



---

# CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

---

To: Planning Board

From: CDD Staff

Date: October 16, 2024

Re: Special Permit **PB-405, 425 Massachusetts Avenue (StretchMed)**

---

**IRAM FAROOQ**

*Assistant City Manager for  
Community Development*

**SANDRA CLARKE**

*Chief of Admin/Operations*

**MELISSA PETERS**

*Chief of Planning Strategy*

## Overview

---

Submission Type: Special Permit Application

---

Applicant: Cambridge Stretch LLC

---

Zoning District(s): Business B; Central Square Overlay District

---

Proposal Summary: Operate a Formula Business fitness center, occupying approximately 754 square feet in the first floor of the existing building.

---

Special Permits Requested: Formula Business (20.304.5(4))

---

Other City Permits Needed: n/a

---

Planning Board Action: Grant or deny requested special permits.

---

Memo Contents: CDD Zoning Report & Urban Design Report

---

Other Staff Reports: n/a

---

Zoning Section	<b>Required Planning Board Findings</b> <i>(Summary - see appendix for zoning text excerpts)</i>
Central Square Overlay District: Formula Business Special Permit (20.304.5(4))	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The design reflects, amplifies and strengthens the established historical character of existing buildings and storefronts in Central Square.</li> <li>• The particulars of the building or storefront design is varied from the formula or standard design of the chain in order to reflect the unique character and conditions of Central Square generally or the specific location in particular.</li> <li>• Standard elements of the enterprise defining it as a Formula Business are modified to respect and provide unique expressions of Central Square history and traditions as well as innovation in physical design and marketing that will distinguish the Central Square location from other locations of the Formula Business.</li> </ul>
Central Square Overlay District: Criteria for Issuance of Special Permits (Section 20.305)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proposed development is consistent with the goals and objectives of the Central Square Action Plan:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ encourage responsible and orderly development;</li> <li>○ strengthen the retail base to more completely serve the needs of the neighborhoods;</li> <li>○ preserve the Square’s cultural diversity;</li> <li>○ create active people oriented spaces;</li> <li>○ improve the physical, and visual environment;</li> <li>○ provide retail establishments that serve people of diverse economic and social groups who live in the surrounding neighborhoods.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Building and site designs are consistent with “Urban Design Plan for Central Square” as outlined in the “Central Square Action Plan” and the “Central Square Development Guidelines.”</li> <li>• Building and site designs adequately screen the parking provided and are sensitive to the contributing buildings in the vicinity.</li> <li>• No National Register or contributing building is demolished or so altered as to terminate or preclude its designation (either now or within the past 5 years).</li> </ul>
General Special Permit Criteria (Section 10.43)	Special permits will be normally granted if the zoning requirements are met, unless it is found not to be in the public interest due to one of the criteria enumerated in Section 10.43: (a) It appears that requirements of this Ordinance cannot or will not be met, or

<b>Zoning Section</b>	<b>Required Planning Board Findings</b> <i>(Summary - see appendix for zoning text excerpts)</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>(b) traffic generated or patterns of access or egress would cause congestion, hazard, or substantial change in established neighborhood character, or</li><li>(c) the continued operation of or the development of adjacent uses as permitted in the Zoning Ordinance would be adversely affected by the nature of the proposed use, or</li><li>(d) nuisance or hazard would be created to the detriment of the health, safety and/or welfare of the occupant of the proposed use or the citizens of the City, or</li><li>(e) for other reasons, the proposed use would impair the integrity of the district or adjoining district, or otherwise derogate from the intent and purpose of this Ordinance, and</li><li>(f) the new use or building construction is inconsistent with the Urban Design Objectives set forth in Section 19.30.</li></ul>

