



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

To: Planning Board

From: CDD Staff

Date: June 27, 2024

Re: **AHO-3, 21 Walden Square Road - Affordable Housing Overlay Design Consultation Meeting #2**

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Overview

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

Applicant: Winn Development Company LP

Zoning District(s): Residence C-2

Proposal Summary: Construct 2 buildings to add 95 affordable rental units with 74 long-term and 10 short-term bicycle parking spaces with a gross floor area of 132,226 square feet 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

Overview

Winn Development Company LP (“Winn” or “the Applicant”) proposes to construct two additional buildings in the existing Walden Square campus, consisting of a total of 95 affordable units. Building A is an approximately 91,000 square-foot, 7-story building with 60 affordable dwelling units and Building B is a 6-story building with approximately 41,000 square feet and 35 affordable units. Building A faces Raymond Street and straddles the existing internal Walden Square Road while Building B is set behind an existing 9-story building.

The project will include 8 additional off-street parking spaces for a total of 198, 74 new long-term bike parking spaces, and a new 19-dock Bluebikes station. The development will reduce the overall open space on the site from 36% (113,000 square feet) to 31% (100,000 square feet) and will include the renovation of 3 existing play areas and the planting of over 150 new trees. The site currently includes 240 units of affordable housing within 20 3-story buildings and one 9-story high rise.

Planning Board Comments from Initial Consultation Meeting

The Planning Board was generally supportive of the additional 95 units of affordable housing at the site and the addition of larger units for families. The Board was supportive of the two-building scheme and commended Winn for taking time to refine the design of the project after initial community feedback.

In terms of site design, Board members pushed the Applicant to improve the design of the space underneath Building A, with specific direction to focus on utilizing lighting, signage, pavement texture, and other design elements to reduce potential vehicle and pedestrian conflicts and improve the overall aesthetic of the area. The Board urged Winn to explore more opportunities to improve pedestrian and bicycle circulation throughout the site and add more canopy trees. Board members also asked the Applicant if they could work with the utility company to reduce the size of and/or relocate the transformer/substation area adjacent to Building A.

In terms of building design, the Board requested that the Applicant explore opportunities to further articulate the façade and consider a lighter color for the upper portions of both buildings.

Staff Comments on Revised Submission

A revised application was received by the City dated May 20, 2024, consisting of revised application forms and narrative, a revised graphics volume, and a revised appendix volume including letters from CDD staff that the project has provided sufficient documentation to show compliance with both Green Building and Green Factor standards at this stage of review. The Applicant also met with City staff to discuss further design refinements since the initial hearing, and the revised application is responsive to both staff and Board comments on the original application.

The project remains consistent with the AHO zoning standards. In the initial [Zoning memo](#) from CDD staff, further detail of façade transparency percentages were requested to ensure compliance with Section 11.207.7.3(a). Elevation drawings on page 58 show the Building A façade that faces Raymond

Street will meet the minimum 20% clear glass requirement. Updated bicycle parking details on page 27 show the each of the spaces will meet the design standards of Section 6.105.1.f. Further details of the proposed substation and transformer screen adjacent to Building A are still needed to ensure the screening meets the opacity and quality standards of Section 11.207.7.5.b and will be reviewed at the building permit stage.

Urban Design Staff Report

Overview

The Walden Square Apartments project, proposed by the Winn Development Company, will add two new buildings to the existing Walden Square affordable housing complex. The 95 new residential units will increase the total at Walden Square from 240 to 335. The essence of the revised design, depicted in the May 20, 2024 submission, remains the same as the design the Planning Board reviewed on March 12, 2024:

- Building A is located over the existing east/west Walden Square Road, which is privately owned but is used by residents and the general public as a vehicular, bicycle, and pedestrian route between Richdale and Raymond Streets on the east of the site, Sherman Street on the west, and Bolton Street to the northwest. Walden Square Road will remain a two-way vehicular route, with a small number of perpendicular parking spaces under the building.
- Building A will separate an existing parking lot and a north/south-oriented tree-lined pedestrian mall within the Walden Square site from the grassy lawn on the adjoining property to the north. The building's eastern end is close to the axis of the north/south path from the Yerxa Road underpass (below the Fitchburg line) which connects to the Peabody School and the Rindge neighborhood.
- Building B is located on the site of the existing play area on the west side of the existing nine-floor-high Building 21 and parallel to it. It faces the adjoining athletics fields of the Cambridge Friends School.
- The scope of the project includes the renovation of existing play areas throughout the whole of the complex, which staff understands has already been done.
- The project removes the row of large London plane trees on the north side of Walden Square Road, and other trees elsewhere in the complex.
- New trees will be planted in various locations throughout the complex.
- Covered long-term bicycle parking is added in separate structures throughout the complex and also provided in the first floors of both new buildings.
- The completed project will provide a total of 198 vehicular parking spaces for the whole of the Walden Square complex, 74 long-term bicycle parking spaces (both in the first floors of the new buildings and in separate structures), and 10 short-term bicycle spaces.

