

WATERTOWN PLANNING BOARD

DATE: February 11, 2026, PLACE: City Council Chamber TIME: 7:00 PM COMMENCED:7:01 PM

PURPOSE OF MEETING: Public Hearing

MEMBERS PRESENT: Chair Janet Buck; Jason Cohen; Payson Whitney; Abigail Hammett; Sarah Scott.

MEMBERS ABSENT: Rachael Sack.

STAFF PRESENT: Sameena Pirani, Principal Departmental Assistant (in-person); Gideon Schreiber, Director of Planning & Zoning; Will Downie, Senior Planner.

ADMINISTRATIVE BUSINESS

Approval of Minutes:

Payson Whitney motioned to approve Minutes of 1/14/2026 meeting.

Abigail Hammett seconded the motion.

VOTE: 5-0 In Favor (Chair Janet Buck, Jason Cohen, Abigail Hammett, Sarah Scott and Payson Whitney)

Cases

108 California St: Motion to continue to the Planning Board meeting on March 11, 2026, was made by Abigail Hammett, Payson Whitney seconded the motion.

Vote:5-0 In Favor (Chair Janet Buck, Jason Cohen, Abigail Hammett, Sarah Scott and Payson Whitney)

72 Mt Auburn St:

Attorney Terry Morris gave a presentation that highlighted zoning and corner lot challenges, design logic (contrast and transition between old and new), and plans for façade, alignment, parking and circulation.

Following his presentation, Architect Benyamin Ber of design firm Neh-Koo-Dah outlined the building's façade materials and design details, including copper roof caps, concealed rooftop equipment, fiber cement cladding (light and wood-toned), aluminum clad wood windows, brick veneer foundation, and minimal trim for a clean look. Also described were features such as garage door, increased lower-level enclosure for future adjacent development, landscaping with seating at the corner, and bay projections to add visual interest and comply with zoning.

Attorney Morris stated that the new addition was aligned with both the historic building's façade and Summer Street with design revisions (like removing the porch) to improve compatibility and connectivity. Also highlighted was the five-car garage accessed from Summer Street with separated pedestrian/bike access, added security measures and

traffic sensors, concluding that the design preserved visibility and prominence of the historic building from all approaches.

Chair opened discussion to the Board. Abigail Hammett praised the improved design. She asked questions about material finishes, color choices, corner material transitions, rear doors and possible roof deck use. She was particularly concerned about the material transition occurring at an exposed outside corner, saying it felt visually “choppy,” weakened the expression of building volumes, and would create a noticeable seam between two different materials. She suggested keeping one material (likely the wood-look cladding) wrapping the recessed corner, so each volume read more clearly. The petitioner explained they had introduced slight projections to soften transitions, and staff agreed outside-corner transitions were more difficult and visually prominent. The consensus was that refining the transition—preferably moving it away from the most visible outside corner—would improve the design.

Benjamin Ber clarified finishes would be matte, copper with patina, details would be refined (especially corner transitions), rear doors handled with the Historic Commission, and the roof access was for maintenance only.

Jason Cohen’s main concerns were that the building felt overly stark and modernist, with the rear white façade dominating neighboring views and the corner material transitions looking awkward. He suggested that changing the entire back façade to brown and rethinking the white-versus brown strategy would improve the building’s appearance by reducing visual contrast, simplifying outside corners, and making the material transitions feel intentional rather than random.

Payson Whitney appreciated the overall improvements and incorporation of prior feedback, particularly the addition of brick at the base as a nod to historic features. He supported the general design but raised questions about the fiber cement panel patterns, the flat/ventilated area above the garage, and suggested bringing material mock-ups for clarity. He also noted minor zoning documentation issues for review.

Terry Morris asked whether making the entire two-story wall facing Summer St all brown would simplify the material transition on the corner and better align with surrounding elements.

Abigail Hammett supported using consistent materials and colors across building volumes rather than changing them at corners, noting that seeing a real sample of the faux wood would help assess how the facade will look, especially on prominent or blind walls. She agreed that maintaining the same color on a continuous volume avoided visual confusion and kept the design cohesive.

Staff noted that the Historic District Commission had not yet reviewed the current modern design, and any exterior changes must get their approval. The need for coordination between the Zoning Board of Appeal's (as SPGA) and the Historic Commission's consideration of the project was discussed. Staff also cautioned that modern materials, especially new or synthetic ones may not meet historic guidelines, could age poorly, and may be rejected by the Historic District Commission, so any recommendations should allow flexibility for their review. They noted that color was less strictly controlled, but durability, material compatibility and alignment with traditional natural materials were key concerns.

Sarah Scott asked about Affordable Housing Trust's feedback, and safe, clear circulation for pedestrians and cyclists, including trash/recycling access and bike security. Staff responded that the Trust approved payment in lieu. Benjamin Ber also explained the bike/trash routes, with access control details still pending. He also clarified that the new exterior stairs and half flights provided direct, clear access from the historic house and parking/bike areas to both the lower patio and upper outdoor areas, improving circulation for all residents.

Janet Buck praised the new massing and approach of contrasting style while limiting ornamentation but raised a concern that the white panels might have a high gloss, reflective finish typically used in commercial applications. Benjamin Ber confirmed that the intent was non-glossy and they could adjust the specifications if needed.

Jason Cohen expressed concern about the fire separation and building code compliance. He wanted to ensure that the glazing/lobby wall that is close to the existing building meets the required fire rating and separation distances, given that zoning treated the two buildings as one, but code required certain clearances for openings. Benjamin Ber confirmed that they were aware of the requirements and would comply.

In response to Abigail Hammett's questions about panel trim, layout and fasteners, Benjamin Ber confirmed dark trim on all panels, concealed fasteners, and that the panel grid would be visible despite looking flat in the renderings.

Chair opened the meeting to comments from the public. There were no public comments. Staff confirmed no hands raised online.

Abigail Hammett said she was conflicted—while she was okay with the modern, stark design, she would feel more comfortable approving the project if material transitions, panel details, and physical samples were clarified, since those details would strongly affect how the building read on the corner. In response to Payson Whitney's comment that the Board's role was to give recommendations, and the Zoning Board could handle final

decisions on materials, Abigail Hammett said that panel joints and façade details needed careful alignment with windows and consistent panel layout, and that these details should be clearly shown to convey how the materials looked.

Payson Whitney moved for the Planning Board to recommend approval of the 72 Mount Auburn Street project to the Zoning Board of Appeals. The Planning Board also specifically requested that the Zoning Board of Appeals consider the following points in their review:

- Review the materials proposed in the development to ensure they use a matte finish, and that wood material is used to wrap around the southeastern corner of the new structure;
- Review materials samples of the proposed materials and ensure thoughtful joining;
- Ensure the party wall on the western edge of the property use the brown material consistent with the rest of the wall;
- Ensure that the proposed colors of the new structure are associated with volume;
- Review any opportunities to make better use of the doors that serve the current fire escape on the existing structure if the fire escape is removed;
- Ensure protected access for bikes and pedestrians through the pedestrian door on Summer Street; and
- The Planning Board encourages the Zoning Board of Appeals to coordinate with the Historical District Commission regarding this project.

Motion was seconded by Abigail Hammett. Motion was approved 5-1 with Payson Whitney, Abigail Hammett, Janet Buck and Sarah Scott voting in favor, opposed Jason Cohen.

Meeting adjourned 8:24

Meeting Minutes-----