

## **WATERTOWN PLANNING BOARD**

DATE: October 8, 2025, PLACE: City Council Chamber TIME: 7:00 PM COMMENCED: 7:03 PM

PURPOSE OF MEETING: Public Hearing

MEMBERS PRESENT: Acting Chair Payson Whitney; Jason Cohen; Sarah Scott (remote); Abigail Hammett; Rachael Sack

MEMBERS ABSENT: Chair Janet Buck

STAFF PRESENT: Sameena Pirani, Principal Departmental Assistant; Gideon Schreiber, Director of Planning & Zoning; Matthew Neubacher, Planner.

### **ADMINISTRATIVE BUSINESS**

#### **Approval of Minutes:**

Jason Cohen motioned to approve Minutes of 9/10/2025 meeting.

Abigail Hammett seconded the motion. VOTE: 5-0 In Favor

(Roll call vote)

Payson Whitney stated that he would be Acting Chair in the absence of Janet Buck. Also, as Sarah Scott was remote, all votes would be by roll call.

**10 Coolidge** was continued to November 5, 2025, and not heard tonight.

#### **65 Main St**

Jack Dombrowski (SMMA) and Jason Sohigian (executive Director, Armenian Museum of America), introduced the project describing current conditions, project goals, proposed signage, design elements and lighting.

Member Hammett clarified that the approval sought was for the maximum potential size of the mural, with the final design still in progress. It was confirmed that differences between the drawings and renderings was due to the building depth changes and shading in the 3D view.

Detailing the materials for the mural, Dombrowski stated that they were designed to be visually effective, non-damaging to the building and easily replaceable, making them practical for installation and future updates.

Member Rachael Sack confirmed the durability of materials in extreme weather.

Dombrowski stated that the glass film will be applied inside using layered inks to create a fuchsia pattern with controlled opacity visible from both sides. Board also recommended improving address visibility by placing numbers above the door or integrating them into the vinyl film on entrance to meet emergency visibility requirements, even though local EMS likely identified the location by name.

The Board questioned whether the existing fabric awning at the service entrance was still necessary, noting that it felt visually outdated compared to the refreshed building design. They suggested removing it if it lacked functional value. Jason Sohigian explained that the awning provided weather protection and helped with wayfinding and was used for deliveries and office access when the museum was closed. Upgrades to style would be considered in the future.

Members discussed other details and suggested some specific changes to consider with staff review, including:

- Upper Horizontal Band – adding a color to the upper concrete band would truncate the building and one member suggested allowing it only at the front angled façade.
- Vertical Color Bands – the coloration of brick using heat applied vinyl cladding would be appropriate. They suggested mocking it up before application and ensuring the application is as shown in the plans.
- Paint - should not be used as it could impact the building's materials (brick and concrete).
- Banners – Discussed location and number, frequency of replacements, and the inaccurate rendering showing wider banners than proposed. They determined the number and size was appropriate but added a condition about upkeep and review process by staff during replacement.
- The detail and size of the main front entry rectangular sign in place of the window was discussed in detail. There was concern about it impacting the building's overall architecture and ultimately, the Board determined it should remain as proposed, noting that it is illuminated via a backlit layer.
- The Board suggested criteria to consider in reviewing the mural, noting ideas like maintaining a brick frame around it, considering a reduced size/scale, limiting the gradient coloring, and/or increasing brick exposure within the design. Specific material requirements were removed to allow flexibility.

Responding to the Boards discussion of the visual impact of antennas around the parapet and how they interfere with the building's appearance and the proposed design changes, staff confirmed that relocation was unlikely due to technical constraints and requirements from multiple carriers.

Staff summarized their report concluding that given the museums cultural significance and visibility in Watertown Square, a Sign Special Permit was appropriate to ensure cohesive and intentional signage design. While there were concerns about the material treatments and

Special Permit history for the antenna, the proposal largely aligned with Design Guidelines, and conditional approval was recommended.

Based on staff input and clarification of the extent to which the proposed signage exceeded zoning limits, there was Board agreement that flexibility was warranted for a cultural institution, and the signage was seen as appropriate and not excessive given the museums significance and scale.

Payson Whitney open discussion to the public.

Councilor Feltner supported the museum’s improvements but raised concerns about the mural resembling a billboard, the bright top color shortening the building, the size and number of banners on Church St and potential confusion about the entrance due to signage placement.

Confirming no other comments in-person and on zoom, Payson Whitney closed the public hearing and opened it for Board deliberations.

Abigail Hammett made a motion to approve the Sign Special Permit with the following amended conditions:

Banner designs to be approved by staff at changeover. \*

Require the applicant to seek input on the mural design from the Public Arts and Culture Committee, with staff having final sign off. Other changes to condition 8 include recommendations to consider underlying brick exposure, reduce scale and eliminate the gradient effect in mural design. Specific material requirement was removed to allow flexibility.\*\*

Amend lighting conditions to require sign illumination to be limited to surrounding restaurant/business hours with an exception for scheduled events outside of those hours. Clarify that the entire front entry rectangular sign would be illuminated (versus only portions).\*\*\*

Require a signage maintenance plan addressing upkeep, replacement and vibrancy.

Motion was seconded by Rachael Sack (VOTE 5-0 ) In Favor

Meeting adjourned 8:00PM Meeting Minutes-----

Notes

*\*Referenced as Condition 7 in the motion, Condition 8 in the Planning Board Decision*

*\*\*Referenced as Condition 8 in the motion, Condition 9 in the Planning Board Decision*

*\*\*\*Referenced as Condition 4 in the Planning Board Decision*