The project presents the design challenge of how to add the new buildings in a way that is compatible with the existing buildings, fits in with the nearby neighborhoods, improves the complex's open spaces, addresses circulation issues, and enhances the quality of life for both the existing and the new residents.

Planning Board comments on the initial submission

In the project's first review on March 12, 2024, the Planning Board supported the comments provided in the staff memo and particularly stressed the following concerns:

Site Design

- Pedestrian connectivity and safety, especially around and under Building A.
- The character of the privately owned Walden Square Road, particularly as it passes under Building A.
- Pedestrian, bicycle, and vehicular wayfinding.
- The design of pedestrian crosswalks.
- Lighting and safety, including providing greater light intensity at the ends of the tunnel than in the middle to reduce the contrast to ambient outdoor light in the daytime.
- Building A's transformer/switchgear area, including suggestions to reduce its size or relocate it to a less obtrusive location.
- More information should be provided regarding the process for selecting and installing the proposed art sculpture.
- Additional canopy trees, instead of small ornamental trees, would be preferable.

Building Design

- The Board appreciated the inclusion of family units, community spaces, and play areas.
- The Board suggested further articulation of the façades in response to adjoining buildings and spaces to better integrate the new buildings into the complex.
- To reduce the impact of Building A on Walden Square Road, one member recommended to shorten its east/west dimension, and to create more space for the plaza at its east end by moving it to the west.
- Building colors: the upper parts of the building seem too dark and too grey.

Urban Design Comments on Design Revisions

The revised design and documentation address comments and questions from the March 12, 2024 review.

- Improvements have been made to pedestrian, bicycle, and vehicular circulation and its documentation, and proposed signage is described.
- A pedestrian path has been added along the south side of Building A.
- The vehicular driveway from Building A into the eastern portion of the parking lot to the building's south side has been eliminated.
- The trash enclosure has been relocated from the middle of the parking lot south of Building A to the building's ground floor.
- New trees have been added at the southern corners of that parking lot.
- The facades are generally improved. Building A's façades relate better to the scale of the spaces and buildings to its north and south. The red accent panels are more purposefully located.
- The floor-to-floor height of Building A's ground floor has been increased, creating more headroom in the tunnel.
- The rooftop photovoltaic panels are mounted lower and are less visually prominent.

Suggestions for Further Study

East/west circulation around and through Building A:

1. Staff recommends that further study be given to the vehicular, pedestrian, and bicycle connectivity to and through the site. The intended routes for pedestrians and bicyclists should be intuitively clear, not dependent on signage.
 - a. Clarify the preferred route for east-bound people walking or bicycling from the western part of Walden Square Road to the Yerxa Road Underpass. A smoother and more visually apparent connection to the new path on the north side of Building A should be investigated.
 - b. Clarify the preferred route for east-bound people walking or cycling from the western part of Walden Square Road toward Raymond Street or to the bicycle storage room at the east end of Building A. Is it meant to be the new path along the north side of Building A, the tunnel through the building, or the new path along the building's south side?
 - c. The new pedestrian path along the south side of Building A is indicated only by painted markings. A raised sidewalk, separate from the parking lot and with a curb cut to the trash room would be preferable. In addition, it would be preferable to create a more direct route to this path for east-bound pedestrians coming from the sidewalk on the south side of the western part of Walden Square Road.
 - d. Clarify the route for people bicycling west-bound on Walden Square Road from Raymond Street to the bicycle storage room at the east end of Building A. The configuration of the paved area and planting outside the bike room seems to not address this desire line.
 - e. Clarify the preferred route for people bicycling west-bound on Walden Square Road from Raymond Street toward Sherman Street. Are they meant to continue on Walden Square Road through the Building A tunnel, or use the new path on the building's north side, or the new path on the building's south side? The configuration of the plaza and crosswalk area at the east end of Building A seems to prioritize the route through the tunnel.
2. At the east end of Building A, a pedestrian crosswalk across Walden Square Road connects the path from the Yerxa Underpass to the east/west path on the south side of Building A and to the sidewalk on the east side of Building 21. Consideration could be given adjusting the designs of the crosswalk and the associated areas of pedestrian pavement to more strongly prioritize pedestrians over vehicular traffic and to create a more direct connection to the Yerxa Underpass.
3. Wayfinding signage, pavement materials, and pavement markings should be further considered to make the intended use of the tunnel through Building A clearer to drivers, pedestrians, and bicyclists.

