

Memo

To: Richard Brown, AICP
Wellesley Planning Board
From: Ralph Willmer, AICP
CC: Meghan Conlon
Date: April 29, 2003
Re: Wellesley Square Zoning Change Recommendations

After consideration of the issues regarding Wellesley Square and a review of the Wellesley Zoning Bylaw, it is clear that a number of changes to the Business and Business A districts are required to achieve the goals set forth for Wellesley Square, particularly as discussed in the Wellesley Square Action Plan. To that end, this memorandum will make numerous recommendations for how the Zoning Bylaw should be amended, with particular emphasis on the following issues and concerns:

- Create and enhance village center appearance of Wellesley Square;
- Encourage more mixed uses, particularly more housing, to increase pedestrian traffic in the Square; and
- Assess allowed and special permit uses, dimensional standards, and design review.

The proposed revisions will be listed for each relevant section of the Zoning Bylaw. As needed, commentary will be provided to explain the rationale for the suggested changes. After comment from the Planning Board, staff, and the public, a final set of proposed amendment text changes will be submitted. Note that these

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proposals are intended to be applied in the Wellesley Square study area business districts.

Section XI. Business District Uses

- Permit compatible mixed-use – little restriction on combining different categories of use within the same building as long as evidence is presented that there will be no detrimental effects of two different uses being placed in the same building. Typically, the first floor is occupied by an office or retail storefront, with residential units above (rental or ownership). One example of a possible incompatible mix might be a restaurant with residential above, although many communities have such buildings. An alternative would be to allow mixed-use with a special permit, but that creates a disincentive by adding an additional permitting requirement. A less stringent approach would be to require design review instead.
- Prohibit single-family housing in order to encourage more multi-family housing (and a variety of housing choices) and dwelling units in commercial buildings
- Prohibit drive-through services associated with any commercial use
- Reduce the size of retail stores currently allowed by right from 50,000 square feet to 25,000 square feet; if a store is proposed that is greater than 25,000 square feet, it should be allowed only with special permit. Smaller stores can enhance the village feel of the Square.
- Prohibit all automobile-related services, including service stations and automobile repair facilities
- Require a special permit for light manufacturing uses, even if “the major portion of which is to be sold at retail on the premises”. Another option is to prohibit these uses altogether.
- Eliminate the list of special permit uses (Section XI, clause 13)
- Add to the list of permitted uses: personal service establishments including, but not limited to, tailor, barber shop, beauty salon, shoe repair, dressmaking, hair care, laundry, photography studio or similar service uses; professional offices; home occupations; educational and child care facilities, including, but not limited to, studios for dance, music, art, martial arts, and other similar uses

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- Consider allowing a privately developed parking structure with mixed uses (commercial, office and/or housing) on the same parcel

Sections XI. Business District Floor Area Ratio (FAR)

Currently, the FAR standard for the business districts is .30. Essentially, this results in having the entire district be out of compliance with the standard. It is important to revise this standard to reflect, at the least, what is currently the practice in Wellesley Square. Additionally, a correction is required to ensure that future development matches the existing development pattern and that property owners have an incentive to facilitate redevelopment as needed.

Under the current provision, no property owner in the Square can redevelop in a manner that creates a change of use or more compact development on the property. Without a change in the FAR, property owners will not be allowed to achieve the stated goal for mixed uses in the Square.

To that end, it is proposed that the FAR be increased to a maximum of 3.0. This means that there will be a 3:1 ratio between floor area and site coverage. Thus, a two-story or a three-story building can cover the full site, and a four-story building can cover three-quarters the lot.

From a design standard, it is important to try to maximize site coverage in order to bring the buildings up to the sidewalk without significant setbacks. This makes the Square more pedestrian friendly and helps to create a neighborhood where pedestrians have visual and physical access to the stores, offices, and residences.

Section XII. Business District A

The same recommendations apply as stated above for both uses and FAR.

Section XVIA. Site Plan Approval

Unless there are specific problems associated with the site plan approval process and standards, no changes are recommended here. If changes were to be suggested (for example in the thresholds that differentiate major and minor construction projects, and projects of significant impact) they would have to apply for all districts in Wellesley where site plan approval is required. A potentially

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cumbersome alternative is to create different thresholds for the Wellesley Square area.

Section XVIII. Area Regulations

Wellesley is divided into “classes of area regulation districts”. The minimum area requirement is 10,000 square feet. It is noted that in the business inventory for Wellesley Square that there are numerous lots that fall below this threshold that are grandfathered. In fact, there are several smaller than 5,000 square feet. If the minimum lot size is reduced for the Wellesley Square study area, it may provide greater flexibility for potential redevelopment that may involve a change in use or increase in size.

The lot area standard for Business District and Business District A is 25% (paragraph C). In order to be consistent with the discussion on FAR, the standard for the Wellesley Square study area should be significantly increased, perhaps even allowing full site coverage. Again, the current regulation puts all parcels into non-compliance and if applied to future development, it would create a substantial disincentive.

Section XX. Heights of Buildings or Structures

No changes are suggested here. The height limitation serves as another way to ensure compliance with the FAR requirement.

Section XXI. Off-Street Parking

A couple of changes are suggested to ensure that parking requirements in Wellesley Square meet existing and future needs in the most efficient way possible, regardless of whether a parking structure is eventually constructed. In Part D, Subpart 1, there is a requirement that the minimum parking in connection with two or more uses shall be the sum of the requirements for the two uses. It is suggested that this not be an outright requirement, but that there be some flexibility that allows for a reduction based upon the specific uses and the possibility of sharing the parking area.

In general, shared parking should be encouraged wherever possible. There may be situations where two or more uses have different business and parking needs based

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upon their hours of operation. For instance, a restaurant that draws a predominantly dinner clientele can share parking with an adjacent dental office that expects patient visits from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Thus, shared parking should be accommodated with a demonstration that the hours, days, or peak parking demand for the uses are so different that a lower total number of spaces could be provided. One tactic would be to require a special permit in order to allow shared parking. Although it adds an additional layer of review, the developer(s) have much to gain if they decide to pursue this option.

Finally, it may be worthwhile to carefully review your current parking standards to determine whether they need to be updated based either upon development patterns in Wellesley or national standards as revised by methodologies or indices such as the Institute of Traffic Engineers or Urban Land Institute.

Section XXII. Design Review

The Design Guidelines Handbook contains some excellent criteria regarding landscaping, buildings and environment, open space, signs, and heritage. It does not specifically address issues regarding pedestrian access and accommodation of bicycles. Additional criteria should be added to create pedestrian, bicycle, and transit friendly design guidelines to enhance the Square. This creates an environment that encourages access by means other than the automobile, which could have the added advantage of helping with the parking problem.

A number of improvements can be made in the construction of sidewalks, alleys, bike ways or bike lanes, streetscapes, signage, etc. that will make for a friendlier environment in the Square. Traffic calming measures can also be considered.