## Zoning & Development Staff Report

---

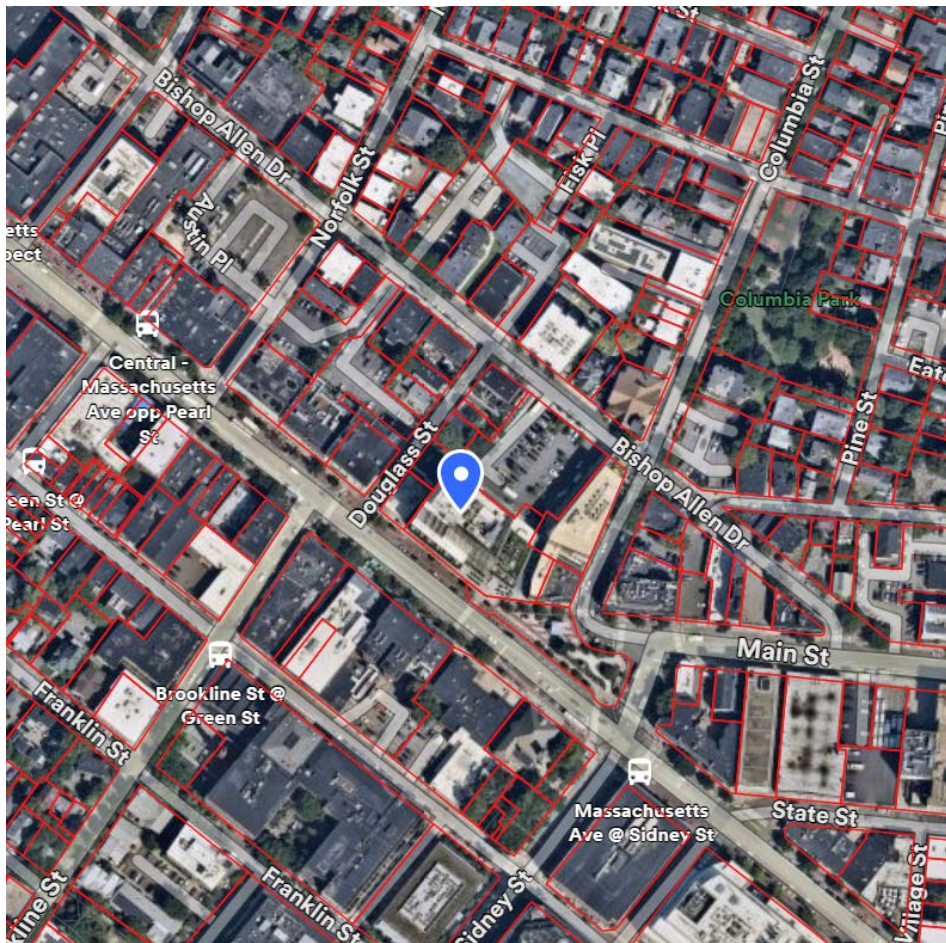
### Area Planning and Zoning

#### Site Context

Neighborhood/Area: Central Square

Development Patterns: This site is located on the Eastern side of Central Square, on the ground level of the new 22-story Market Central residential development. The building is located on a block with a mix of retail and consumer service uses, with office space and residential uses above the ground story.

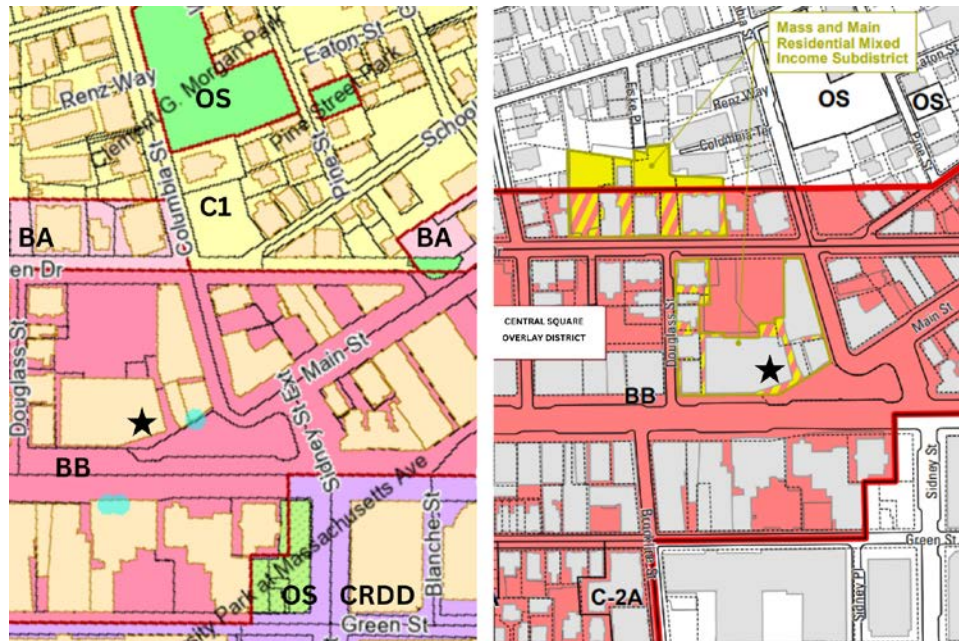
Nearby Features: The site is adjacent to Lafayette Square, a communal space with seating. Transportation features include the MBTA Central Square station headhouse, located 0.1 miles away, a stop for the Route 1 MBTA bus and a Bluebikes station located to the South of the building.



