building contexts.
Building Interiors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Affordable housing, like all housing, should serve the needs of its residents while contributing to the residential character and sense of neighborhood within the area at large.
Sustainable Design Objective	
Site and Building Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Achieve resilience measures to the maximum extent possible, including energy efficiency and measures to promote the health and wellness of residents.

The complete set of Design Guidelines for Affordable Housing (28 July 2020) can be found at:

https://www.cambridgema.gov/-/media/Files/CDD/Housing/Overlay/zngamend_aho_designguidelines_20200728v2.pdf

19.30 Citywide Urban Design Objectives [SUMMARIZED]

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

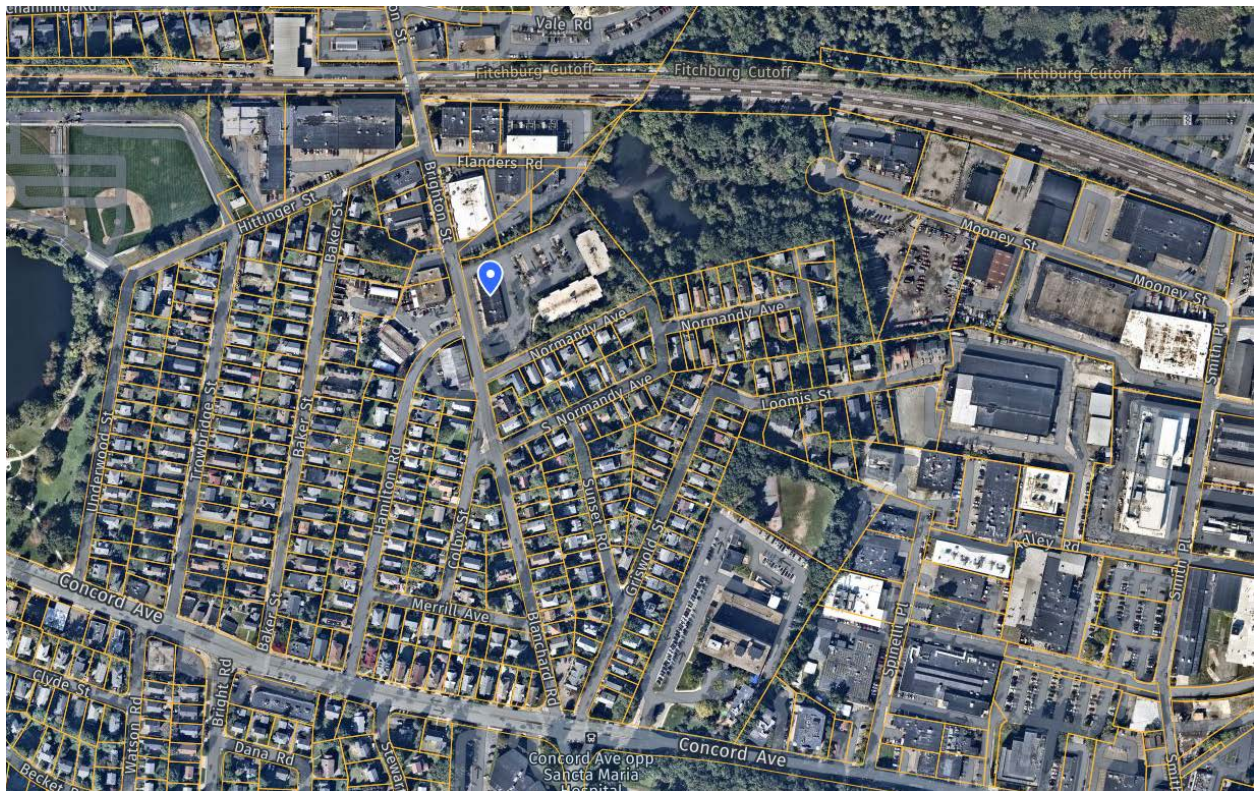
Zoning & Development Staff Report

Site & Zoning Context

Site Context

The site is located at the northeastern corner of Blanchard Road and Normandy Ave, in the Cambridge Highlands neighborhood of northwest Cambridge and just east of the Belmont municipal boundary. Located immediately east of the parcel is Blair Pond, and the Fitchburg Cutoff bike path is approximately two blocks to the north.

