



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
OFFICE OF STRATEGIC PLANNING & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
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Case #: ZBA 2012-28

Date: April 26, 2012

Recommendation: Conditional Approval

PLANNING STAFF REPORT

Site: 30 Bow Street

Applicant Name: Mark Boyes-Watson

Applicant Address: 30 Bow Street, Somerville, MA 02143

Property Owner Name: Mark Boyes-Watson

Property Owner Address: 30 Bow Street, Somerville, MA 02143

Alderman: Thomas F. Taylor, Ward 3

Legal Notice: Owner and Applicant, Mark Boyes-Watson, seeks a Special Permit under SZO §7.11.1.c to create five residential units within the existing structure.

Zoning District/Ward: NB & Arts Overlay / 3

Zoning Approval Sought: Special Permit §7.11.1.c

Date of Application: April 3, 2012

Dates of Public Hearing: Zoning Board of Appeals – **May 2, 2012**

I. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

1. Subject Property: The subject property is currently an office building on a 5,350 square foot lot within Union Square near the corner of Bow and Walnut streets. The existing structure has 1,923 square feet of living space and approximately 15% of the parcel is landscaped. The structure is 2½ stories in height with a gable roof that faces Bow Street. Various additions are visible on the front, south side, and rear elevations. The building is located in a Neighborhood Business District and is also within an Arts Overlay District. Residential buildings are located on either side of the subject property while a mix of commercial and residential buildings are located across the street and within the immediate vicinity.

This c. 1874 dwelling is listed on both the local and National Register of Historic Places as part of the Bow Street Historic District. Historic designation at the local level requires the Applicant to submit an application to the Somerville Historic Preservation Commission and receive a Certificate



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before any work commences. National Register listing, in this instance, identifies the property as worthy of preservation according Federal government standards. The building retains a high degree of integrity due to the architectural design, including the later additions which create a rich and more sophisticated Georgian Revival style façade, workmanship, and association with the later development of the eastern portion of Union Square.

No prior zoning relief has been given to the subject property. The Applicant purchased the property in late 2000 as a primarily residential building and converted the use of the building by-right into office space for his architectural firm in 2001. Changes to the subject property at that time included the installation of a gravel parking area at the rear of the building, a reconfigured window head on the front façade bay, and the replacement of multiple deteriorated windows. These changes were given a conditional Certificate of Appropriateness by the SHPC.

2. Proposal: The Applicant proposes to change the use of the building back to residential to create five studio apartments. Converting the building into five studio units will minimally affect the exterior of the structure and will not create any additional square footage. Exterior changes include the installation of a new plumbing stack, five new A/C compressor units, and a red fire beacon. The new plumbing stack for Units 2, 3, and 5 will be located on the eastern slope of the rear gable and out of public view. The five new A/C compressor units will be located behind the rear elevation and behind the enclosed porch, both of which are out of public view. Although the location of the fire beacon has not yet been determined, the final location, which will need to be visible from Bow Street, will be reviewed by Historic Staff prior to installation.

The Applicant's plan to reconfigure the interior of the building will create five studio units that are each approximately 385 square feet. Three units will be located on the first floor while two more units will be located on the second floor. The front entry will provide access for two of the first floor units as well as both of the second floor units. The rear unit of the first floor will access the building from the rear deck.



Left: 30 Bow Street, front and left side elevations

Right: 30 Bow Street, front and right side elevations

3. Nature of Application: The Applicant proposes to change the use of the building to residential and create five studio apartments. The Neighborhood Business District allows for this change in use; however, only up to three units are allowed by-right. Therefore, under SZO §7.11.1.c a Special Permit is required for the Applicant to establish more than three residential units, in this case five, at the property.

Currently, five parking spaces are located on site. SZO §9.5.1.a explains that one space per studio unit is required. Therefore, the subject property would have the minimum number of spaces necessary, as required by the SZO for this proposal.

4. Surrounding Neighborhood: The subject property is located in a Neighborhood Business district within the larger Union Square neighborhood. A majority of the surrounding properties consist of mixed use buildings that vary in size and architectural style. The immediate area along Bow Street has a moderate level of density as many buildings are between two and three stories in height. The subject property and the houses abutting on either side are historically known as “Doctors Row.” These buildings are also part of a larger Bow Street Local Historic District and a National Register District.