Aerial Context Map showing 425 Massachusetts Avenue. Source: Nearmap, 2024.

### Site Zoning

General description: The base zoning for the site is Business B (BB). Business B allows a wide range of typical neighborhood business uses, as well as office and residential uses. The district development standards allow higher-density development, with maximum heights up to 80 feet and floor-area ratios (FAR) up to 3.00. The site is also in the Central Square Overlay District, which modifies base zoning provisions both as-of-right and by special permit.



Zoning Map (left) and Overlay Map (right). (Source: City of Cambridge)

### Development Plans and Guidelines

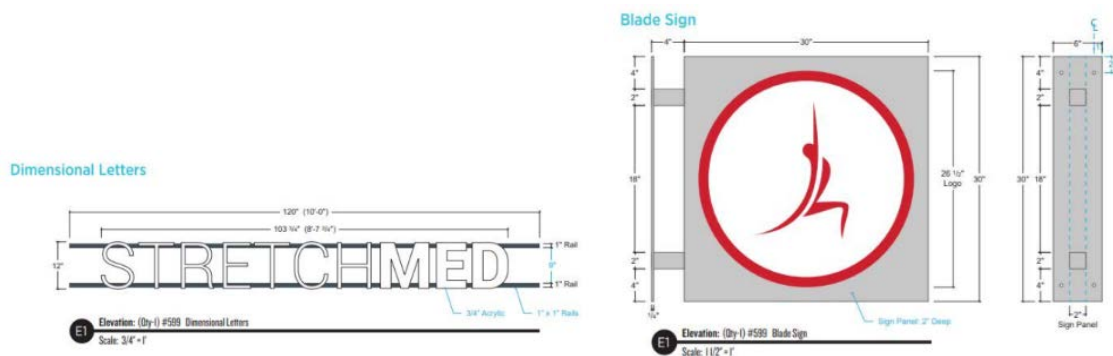
- [Central Square Overlay District](#). The Central Square Overlay District (CSOD) was created in 1989 following a planning study that established development goals and guidelines for the area; it was most recently amended in 2017. There are a variety of plans and guidelines focused on Central Square, including the [Central Square Planning Study - C2 \(2013\)](#), the [Central Square Action Plan](#), and the [Central Square Development Guidelines](#). Overall, these documents envision a Central Square with a strong retail base made up of local, independent retailers; an active arts community; vibrant public spaces; new development that is compatible with the existing historic character of the square; and a diverse range of housing types.
- [Formula Business](#). The definition of “Formula Business” was added to the Zoning Ordinance as part of the 2017 amendments to the CSOD. The Zoning Ordinance requires that a special permit be obtained prior to a Formula Business use being located within the CSOD.

### Current Proposal

### Overview

The applicant, Cambridge Stretch, LLC proposes to open a stretch studio at the new Market Central development located at 425 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, Massachusetts. The proposed stretch studio specializing in decreasing chronic pain, muscle tightness, muscle imbalances, and tension through trainer-led stretching sessions, shall occupy approximately 754 square feet on the street level of the complex. StretchMed has over 80 locations across the US, which operate as a “Fitness Center,” a type of Retail or Consumer Service Establishment.