Blanchard Road is a mixed-use corridor that is predominately residential in character closer to Concord Ave (consisting of one- and two-story single and two-family homes), but increasingly becomes more of a low-scale commercial street to the north. The project parcel is improved with an existing one-story retail building along Blanchard Road, and a three-story residential development separated into two distinct buildings at the back of the site. There are 118 existing off-street parking spaces serving all three buildings.

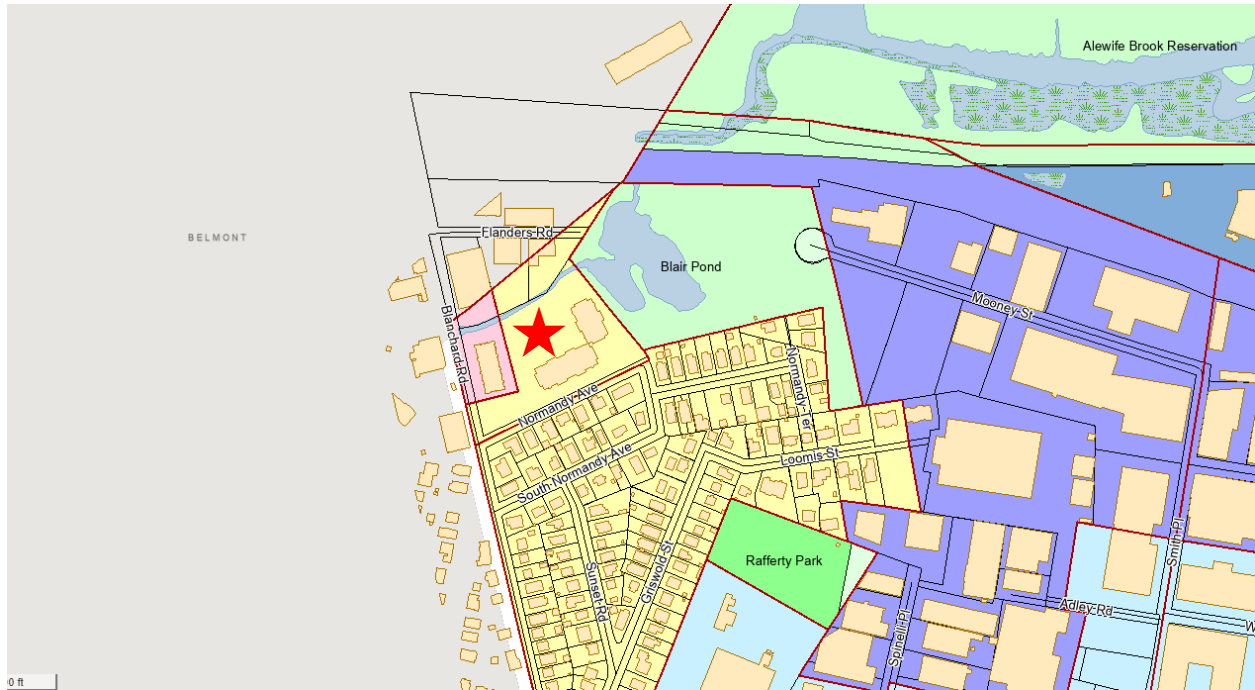


(Source: Nearmap, 2024)

Site Zoning

The site is split-zoned Business A and Residence C-1, with the Business A portion of the site generally located in the area where the one-story retail center currently exists (see zoning map below). The

Business A district is a low-intensity commercial district which permits development up to 45' in height and allows for residential uses and some neighborhood-scale retail and consumer service uses. Residence C-1 is a lower-intensity residential district which permits a max FAR of 0.75 and development up to 35', with a 30% open space requirement.



