



Town of Natick, Massachusetts
Department of Community and Economic Development
13 East Central Street Natick, Massachusetts 01760

Telephone
(508) 647-6450
www.natickma.org

James Freas, AICP
Director

MEMORANDUM

DATE: March 15, 2021
TO: Planning Board
FROM: James Freas, Director of Community & Economic Development
RE: Zoning Amendment Articles 27 & 28: 26-28 Eliot Street
Meeting Date: March 17, 2021

Eastern Acrobatics, a circus and acrobatics school currently located in Ashland, MA, purchased the property at 26-28 Eliot Street with the intention of converting the historic church located there into a new location for their school. The Building Commissioner determined that the proposed use is a commercial service use, similar in nature to a dance or martial arts school, and not "Dover protected". As such, the school would not be an allowed use in the Residential zoning district currently on the property. The property owner has proposed two different zoning amendment strategies intended to allow the circus school use.

There are a number of reasons to consider supporting the proposed intent of allowing this use at 26-28 Eliot Street. The high ceilings offered by many church buildings make them ideal for the unique needs of a circus/acrobatics school. In contrast, there are inherent challenges in converting a church-style building into a residential use. Coupling these design challenges with the additional costs of restoring an historic building have made reusing this site difficult, as evidenced by the lack of progress on a previously approved special permit for a multi-family reuse project. The nature of the site, located on a primary road and with adequate on-site parking, make the proposed use a potentially viable option.

The article proponent is proposing two approaches to making the circus school an allowed use and either one alone is sufficient to meet that objective. Article 27 would rezone the property into the Commercial II (CII) district. Article 28 would amend the Historic Preservation Bylaw, Section III-J to allow indoor recreation, amusement, performing arts educations and/or live performances in former houses of worship.

Article 27

Rezoning the property at 26-28 Eliot Street from Residential-A to Commercial II has the following considerations:

- Any use now allowed in the Commercial II district would now be allowed on this site.

- Any potential impacts of such uses are mitigated by the fact that this property is in the Aquifer Protection District (thus no gas stations) and the Eliot Street Local Historic District, which requires review by the Historic District Commission of all exterior changes to the property.
- The property across the street is also zoned Commercial II and occupied by a range of professional offices. There is a relatively consistent pattern of Commercial II zoning for medium sized historic properties along this portion of the Eliot Street corridor.
- Long term, Commercial II zoning offers the better option for ensuring the continued productive use of the property, consistent with the preservation of the historic church building.
- In a previous meeting of the Planning Board, the proponent indicated an interest in having an accessory residential use in the building. This objective can be achieved using the existing provisions of the Historic Preservation Bylaw, section III-J, requiring a special permit from the Planning Board.

Article 28

Amending Section III-J: Historic Preservation to allow performing arts and arts education type uses in former houses of worship has the following considerations:

- The approach offers a potentially creative way to promote the preservation of historic religious buildings while also supporting the arts. Such buildings can be challenging to reuse so there is a benefit to expanding the range of available options.
- Staff has not had the opportunity to further study the proposed amendment. Key questions include:
 - How many historic houses of worship are there in Natick to which this proposed amendment might apply?
 - How many of these buildings are subject to residential or other zoning such that the Zoning Bylaw currently prevents their reuse for performing arts and/or education related uses?
 - Are there other standards or requirements that reasonably should apply to this use(s) when allowed through the Historic Preservation Bylaw?