North/south circulation between Building A, Building B, and Building 21:

4. Adjust the north/south path along the west side of the tree-lined pedestrian mall between these buildings to create a smoother north/south pedestrian route, a route more congruent with the linear character of the space.

North/south circulation to the Lincoln Way housing complex:

5. If possible, create a formal pedestrian connection to the Lincoln Way residential complex.

Site mounted electrical, mechanical, and plumbing equipment:

6. If possible, relocate as much as possible of the “MEP” equipment in the screened enclosure at the west end of Building A to the building’s ground floor. Design any remaining screening to be compatible with the building facades.

Plantings:

7. Shade the paths and open spaces throughout the complex with more large-growth-habit canopy trees.
 - a. Prioritize planting new canopy trees instead of the ornamental trees indicated in many places on the site plan.
 - b. Provide additional canopy shade trees inside and to the east, west, and south of the play areas.
8. The proposed decorative low-growth-habit tree species are good choices as understory trees below and near taller canopy trees.
9. A greater variety of shade tree species would be preferable, including replacing some of the several varieties of red maples with oaks.

Play Areas:

10. Staff understand that the play areas have already been improved. But note that it appears that additional play equipment could be provided in the spaces allocated, for instance in the “Courtyard C” play area.

Building Facades:

11. Continue to develop the building facades to complement the form and character of the adjoining open spaces, considering the use of planar repetitive facades vs. facades articulated into smaller scaled elements, and façade elements that relate to the heights of nearby buildings. Potential areas of focus include:
 - a. The south side of Building A, in response to the height of the existing buildings around the parking lot south of Building A.
 - b. The end facades of Building A relative to Walden Square Road and the building’s massing.
 - c. The west façade of Building B facing the playfields vs. its east façade facing the tree lined space between Building B and Building 21.
12. Consider using a lighter color instead of the dark gray proposed for the upper portions of the buildings.
13. Consider the use of more substantial exterior cladding material for the upper portions of the buildings instead of the proposed thin cementitious panel and aluminum reglet system.

Building Plans

14. Consider moving the lobby of Building A to the east, so that it provides an active interior space at the north end of the tree-lined pedestrian mall and play area between Building 21, Building B, and the easternmost of the existing three-floor-tall buildings.

Bicycle Parking:

15. Consideration should be given to providing more long-term bicycle parking spaces for Walden Square as a whole, including storage areas for e-bikes and cargo bikes.
16. Long-term bicycle parking spaces should be weather protected.

Staff would be happy to be a resource for the applicant as the design progresses.

Consistency with the Affordable Housing Overlay Design Guidelines

- The decision to divide the project into two buildings, and to locate them deeply inside the site, reduces its impact on the existing Walden Square buildings, on Walden Square Road, and on the context.
- The proposed buildings are midway in height between the existing three-floor buildings and the existing nine-floor building and so help mediate between them.
- The differentiation of the first-floor facades from the upper floors and the use of brick detail on the first floors accord with the Guidelines' emphasis on the scale and character of the pedestrian zone.
- The grouping of windows into larger figures helps mediate the height of the buildings by introducing an intermediate level of scale, and the use of the red elements helps reinforce the patterns created by building massing.
- The relocation of Building A's trash area from the parking lot to the building's first floor helps reduce its visual presence.
- The parking on the ground floor levels of both the new buildings is screened from view.
- Some of the challenges the proposed design presents to site circulation arise from the siting of Building A over the privately owned Walden Square Road. The AHO guidelines assume that circulation is instead located in open spaces that are bordered and framed by buildings. This more normative relationship between building massing and circulation
 - accommodates vehicular, bicycle, and pedestrian movements,
 - creates clear distinctions between the fully public realm and more private open spaces within project sites,
 - and allows building entrances to directly address the public realm.
- As noted above, adjustments to the proposed building facades, including more deliberate use of planar repetitive facades vs. facades that are articulated into smaller scaled elements, and a reference to the height of the nearby existing three-floor-tall buildings, could be considered to create stronger relationships to the adjoining buildings and to emphasize the coherence of the site's open spaces by giving them more consistent architectural frames.
- The panelized cladding system proposed for the upper portions of the buildings is questionable in terms of its relationship to the existing buildings of Walden Square and its context.
- Staff can provide input and guidance on the proposed sculpture selection and installation.
- Additional canopy trees would help reduce the site's urban heat island effect by shading the buildings and open spaces.
- Less prominent site mounted electrical equipment would better conform to the Guidelines.