5. Impacts of Proposal: The proposal to modify the use of the building to create five efficiency dwelling units will not be detrimental to the abutters or the surrounding neighborhood. The interior of the building was largely rehabilitated already in 2001 when the Applicant purchased the building and turned it into office space. Converting the use back to residential will retain the character of the existing Bow Street neighborhood. The project will meet the off-street parking requirements as specified in the SZO and therefore there will be minimal impacts, if any, to the on-street parking situation in the greater Union Square neighborhood. Similarly, the traffic impacts on the surrounding area will be minimal as the specific times of vehicles traveling to and from the property will remain similar to those of the previous office use.

Staff had initial concerns about the size and number of units, as well as the loss of the unique office space that contributes to the mixed-use nature of this stretch of Bow Street., and remain sensitive to this issue.

But, there is also a benefit to be gained from adding a market segment of housing that is lacking in Union Square. Areas around transit stations are often missing a market segment of small single-person households that can benefit from being located in a mixed-use area. This location would benefit from high-quality small spaces that work for single people seeking a unique living experience in an urban setting. It offers an alternative to typical apartment arrangements that require young professionals to share space with roommates in order to live in urban settings. This product is different than the small studio housing at lower income levels that will often degrade a property and a neighborhood. Therefore, while sensitive to the issues of small-sized housing units and concerned about the loss of office space, staff feels that, on balance, there is a benefit to this proposal.

6. Green Building Practices: The Applicant has not specified any green building practices that will be used.

7. Comments:

Fire Prevention: Has been contacted but has not yet provided comments.

Ward Alderman: Aldermen Taylor has been contacted but has not yet provided comments.

Historic Preservation: Since the subject property is designated historic at the local level, the Applicant has already begun the review process for the Somerville Historic Preservation Commission (SHPC). Due to the nature of the application and the purview of the SHPC, the Applicant will receive a Certificate of Non-Applicability for the exterior changes not visible from a public right-of-way and a Certificate of Hardship for the installation of a fire beacon that is required by code to be visible from Bow Street.

Wiring Inspector: Indicated in an email to Staff dated April 12, 2012, that his records indicate there is only one electrical meter at 30 Bow Street. As the units are small, any upgrade to the electrical service does not appear to require service larger than what would be allowed before a transformer would be required.

II. FINDINGS FOR SPECIAL PERMIT (SZO §7.11.1.c):

In order to grant a Special Permit, the SPGA must make certain findings and determinations as outlined in §5.1.4 of the SZO. This section of the report goes through §5.1.4 in detail.

1. Information Supplied: The Staff finds that the information provided by the Applicant conforms to the requirements of §5.1.2 of the SZO and allows for a comprehensive analysis of the project with respect to the required Special Permits.

2. Compliance with Standards: The Applicant must comply "with such criteria or standards as may be set forth in this Ordinance which refer to the granting of the requested special permit."

In considering a Special Permit under §7.11.1.c of the SZO, Staff finds that the use proposed would not be substantially more detrimental to the neighborhood than the existing use. As the structure was originally a single-family dwelling, rehabilitating the building into five efficiency apartments will return the structure back to its original residential use, which is consistent with this portion of Bow Street.

As the property provides all required on-site parking, the availability of on-street parking will remain the same. The use of on-site parking will likely change from being utilized during the day to being utilized overnight; however, Union Square is well connected to public transportation and provides numerous amenities so there is incentive for residents of the units to not own a vehicle.

3. Consistency with Purposes: The Applicant has to ensure that the project "is consistent with (1) the general purposes of this Ordinance as set forth in Article 1, and (2) the purposes, provisions, and specific objectives applicable to the requested special permit which may be set forth elsewhere in this Ordinance, such as, but not limited to, those purposes at the beginning of the various Articles."

The proposal is consistent with the general purposes of the Ordinance as set forth under §1.2, which includes, but is not limited to promoting "the health, safety, and welfare of the inhabitants of the City of Somerville; to provide for and maintain the uniquely integrated structure of uses in the City; to secure safety from fire, panic and other dangers; to provide adequate light and air; to prevent the overcrowding of land; to avoid undue concentration of population; to conserve the value of land and buildings; to preserve the historical and architectural resources of the City; to encourage the most appropriate use of land throughout the City; to encourage housing for persons of all income levels; and to preserve and increase the amenities of the municipality."