As part of the interior build-out, the applicant intends to utilize its standard color scheme and logo for the interior of the premises. The exterior will include signage that does not utilize the standard StretchMed color palette and instead will be a black and white version of the text only, not including the rest of the logo, to ensure the design does not take away from the unique character of the neighborhood in Central Square.



Signs proposed: Wall sign (left) and Blade sign (right)

### Special Permits

#### Formula Business Special Permit

A Formula Business requires a Planning Board special permit. The special permit for a Formula Business applies to the entity itself rather than an overall use category. Therefore, if an existing Formula Business is replaced by a different Formula Business, a new special permit is required.

Cambridge zoning defines a Formula Business as an individual Retail or Consumer Service establishment that is required by virtue of a contract, franchise agreement, ownership or other similar legal obligation to conform or substantially conform to a set of common design and operating features that serve to identify the establishment as one of a group of establishments for business, marketing and public relations purposes. Specifically, an establishment shall be considered a Formula Business if it shares at least two (2) of the following three (3) characteristics with ten (10) or more other establishments in Massachusetts or within twenty (20) or more other establishments:

1. Trademark, service mark or logo, defined as a word, phrase, symbol, or design or combination thereof that identifies and distinguishes the source of the goods or services from others;
2. Standardized building architecture including but not limited to façade design and signage;

3. Standardized color scheme used throughout the exterior of the establishment, including color associated with signs and logos.

As a result of sharing a trademark, logo, and standardized color scheme with ten (10) or more other establishments in Massachusetts, Cambridge Stretch, LLC is seeking a Special Permit to operate a Formula Business in Cambridge’s Business B Zoning District and Central Square Overlay District.

The criteria for granting a Formula Business special permit in the Central Square Overlay District focus on the extent to which the proposal is unique to Central Square and reflects, amplifies, and strengthens the established historical character of existing buildings and storefronts in Central Square.

The proposed use is moving into an existing building and the installation of the horizontal business signage is the only alteration to the exterior of the building. Therefore, the design of the signage is the main focus of the Board’s review.

### ***Advisory Review***

#### Central Square Advisory Committee (CSAC) Review and Comment

On August 7, 2024, pursuant to the provisions of Section 20.50 of the Cambridge Zoning Ordinance, the Central Square Advisory Committee reviewed and commented on this project in advance of the Applicant’s request for a Formula Business special permit from the Planning Board. No public comments were received by CSAC. The Committee voted to forward a report to the Planning Board with a positive recommendation. CSAC members were supportive of the proposed retail use and raised no major concerns. The proposal to CSAC included sample signage from other locations, including a blade sign and window signage, where the Committee expressed no concerns with the design of the signage. However, the current proposal is different from what was proposed to the Committee. The signage proposed for the 425 Mass Ave location includes a monochromatic wall sign and a blade sign with the StretchMed logo. This approach is consistent with a lot of Central Square businesses utilizing a large wall sign and small blade sign. CSAC members agreed the proposed use would be a positive addition to the Market Central alley, citing its current inactivity.

### ***Community Engagement***

According to the Applicant’s community engagement summary, a virtual meeting was held via Zoom and in-person at the retail location on August 29, 2024. The applicant noted that no members of the public attended either meeting. Standard notice was provided by the Applicant to abutters.

### **Special Permit Conditions**

1. Approved Use: The special permit would specifically authorize StretchMed as the approved Formula Business use at this location. The Board’s approval of this Formula Business would not be transferrable to a different entity or use.
2. Continuing Design Review: CDD staff would review and approve design details at the construction documents phase, prior to issuance of a building permit, to certify that the plans conform to the Planning Board’s approval. Board members may cite specific areas of focus for detailed review, based on the Urban Design Report and Board discussion.

