

WATERTOWN PLANNING BOARD

DATE: December 3, 2025, PLACE: City Council Chamber TIME: 7:00 PM COMMENCED: 7:03 PM

PURPOSE OF MEETING: Public Hearing

MEMBERS PRESENT: Chair Janet Buck; Jason Cohen; Payson Whitney; Abigail Hammett; Rachael Sack; Sarah Scott (joined after 15 Thurston Road)

MEMBERS ABSENT: None.

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

ADMINISTRATIVE BUSINESS

Approval of Minutes:

Jason Cohen motioned to approve Minutes of 11/05/2025 meeting.

Rachael Sack seconded the motion. VOTE: 4-0 In Favor (Chair Buck, Jason Cohen, Abigail Hammett, & Rachael Sack---Abstained Payson Whitney)

Community Preservation Committee appointment of Abigail Hammett, Planning Board Designee for the term ending Feb 1, 2029. Motion Jason Cohen, seconded by Payson Whitney. Vote: 5-0

Cases: 8-10 Kimball Rd

Kazem Safari, owner and petitioner described the scope of the project, presented plans to create the accessory dwelling unit in the basement of his property. He described the site conditions and parking, stating that there were no exterior site changes. The property had space for up to 8 cars in the driveway, 2 in the garage. Parking was not assigned—tenants organized their own spaces. He pointed out the entrances and exits, and escape windows. Board members inquired about a few construction details—related to flooring.

Diane Tucker, 12 Kimball Rd, while supportive of ADUs, opposed this proposal for several reasons—She believed that the exterior changes violated ADU guidelines; she cited a history of unpermitted or noncompliant work on the property—she did not have confidence that the owner would follow ADU rules going forward; She questioned the accuracy of the ADUs square footage. Members noted that many of these issues would be addressed during the building permit review and were not grounds for denying the application. Also, the exterior changes were allowed for ADUs.

Overall, members noted that the proposal was straightforward and aligned with the type of basement conversions they hoped for under the new ADU regulations. Motion to approve was made by Payson Whitney, seconded by Jason Cohen. Votes 5-0.

15 Thurston Rd

Amr Hafez, Quantum Leap Construction, gave the project overview, converting the lower level of a single-family home to an ADU. He detailed access, layout, parking and site conditions and confirmed that the initial application and drawings had been corrected. Board asked questions about floor insulation, plan orientation, requesting that future submittals reflect orientation of the plan relative to the streets, location of entrances and clear connections between site photos and drawings. Staff acknowledged and agreed to encourage applicants to include this information. Overall, the Board had no major concerns. After confirming that there were no public comments, motion to approve was made by Payson Whitney, seconded by Abigail Hammett. Motion was approved 5-0.

Member Sarah Scott would participate in the upcoming hearing.

260 Arsenal Pl

VHB, represented by Ann Sobolewski, requested a Sign Special Permit to install a facade sign located more than twenty feet above ground level and slightly extending above the roofline. The sign was not internally illuminated and was intended to improve visibility since the building was set far back from Arsenal Street. Board members agreed that the height was appropriate because of the building's distance from the street and the facade design

Board members discussed future lighting options and how they would be handled. It was noted that the applicant may make a request for external illumination in the future. Staff clarified that since lighting was not included in the submitted plans, future illumination would typically require review. The Board suggested adding a condition to allow certain types of lighting. The Board members agreed the sign's location was logical and visually enhanced the building's facade. There were no public objections.

Motion was approved with the additional condition related to future illumination of the sign as discussed. Applicant shall ensure that any future illumination of the sign be reviewed and approved by DCDP staff, and such illumination be limited to halo lighting, backlighting, or full-cutoff downlighting directed onto the sign or building facade; internal illumination of the sign itself is prohibited.

Motion was made by Payson Whitney, seconded by Abigail Hammett. Motion was approved 5-0.

33 Mt Auburn St

Alex Brownell, PCA, introduced the owner Peter Doucet, project team including Attorney Bill York, Dave Snell, Principal at PCA, Jeffrey Dirk (Vanasse & Associates, Inc), Austin Chartier (McKenzie Engineering Group Inc), and Mike D'Angelo (MDLA). He provided an overview of the project, including site context, existing conditions, zoning framework, unit mix, site plan and circulation, open space and public realm improvements, building form, massing and setbacks, Floor plans, design, material palette, streetscape and facade composition, and sustainability features.

