

BOSTON PRESERVATION ALLIANCE

Board of Directors

Christopher Scoville
Chair

Susan Park
President

Sean Geary
Treasurer

Beatrice Nessen
Secretary

Diana Pisciotta
Vice Chair

Roger Tackeff
Vice Chair

W. Lewis Barlow IV FAIA

William G. Barry

Nicole Benjamin-Ma

Nick Brooks AIA

Valerie Burns

Ross Cameron RIBA

Laura Dziorny

Minxie Fannin

Gill Fishman

Kay Flynn

Leigh Freudenheim

Peter Goedecke

Miguel Gómez-Ibáñez

Carl Jay

Michael LeBlanc AIA

David Nagahiro AIA

Regan Shields Ives AIA

Anthony Ursillo CFA

Peter Vanderwarker

Executive Director

Gregory J. Galer, Ph.D.

June 11, 2018

Mr. Tim Czerwienski
Boston Planning and Development Agency
One City Hall Square
Boston, MA 02201
Via email: tim.czerwienski@boston.gov
Re: Kenmore Square Redevelopment

Dear Mr. Czerwienski,

The Boston Preservation Alliance is Boston's primary, non-profit advocacy organization that protects and promotes the use of historic buildings and landscapes in all of the city's neighborhoods. With 36 Organizational Members, 104 Corporate Members, and a reach of 35,000 friends and supporters we represent a diverse constituency advocating for the thoughtful evolution of the city and celebration of its unique character. We appreciate the opportunity to offer comments on projects that impact the historic character of the city.

The Alliance has been engaged with this site for several years. We are especially concerned about the future of the iconic Citgo sign, adamantly advocating for Landmark status as well as protection of the cherished view corridors to the sign. We have had ongoing discussions with Related Beal as well as Citgo and other Fenway historic property owners on behalf of over 16,500 individuals who signed our online petition supporting protection of the sign.

We have met with Related's team to discuss this proposal and shared with them several of the comments we have summarized below as well as spoken at the recent BCDC meeting to provide some of our feedback. While we are pleased that concerns about viewsheds to the Citgo Sign were taken seriously by Related Beal, and the proposed design does seem to preserve many views to the sign, a more comprehensive study of view impacts is needed to fully understand the effects.

In addition to the sign, we have concerns about the proposal overall:

Loss of Historic, Contextual Fabric

The current proposal calls for the demolition of six buildings in Kenmore Square. With the exception of the midcentury New England School of Photography building, these are Classical Revival buildings each over 100 years old that contribute to the overall character and urban fabric of the square. The corner building at 541 Commonwealth Avenue, built in 1894, is particularly enriching, anchoring the corner and creating a sense of place for nearly 125 years. Since the proposal was made public, we have heard from an array of community members appalled by the suggested demolition of the corner building. With such extensive development occurring in this neighborhood and a drastic change in character, it is important that buildings that establish a sense of place and authenticity to the neighborhood be incorporated into new projects. Otherwise, the square – where millions of people experience the city -- becomes unrecognizable as Boston. Homogenization of neighborhoods like Kenmore Square benefits no one.

The Otis House
141 Cambridge Street
Boston, MA 02114
617.367.2458
bostonpreservation.org

When the Project Notification Form was filed, the Alliance was surprised to find that the buildings at 650-656 were proposed for demolition, to be replaced with a single structure called the Beacon Building, since this had not been part of early conversations. The design team has suggested that their goal for the new building was to marry the architectural lines and elements of the adjoining buildings into a modern expression. While we feel that with additional attention to details the proposed design may successfully accomplish that goal, the existing buildings are already an ideal amalgamation of the historic fabric along the streetscape. We are not convinced that the existing facades could not be retained in a new development, and we would prefer that they were, but will focus our feedback at this time on other aspects of the project.

Regarding the proposed building at 541 Commonwealth Avenue, the Alliance echoes comments provided by the Boston Civic Design Commission- the design does not relate to the character, materiality, or texture of the existing buildings in Kenmore Square. We feel the proponent should give more serious consideration to restoring 541 Commonwealth Avenue and incorporating it into their new construction. Although challenging, incorporating this statement building into the new development would better balance the loss of other historic fabric in this project and throughout the neighborhood and create a particularly unique and dynamic blend of old and new that could become a signature of this project.

For the new components, we encourage the design team to explore materials that can be found in the neighborhood like masonry and copper. Instead of glass curtain wall, which would be more appropriate in the Seaport District or a suburban office park. The design team might consider a modern expression of punched windows or the ornamentation seen on the several Classical Revival buildings in the streetscape. While this building should not mimic historic architecture, it should be in conversation with, rather than alien to, the existing urban fabric.

Recognizing that the Citgo Sign and preserving views to it are a necessary consideration at this site, we believe that a creative, well executed design solution will bring a uniqueness to this site unmatched anywhere in the country. This design challenge presents a tremendous opportunity for distinctiveness that we believe will benefit the desirability of this project. As the design evolves, renderings are needed to evaluate the efficacy of setbacks or other features designed to preserve views to the sign.

Another Possible Solution

In the interest of trying to work towards a long-term, sustainable solution that untangles some of the complexities of the situation, we propose an alternative to the current approach. In this solution, the Citgo sign, an acknowledged Boston icon, would no longer be owned by Citgo but either by the City or a third-party non-profit organization. Citgo would create an endowment fund for its perpetual care and maintenance. The sign would be Landmarked and protected in a way that preserves the many elements that define it.

If all parties were to agree to a solution like this, we propose the following elements in a multi-party arrangement:

1. Citgo donates the sign to a neutral, third party, either the City or a non-profit.
2. Citgo donates funds to form an endowment. These funds would be in lieu of the lease payments to Related, the equivalent of the life of the long-term agreement they are contemplating.
3. Citgo donates to the new sign owner the rights to use their trademarks on the sign in perpetuity.
4. Related is allowed two to three additional floors (we envision perhaps another 30' – view studies required) on their buildings to offset the loss in revenue from the sign lease. Setbacks would be necessary to protect views to the sign and the character of historic buildings.
5. The Citgo Sign and the metal structure below it are raised 30' atop the new floors, maintaining the relationship with the roof but enhancing views to the sign.
6. We work together on a compromise design that is more appropriate for historic Kenmore Square that protects views to the sign while providing Related the revenue they need to make the whole package work.

We look forward to the opportunity to work through such a complex but mutually beneficial re-arrangement of the pieces into a whole that benefits Boston. This complex project requires a creative, experienced team and we are confident that Related Beal, in collaboration with the BPDA, BCDC, and the community will design a superior project for such a unique and historic neighborhood.

Kenmore Square retains the unique character and personality of a distinct Boston neighborhood and one that is frequently visited by those coming to our historic city. It is important that it not become an area dominated by generic architecture that one could find anywhere in the country. We look forward to working with the BPDA and Related Beal to create a dynamic future for Kenmore Square that engages and celebrates its vibrant past.

Sincerely,



Greg Galer
Executive Director

Cc:

Josh Zakim, Boston City Council
Michael Flaherty, Boston City Council
Annisssa Essaibi George, Boston City Council
Ayanna Pressley, Boston City Council
Michelle Wu, Boston City Council
Patrick Sweeney, Related Beal
Drew Yoder, Citgo
Jonathan Greeley, Boston Planning and Development Agency
Rosanne Foley, Boston Landmarks Commission
Lynn Smiledge, Boston Landmarks Commission, Chair