## **Appendix - Zoning Text Excerpts**

---

### **Special Permit for Establishing a Formula Business in Central Square Overlay District**

- 20.305.5(4)** Formula Business District. A Formula Business as defined in this Ordinance may be established in the Central Square Overlay District only after the issuance of a special permit from the Planning Board. In reviewing an application the Planning Board shall take the following into consideration:
- a. The extent to which the design of the proposal reflects, amplifies, and strengthens the established historical character of existing buildings and store fronts in Central Square.
  - b. The extent to which the particulars of the building or storefront design is varied from the formula or standard design of the chain in order to reflect the unique character and conditions of Central Square generally or the specific location in particular.
  - c. The extent to which the standard elements of the enterprise as they define it as a Formula Business are modified to respect and provide unique expressions of Central Square history and traditions as well as innovation in physical design and marketing that will distinguish the Central Square location from other locations of the Formula Business.



**Issuance of Special Permit in Central Square Overlay District**

**20.305** *Standards for Issuance of Special Permits.* In addition to the general standards for the issuance of a special permit found in Section 10.40 of the Zoning Ordinance, the special permit granting authority shall in addition make the following findings:

1. The proposed development is consistent with the goals and objectives of the Central Square Action Plan:
  - Encourage responsible and orderly development;
  - Strengthen the retail base to more completely serve the needs of the neighborhoods;
  - Preserve the Square's cultural diversity;
  - Create active people oriented spaces;
  - Improve the physical, and visual environment;
  - Provide retail establishments that serve people of diverse economic and social groups who live in the surrounding neighborhoods;
  - Encourage the development of new mixed income housing; and
  - Promote compatible retail adjacent to residential uses.
2. The building and site designs are consistent with "Urban Design Plan for Central Square" as outlined in the "Central Square Action Plan" and the "Central Square Development Guidelines";
3. The building and site designs adequately screen the parking provided and are sensitive to the contributing buildings in the vicinity;
4. No National Register or contributing building is demolished or so altered as to terminate or preclude its designation as a National Register or contributing building; and
5. No National Register or contributing building has been demolished or altered so as to terminate or preclude its designation within the five (5) years preceding the application.

**General Criteria for Issuance of a Special Permit**

**10.43** *Criteria.* Special permits will normally be granted where specific provisions of this Ordinance are met, except when particulars of the location or use, not generally true of the district or of the uses permitted in it, would cause granting of such permit to be to the detriment of the public interest because:

- (a) It appears that requirements of this Ordinance cannot or will not be met, or
- (b) traffic generated or patterns of access or egress would cause congestion, hazard, or substantial change in established neighborhood character, or
- (c) the continued operation of or the development of adjacent uses as permitted in the Zoning Ordinance would be adversely affected by the nature of the proposed use, or
- (d) nuisance or hazard would be created to the detriment of the health, safety and/or welfare of the occupant of the proposed use or the citizens of the City, or

for other reasons, the proposed use would impair the integrity of the district or adjoining district, or otherwise derogate from the intent and purpose of this Ordinance, and

the new use or building construction is inconsistent with the Urban Design Objectives set forth in Section 19.30.

**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"> <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>

## Urban Design Staff Report

---

### Introduction

Cambridge Stretch LLC proposes to open a stretch studio— “StretchMed”—in the ground floor of the Market Central development in Central Square. Under the Central Square Overlay District (20.304.5(4), StretchMed constitutes a “Formula Business” and is therefore subject to provisions regarding storefront design, including the business’s signage.

Market Central is a 22-floor mixed-use project at 425 Massachusetts Avenue, reviewed by the Planning Board as Special Permit number PB-321. Its glass-roofed outdoor public passage links Lafayette Square on the building’s south-facing front with the municipal parking lot at its rear, giving the block a welcoming permeability for pedestrians. The passage is intended to be activated by small-scaled retail establishments along both sides, creating a small but strategically located urban market, and contributing to the life of Lafayette Square.

At present, however, several of these retail spaces are vacant and others are occupied by the back-of-house functions of the building’s retail establishments. Two of the passage’s eleven facade bays have opaque surfaces behind their glazing, and only four of them have functional entrances. The addition of the StretchMed studio will bring life and activity to the passage.