The proposal is also consistent with the purpose of the district §6.1.4.NB (Neighborhood Business), which is, "To establish and preserve areas for small-scale retail stores, services and offices which are located in close proximity to residential areas and which do not have undesirable impacts on the surrounding neighborhoods." While not maintaining an office use in this site, it provides residential use in close proximity that will benefit from this mixed-use environment, and will not have undesirable impacts on surrounding neighbors.

The subject property is also located within an Arts Overlay District, but since the requested change in use is not related to the creation or maintenance of artist live/work space, there is no impact of this overlay district on the subject parcel.

4. Site and Area Compatibility: The Applicant has to ensure that the project "(i)s designed in a manner that is compatible with the characteristics of the built and unbuilt surrounding area, including land uses."

The change in use of the property is compatible with the built and unbuilt surrounding area. The creation of five efficiency units will increase the density of this portion of Bow Street and retain the character of the streetscape. Although the units do not vary in size and are less than 400 square feet, rental units of this size are not common in Somerville and would allow residents an affordable option to live alone. Units of this size also incentivize single occupants and that these occupants socialize beyond the property, which will keep noise to a minimum.

5. Vehicular and Pedestrian Circulation: The circulation patterns for motor vehicles and pedestrians which would result from the use will not result in conditions that create traffic congestion or the potential for traffic accidents on the site or in the surrounding area. On-site parking is accessible through the driveway located on the left side of the subject parcel. Five parking spots are located at the rear of the building, perpendicular to the driveway.

III. RECOMMENDATION

Special Permit under §7.11.1.c

Based on the materials submitted by the Applicant, the above findings and subject to the following conditions, the Planning Staff recommends **CONDITIONAL APPROVAL** of the requested **SPECIAL PERMIT**.

The recommendation is based upon a technical analysis by Planning Staff of the application material based upon the required findings of the Somerville Zoning Ordinance, and is based only upon information submitted prior to the public hearing. This report may be revised or updated with new recommendations, findings and/or conditions based upon additional information provided to the Planning Staff during the public hearing process.

#	Condition	Timeframe for Compliance	Verified (initial)	Notes										
1	<p>Approval is to create five residential units under SZO §7.11.1.c within the existing structure. This approval is based upon the following application materials and the plans submitted by the Applicant:</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Date (Stamp Date)</th> <th>Submission</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>(April 3, 2012)</td> <td>Initial application submitted to the City Clerk's Office</td> </tr> <tr> <td>April 2, 2012 (April 11, 2012)</td> <td>Plot plan submitted to OSPCD</td> </tr> <tr> <td>April 9, 2012 (April 12, 2012)</td> <td>Site plans submitted to OSPCD (A101, A201, A301, & A401)</td> </tr> <tr> <td>May 2, 2012</td> <td>Information submitted regarding unit design</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>Any changes to the approved site plan or use that is not <i>de minimis</i> must receive SPGA approval.</p>	Date (Stamp Date)	Submission	(April 3, 2012)	Initial application submitted to the City Clerk's Office	April 2, 2012 (April 11, 2012)	Plot plan submitted to OSPCD	April 9, 2012 (April 12, 2012)	Site plans submitted to OSPCD (A101, A201, A301, & A401)	May 2, 2012	Information submitted regarding unit design	BP/CO	ISD/PIng.	
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2	The Applicant or Owner shall meet the Fire Prevention Bureau's requirements. The applicant shall not be authorized to alter exterior site and landscape design to meet these requirements without approval from Planning Staff.	CO	FP											
3	The applicant shall not convert the use of this building to any use under Section 7.11.3 of the SZO, and shall produce a covenant agreeing to this condition if required by Planning Staff.	Perpetual	ISD/PIng.											
4	The Applicant shall contact Planning Staff at least five working days in advance of a request for a final inspection by Inspectional Services to ensure the proposal was constructed in accordance with the plans and information submitted and the conditions attached to this approval.	Final Sign Off	PIng.											