Jeffrey Dirk, transportation consultant attending remotely, stated that a detailed Transportation Impact Assessment and Transportation Demand Management Plan had been prepared and peer reviewed for the project. Overall, the site was highly walkable, bikeable and transit accessible, naturally reducing auto dependency. The project was designed with minimal auto impact even with conservative models and had high alternative mode use. The team was collaborating closely with the City to support long-term transportation improvements.

Austin Chartier (McKenzie Engineering Group, civil engineers for the project) covered the site layout in relation to prior presenters, traffic, access and circulation, parking garage specifications, sidewalks and landscaping, stormwater management design, soil conditions and test pits, grading and utilities plan.

Mike D'Angelo, MDLA, described the streetscape improvements on Mt Auburn St, street trees and furnishing zone, bike parking, street lighting, corner treatment at Taylor St, sidewalk termination and future connectivity, design of the Pocket park, Planting strategy, "leftover" green patch at the upper part of the plan.

Chair opened up the meeting to questions and comments from the Board.

Staff stated that the project qualified as an MBTA Communities project and explained the type of approval required. It was the first project to come before the Board under the MBTA Communities zoning framework. The project required Site Plan Review and was by-right, and the Board's role was to ensure compliance with objective standards and to impose reasonable, non-prohibitive conditions. Staff also noted the board members participating and voting, and the voting threshold.

Member Sarah Scott asked questions about the pocket park design and coordination of desired amenities (e.g. seating types for take-out dining) with local businesses, landscaping, soil depths and plant selection, sidewalk widths, second floor green space

versus garage layout, retail flexibility and unit mix. The applicant clarified design intent, access, and constraints, noting flexibility in retail space and that site geometry prevented including 3-bedroom units.

Member Sack asked for clarification on the green roof versus the fenced ground level area, as well as details on loading, garage access, circulation and EV/e-bike charging. The applicant confirmed that loading would occur via the garage with possible curbside options, provided the rationale for the garage entrance on Taylor Street, and committed to required EV and e-bike charging infrastructure.

Member Hammett asked clarifying questions that included maintenance of the pocket park, retail flexibility, hazardous materials, affordable/accessible unit labeling, trash handling, access to rear open space, traffic queuing, garage operations, canopy design, roof deck coverage and material quality. The architects stated using high quality textured materials to ensure building matched the renderings.

Member Cohen suggested recessing the garage door to improve traffic flow, noted the Mt Auburn side wall's blankness limited window options due to setbacks, and recommended minor material or corner adjustments to reduce the facade's visual heaviness.

Chair Buck clarified trash collection logistics, highlighting the need for package and delivery handling in the lobby. She suggested a temporary or removable green wall on the south facing blank facade for aesthetic improvement.

Member Whitney's comments focused on clarifying the building's "plus story" designation, suggesting a recessed curb for delivery trucks on Taylor Street to improve traffic flow, proposing temporary public art or a mural on the blank wall to enhance aesthetics until another development. He noted that the building was designed to Passive House standards, with high performance envelopes and increasing energy efficiency.

Additional discussion focused on building design details, including facade articulation, balconies, enhancing the pocket park's public identity through landscaping, historical references, and public art while ensuring city approval and maintenance, alongside flexible retail spaces and a safe bike path.

There were no public comments.

Member Payson moved to conditionally approve the mixed use development at 33 Mt Auburn Street, with conditions outlined in the Staff Report and Supplement, including two additional conditions:

Condition 8D: Plans for green roof elements (including the first-floor garage roof and upper roof) shall be incorporated with the landscape/tree management plan submitted for planning staff review and approval.

Condition 8E: After the word “program,” add “including consideration of public art” to ensure public art elements in the city-owned pocket part are reviewed by DCDP/DPW.

Motion was seconded by Abigail Hammett. Motion approved unanimously (5-0).

72 Mt Auburn St

Attorney Terry Morris, representing Peter Lee (72 Mt Auburn Street LLC), presented the proposal for the redevelopment of the historic 7,300-sf corner site in the Mt Auburn Historic District, emphasizing stewardship of the 200-year-old Greek Revival house, which would be restored as a single-family home, alongside a new three-story, flat roof building with seven residential units. He stated that the project had been extensively reviewed and approved by the Historic District Commission and was consistent with the Watertown Comprehensive and Watertown Square Area Plan. It aimed to preserve its historic character while adding modest, relatively affordable multifamily housing.