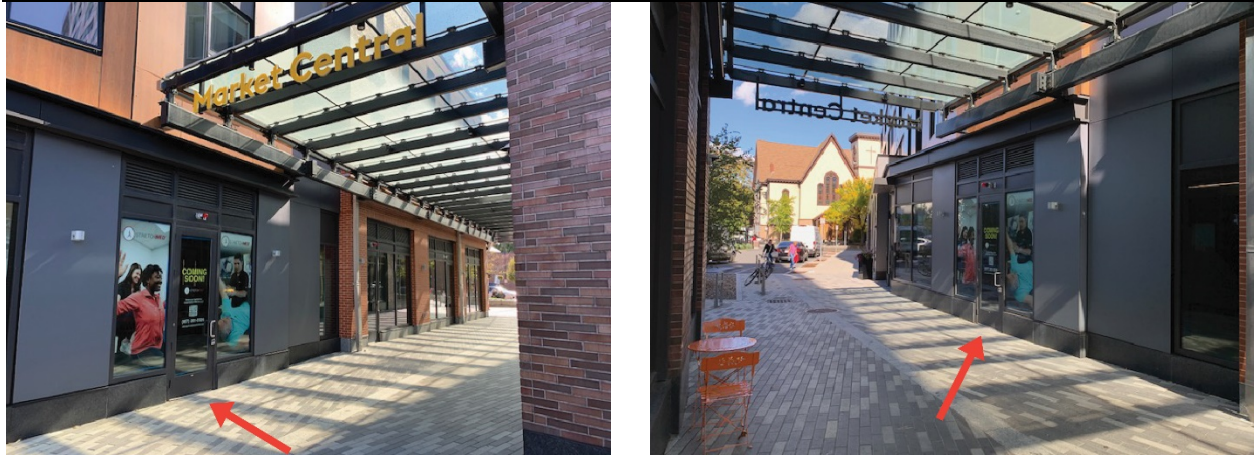
### Urban Design Comments

The proposed StretchMed project accords with the Central Square Development Guidelines (1989), which emphasize that projects should maintain an active streetscape both during the day and evening and encourage large window areas for display or views into interiors, attractively integrated signage, and small projecting signs that are compatible with the building’s architecture.

The Central Square Design Guidelines (2013) encourage ground level facade treatments to either be “rich in detail and help reinforce the human scale through the use of architectural elements such as trim, sills, lintels, awnings and canopies”, or be “inviting and interesting through dramatic treatment of space, lighting, and signage”. They recommend that windows be expansive and illuminated from within to create interesting display or viewing areas. They suggest measures such as large window areas, attractively integrated signage, and encourage creative signage, awnings, and graphics that create a visually interesting, creative, and engaging streetscape.

With the exception of the proposed signage, no changes are proposed to the existing storefront façade. The applicant values the transparency of the existing storefront facade, desiring an unobstructed view of the business’s interior and the activity inside it from the passage, and will maintain the level of transparency as approved in the Market Central Special Permit.

Provision 20.304.5(4) of the Central Square Overlay District encourages Formula Businesses to vary from the “formula or standard design of the chain” in response to the unique character and conditions of Central Square or of the specific site. Accordingly, the proposed StretchMed signage differs from the standard signage of the business. It consists of a wall sign in white and gray letters located in the louvered area above the storefront glazing, plus a blade sign on the pier at the south side of the storefront. From the application materials, both signs appear to be unilluminated.



The existing appearance of the StretchMed storefront at

the north end of the Passage.

The existing storefront facade of StretchMed’s retail space is an unassuming presence on the passage. While the design of StretchMed’s proposed signage and storefront is consistent with other retail uses in the Market Central development, consideration could be given to adding visual interest to the passage by employing a bolder approach to the signage and/or the storefront, potentially using color, lighting, changes to the storefront’s opaque panels, window displays, etc., to respond to Central Square’s character as an historical retail district and/or as an arts and cultural district.

### **Continuing Review**

The following are additional recommendations for ongoing design review by staff if the Board decides to grant the special permit:

- Design of signage in accordance with sign requirements in the Zoning Ordinance and the character of the storefront.
- Further development of the storefront façade to provide additional visual interest.