(Source: Cambridge Cityviewer, 2024)

Comments on Proposal

Project Description

The AHO Project proposes to demolish the existing one-story commercial building and construct an approximately 100,000 square-foot, 6-story, L-shaped building consisting of 110 affordable dwelling units for seniors and approximately 8,000 square feet of non-residential space on the ground story fronting Blanchard Rd. All 110 dwelling units will be one-bedroom units.

The new development will contain thirty new off-street parking spaces (in addition to 80 existing which will remain), 67 long-term bike parking spaces, and a new 19-dock Bluebikes station on the site. The AHO Project will increase the existing open space on the site from 36% (approximately 50,000 square feet) to 38% (53,377 square feet).

Consistency with AHO Development Standards

The AHO development standards applicable to this project are summarized in the table in the introductory section of the memo. The following commentary provides a high-level overview of how the AHO standards compare to this development proposal:

- Use
 - Per the AHO regulations, the proposal for a multifamily dwelling is allowed as-of-right.
 - Per Section 11.207.7.4.e, where existing retail uses are replaced by an AHO project, the AHO Project shall be designed to include active non-residential uses for up to 50% of the existing retail frontage. At this site, the existing retail frontage is 120 linear feet. The AHO project illustrates 63 linear feet of space designated for “Social Services”, which exceeds the 50% requirement.

- Dimensional Standards
 - Height: The maximum height permitted on the site is nine (9) stories or 100’ from grade. The AHO Project consists of six stories and 70’ in height.
 - FAR: The BA zoning district permits up to a 1.75 FAR for residential uses; therefore, there is no maximum FAR applicable to this site. The AHO Project consists of 1.36 FAR.
 - Setbacks: There are no applicable front or side yard setbacks under the AHO. A corner lot contains two front yards and two side yards, and therefore no setbacks apply to the AHO Project.

- Design Standards
 - Transparency: At least 20% of the building’s facades facing a public street must be clear glass windows. The proposed building consists of 24.3% transparency along Blanchard Road, and 23.2% transparency along Normandy Avenue.
 - Where a non-residential use is proposed on the Ground Story, the Ground Story must consist of at least 30% transparent glass windows. The proposed transparency at the Ground Story is 50.5% along Blanchard Road and 30.8% along Normandy Avenue.
 - Non-residential uses on the Ground Story must be at least 15’ in height. The AHO Project illustrates 15’ Ground Story height.
 - Façade Projections/Recesses: Building facades must include projecting and/or recessed elements of at least two feet on an average interval of 40 linear feet along a Public Street, and 80 feet elsewhere. Such projecting or recessed elements do not apply to the lowest or highest Story Above Grade. The AHO Project illustrates such recesses and projections at appropriate depths at the appropriate intervals.
 - Mechanical Equipment & Refuse Screening: Mechanical equipment and refuse areas shall generally be screened from view using a screen that is at least 75% opaque and uniformly distributed across the screening surface.

- Parking and Short-Term Drop Off Loading Areas

- Off-street Parking & Transportation Demand Management (TDM): Thirty new off-street parking spaces are proposed for 110 new dwelling units, which equates to a 0.27 spaces per dwelling unit ratio and is under the minimum parking ratio (0.4 spaces per dwelling unit) requirement for triggering TDM requirements under the AHO. The Applicant has agreed to provide the AHO TDM measures.

- Environmental Design Standards
 - This proposal is subject to the City’s Green Building Requirements as set forth in Section 22.20 of the Zoning Ordinance. The AHO Project has been designed to meet Passive House standards.
 - The City’s Green Roofs Requirement is not applicable to an AHO project.
 - The AHO Project is subject to the City’s Climate Resilience standards. The AHO Project is designed above the City’s 2070 projected 1% probability Long Term Flood Elevation, and the AHO Project meets Green Factor standards as designed.

Further Considerations

The following zoning considerations will need to be reviewed in more detail to confirm zoning compliance before the building permit stage:

- Detail of proposed mechanical screen to ensure screening meets minimum 75% opacity requirement as set forth in Section 11.207.7.5.c.