Project architect, Benjamin Berr, presented the design for the redevelopment, highlighting restoration of the 1830 Greek Revival house as a single-family dwelling, construction of a new three-story building with seven 2 BR units, reduced impervious coverage, increased open space, revised bicycle parking, underground parking, and updated architectural details intended to frame the historic house. He noted that recent revisions included minor roof configuration changes, relocation of bike parking, and replacement of an existing spruce tree with native landscaping.

Board members raised concerns about discrepancies between the plans presented and those in the review packet, citing late and insufficiently disclosed changes to the porch roof, landscaping and tree removal, the late submission of landscape drawings, and the lack of adequate time to review revised materials, with several members suggesting the hearing be continued to allow proper review.

Board members discussed the multi-track approval process; the Planning Board would provide an advisory recommendation to the Zoning Board, the Historic District

Commission retained final authority over exterior design. Additionally, the Affordable Housing Trust would separately review and advise on the affordable housing component. Despite their frustration with late submission deadlines the Board members agreed to proceed by focusing on substantive feedback and public comment.

Chair Buck said she was generally comfortable with the site plan and massing but questioned the historic integrity of the existing house, ultimately accepting that it must remain unchanged due to prior approvals. Her main objection related to the new building's board and batten accent bands, which she founds historically inappropriate and visually busy, recommending flat panels instead so the new building remained a simple backdrop to the historic house.

Other comments from members included issues with the building's corner at Mt Auburn – Summer Street—sparse and oddly proportioned windows, a heavy solid base and inconsistent detailing. They suggested re-designing the Summer Street elevation. They also clarified that a largely blank wall counted as a code-compliant party wall despite the open-air garage below, given its structural integrity.

Member Payson suggested that the new building should respect the historic structure without mimicking it, using similar materials and colors (like flat board siding) to echo the architectural language. He suggested garage security along with a more engaging street facing corner, drawing on examples like Nantucket buildings to show how fronts could be emphasized while sides remained simpler, subtly evoking history.

Member Hammett supported the housing goal but was deeply concerned that the design was inconsistent, awkwardly sited, and failed to appropriately contrast with or respect the historic building, potentially setting a low precedent for future projects.

Member Scott felt that the project fundamentally failed to meet city standards and was inappropriate for the site.

Member Sack saw potential in the corner but thought the design and features (like the porch and bike racks) needed refinement to better utilize the space.

Additional comments from the members emphasized that the project's design lacked contextual sensitivity, site-specificity, and contrast, and that the massing, siting and facade details failed to respect the historic building or the Greek Revival style.

Chair Buck opened the meeting to public comments.

Mary Santoro associated with 3 Summer Street opposed the project saying it did not belong on that corner. It would block sunlight, create a blank wall facing their family home, worsen traffic and safety at a busy intersection, fail to adequately consider the impact on surrounding neighbors.

Mary Sullivan, 93 Mt Auburn St thanked the board and said the project felt fundamentally out of place on this corner, raising concerns about scale, sidewalks, traffic, school children and impacts on the historic district.

Fred Sullivan, 93 Mt Auburn St stated that the project undermined the purpose of the historic district, saying the site was overbuilt, incompatible with surrounding historic homes, and that preserving Watertown's architectural heritage should take precedence over forcing density where it does not fit.

Peter Lee, property owner said the traffic concerns were overstated, noting his current business generated more vehicle activity than the proposed residential use, which would reduce parking and traffic and improve conditions at the corner.

Chair closed the hearing for public testimony

Member Payson summarized key concerns to pass to the Zoning Board focusing on clarity and quality: ensure no unreviewed design changes, improve Summer Street facade treatments (materials, windows, foundation, garage), question the porch, raise broader concerns than the addition's massing, context and overall design quality which do not adequately respect the historic building or this prominent corner.

Board also discussed the option of continuance to allow the petitioner to revise the design and clarified that a voluntary (but limited) design-guidelines review by David Gamble could be pursued.

Motion to continue to Jan 14, 2026 was made by Member Whitney, seconded by Member Cohen. Motion approved unanimously 5-0.

Meeting adjourned 23:48PM

Meeting Minutes-----