

Harvard Square Advisory Committee

November 16, 2022 - Draft Meeting Notes

Members In Attendance:

Alexandra Offiong, Frank Kramer, John DiGiovanni, Kari Kuelzer, Lauren Curry, Nicola Williams, Steven Ng

Members Absent:

Allison Crosbie, Jemel Derbali, Matthew Simitis, Sara Li

Staff In Attendance:

Daniel Messplay, Mason Wells

Staff Absent:

Daniel Wolf

Notes

- General Business
 - Staff transition
- Zoning Petition Update – Blier et. al. Zoning Petition Dated October 17, 2022
 - Staff opened an informal discussion of a Zoning Petition by Suzanne Blier, et. al. to amend Section 20.54.9 of the Cambridge Zoning Ordinance regarding frontage restrictions for financial institutions in the Harvard Square Overlay District. Staff additionally noted that a Planning Board hearing was scheduled for December 6th and an Ordinance Committee Hearing for December 14th.
 - Petitioner Suzanne Blier provided a presentation to the committee summarizing recent zoning changes in Harvard Square and explaining the proposed amendment to restrictions on banking frontages. This was followed by clarifying questions from Committee Members.
 - (Lauren) Raised concerns with possible design outcomes from the proposed language, such as so called “pork chop” floor plans. By this they meant a small entryway from the street and customer circulation space connected to a large L shaped interior bank space.
 - Members wondered if there is a positive or productive way to define the desired outcomes. It would be helpful to have floor plans to show anticipated outcomes.
 - (John) Generally agreed with Lauren that there is no magic number for bank frontage. However, a frontage of 77 plus feet was t problematic.
 - Members wondered if there was a way to promote an active street.
 - Some members wondered if the amount of frontage should be related to the square footage of the space.
 - (Nicola) The newly proposed 25 foot frontage language is intended to clarify a concept that was unanimously approved several years ago.

- (John) Does not agree and thinks that the street frontage was understood to be calculated per street and that this understanding was agreed to by stakeholders when the original language was adopted.
- Members agree that 25 feet of inactive frontage is not desirable in Harvard Square, but there is disagreement on whether zoning is an effective tool to achieve these outcomes.
- (John) Reiterated that the ordinance as written was okay and that the intent was clear when it was adopted.
- (Kari) Noted that local retailers use and need access to banking services in Harvard Square.
- Staff discussed the permitting of the Santander Bank location at 1290 Mass Avenue and the Chase Bank location at 9 JFK Street. HSAC had issued a negative recommendation to the Planning Board for the Santander bank application. However, the applicant subsequently pursued an as-of-right building permit (not subject to HSAC or PB review) and withdrew their application for a special permit from the Planning Board.
- (Kari) Agreed with Lauren's comments and thought that the proposed petition might go too far. Physical banking is needed and it is a good thing. We're lucky to have banks that know retailers.
- Some members thought that the purpose of the petition is to prevent a bank use that serves only as a billboard advertisement. Some members worried that zoning cannot do that.