Urban Design Staff Report

Urban Design Comments

Introduction and Context

The project proposes the redevelopment of an existing, two-story commercial building fronting Blanchard Road into a 6-story building containing 110-unit age-restricted apartments of 100 percent affordable housing. Amenity and social service spaces are to be provided on the ground floor. The footprint is “L” shaped, with one leg oriented along Blanchard Road to the west, and the other aligning with the Blair Pond Stream to the north. To the south and east are two existing, four-story multifamily residential buildings separated from the project by a shared parking lot that will be substantially reconfigured. Abutting the northeast corner of the parcel is Blair Pond, a natural area hydrologically connected to the Alewife Brook Reservation.

Blanchard Road forms the boundary between the Town of Belmont and the City of Cambridge, specifically the Cambridge Highlands neighborhood in which the project is located. Its character changes frequently along its relatively short length, from light industrial/commercial adjacent to the Fitchburg Line tracks to small-scale residential approaching Concord Ave, and thereafter to a mix of residential and open space where it fronts the Fresh Pond Reservation. The project occurs at the transition between the industrial/commercial and residential areas. While no separated bicycle facilities exist along Blanchard Road, the Fitchburg Cutoff Bike Path is a short distance to the north, and there are protected bike lanes along Concord Avenue to the south.

Consistency with AHO Guidelines for Building Design

The design as proposed generally adheres to the tenants and principles outlined in the AHO guidelines:

- Creating an activated urban edge and street wall that reinforces Blanchard Road.
- Stepping down the height and massing as it approaches smaller-scale adjacent context.
- Creating a highly transparent, sheltered, and visually prominent entry at the building’s corner.
- Employing natural and durable materials that relate to the context.

Recommendations for Building Design

Massing

- The articulation of the two legs of the building is similar despite different contextual conditions. Adjusting the massing and materials to reinforce the reading of a primary bar that addresses Blanchard Road, and a secondary rear bar along the stream may better align the building to its context (*Building Design-1.5*).
- Emphasizing the northwest corner is sensible given its visual prominence and correlation with the building entry. Its articulation may benefit from studying alternative strategies such as larger windows or the inclusion of balconies (*Building Design-1.12, 2.3, 2.10*).
- The port cochere’s design language seems incongruous with the rest of the building. Employing a similar language as the canopy above the Blanchard Road entrance and community spaces could help visually unify the building (*Building Design-2.11*).

Façade

- The application of brick should ideally be weighted towards the most publicly visible elevation along Blanchard Road. The brick facades would be further enriched by including techniques such as soldier courses, lintels, and pilasters (*Building Design-2.7*).

- The bays add depth and a residential scale to the façade. However, the proposed use of clapboard cladding seems incongruous with similar instances found throughout the neighborhood (*Building Design-2.2, 2.4, 2.6*).
- The combination of balance of brick and panelized cladding on the lower portion along Blanchard Road may benefit from further study and refinement.
- The ground floor at the northwest corner is appropriately visually distinct. The design would benefit from a similarly clear definition of the building's base along the rest of the west elevation (*Building Design-2.13*).

Ground Floor

- The inclusion of amenity spaces along the Blair Pond Stream creates a strong relationship between the building and the site by highlighting an existing natural amenity. Exchanging the location of the Bicycle Storage Room with the Common Room/Community Deck could avoid potential conflicts caused by cyclists having to cross the community deck (*Site Design-3.7*).
- The Bicycle Storage Room may want to include spaces for tricycles and larger bicycles given the intended resident demographic.
- The single 1-Bedroom Unit in the rear portion could benefit from a buffer, such as vegetation or a low wall, to block the headlights of cars parking in the adjacent spaces at night.
- The depth and design of the proposed landscaping along Blanchard Road will greatly enhance the pedestrian experience. An additional strategy might be including direct front entries into each of the first-floor residential units facing it to further reinforce the residential scale and activate Blanchard Road (*Site Design-3.3, Building Design-2.14*).

Consistency with AHO Guidelines for Site Design

The design as proposed generally follows the tenants and principles outlined in the AHO guidelines:

- Locating the building to visually shield surface parking from the public realm.
- Expanding and further naturalizing the riparian environment along the Blair Pond Stream.
- Providing pedestrian pathways that anticipate long-term connections to Blair Pond.
- Increasing the amount of permeable and planted open space, especially along Blanchard Road.

Recommendations for Site Design

Parking Lot

- Widening the area between the interior parking bays would accommodate additional trees that will provide shade and reduce the heat island effect (*Site Design-2.9, 4.5*).
- Additional vegetation between the rear volume of the building and the parking lot would provide a visual buffer for adjacent uses (*Site Design-2.13*).
- The curb cut as shown does not conform to City standards.

Blair Pond

- The proposed pathway along the Blair Pond Stream creates a wonderful opportunity for residents and the public to experience this currently hidden natural amenity. Any opportunity to collaborate with the adjacent site owners on future extensions that connect to Blair Pond are encouraged (*Site Design-2.2, 2.3*).

Blanchard Road

- The nearby MBTA bus stop may benefit from being relocated adjacent to the project. It would be ideal if the landscape plan could anticipate this potential future scenario.

- The proposed trees in the front yard setback could be located closer to Blanchard Road to further shade the sidewalk as there are no street trees along this portion of the street.
- Given the target population, exploring the financial impact of upgrading the proposed Blue Bike station to one that supports charging electric bikes may be worthwhile to understand if it can be accomplished.

Public Art

- The guidelines suggest incorporating public art into proposed projects. The pathway and spaces along the Blair Pond Stream could be an ideal location for doing so (*Site Design-7.1*).

Consistency with AHO Guidelines for Sustainable Design

The design as proposed generally follows the tenants and principles outlined in the AHO guidelines:

- The building is designed to Passive House standards and is compliant with Article 22.
- The building and all critical infrastructure are positioned above the 2070 projected flood levels.
- The building is sited to maximize solar orientation and employs operable windows.
- The landscape enhances and expands the natural riparian area of the Blair Pond Stream.

Recommendations for Sustainable Design

- Incorporating sun shading devices, canopies, porches, or brise-soleils on shade strongly sunlit facades can help lower thermal gain during warmer seasons (*Sustainable Design, 1.6*).
- Employing renewable and low-carbon energy features such as solar photovoltaic systems, solar heating systems, or geothermal heating and cooling systems where feasible can help sustainably lower energy costs (*Sustainable Design, 1.10*).
- Given the increasing number of electric vehicles, incorporating car chargers for tenants would be beneficial. The nine covered spaces may be the most logical place to install them (*Sustainable Design, 1.12*).
- Integrating “cool roof” or “green roof” systems where possible can contribute to strategies for stormwater management and green infrastructure (*Sustainable Design, 1.14*).
- Including frequent outlets in the bike room will allow for residents to charge their E-Bikes.

Consistency with Citywide Urban Design Objectives

This project aligns well with the City’s objectives for urban design. It replaces a low-scale, auto-centric building with affordable housing at a building scale that modulates the transition between the different development patterns along Blanchard Road. It creates an activated street frontage that provides a substantially improved pedestrian experience with a generous landscaped setback that helps soften the scale of the building and integrate it into the site. The massing tapers down at the end of each leg to bridge the difference in height between the project and the adjacent context. The landscape along the adjacent Blair Pond Stream will be expanded and further naturalized, enhancing its hydrological function as well as providing an amenity for the residents and neighborhood. The parking is visually shielded from the public realm and the amount of existing impermeable surface will be reduced. While there remain opportunities for further refinement of the design as noted above, by and large the project sets a beneficial precedent for the future transformation of the northern portion of Blanchard Road.

The project’s provision of affordable residential units is 110 units (100%). 77 Units will be affordable for individuals or households with incomes at or below 60% of AMI, and 33 units will be affordable for individuals or households with incomes at or below 30% of AMI.