

CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
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OFFICE OF STRATEGIC PLANNING AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT



GEORGE J. PROAKIS, AICP
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

LUISA OLIVEIRA
DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC SPACE & URBAN FORESTRY

MEMORANDUM

To: Sara Lewis, Director of Planning and Zoning
From: Division of Public Space & Urban Forestry (PSUF)
CC:
Date: May 4, 2020
RE: Edge Assembly Civic Space MSPS

Background

The development team for Edge Assembly submitted their Master Plan Special Permit (MPSP) application for review to the Division of Public Space and Urban Forestry. Their submitted MPSP includes dedicating approximately 25% of the Project Site as publicly accessible open space, as well as designated off-site improvements to fulfill the 25% civic space requirement mandated by the Assembly Square Masterplan Development (ASMD). The proposed Civic Space, the Kensington Plaza, will include a “gateway entrance,” hardscape materials, trees, plantings, seating, signage, and lighting. The proposal will integrate the Public Storage seating area with the new Kensington Plaza to read as one continuous Civic Space. The Proponent is prepared to maintain the on and offsite Civic Space with the City granting an easement that dedicates the new Civic Space to the public in perpetuity, in return, for the allowance of the adjacent Kensington Avenue to be decommissioned and count towards the required quantity of Civic Space. The MPSP also includes a commitment to improve the streetscape along Middlesex Avenue, McGrath Highway to include generous pedestrian and street furnishing zones that include new street trees and planters to improve the pedestrian experience.

The overall landscape approach will include strategies to create a more comfortable place during extreme climate using native, drought-resistant landscaping and shade trees in the Kensington Plaza, offsite civic space, and streetscapes, as well as stormwater retention systems in the landscaped areas.

As reported in Appendix F of the MPSP submittal the Civic Space Study (CSS), the Proponent has identified that the area is supported by eight local parks within the ½ mile walkshed which range in park amenity types such as playgrounds, passive recreation and athletic recreation. Specifically in the Assembly Square neighborhood the proponent identified a lack of neighborhood parks and would like to propose the Kensington Plaza as Through Block Plaza and further develop the program to better serve the neighborhood needs through advanced design and programming.





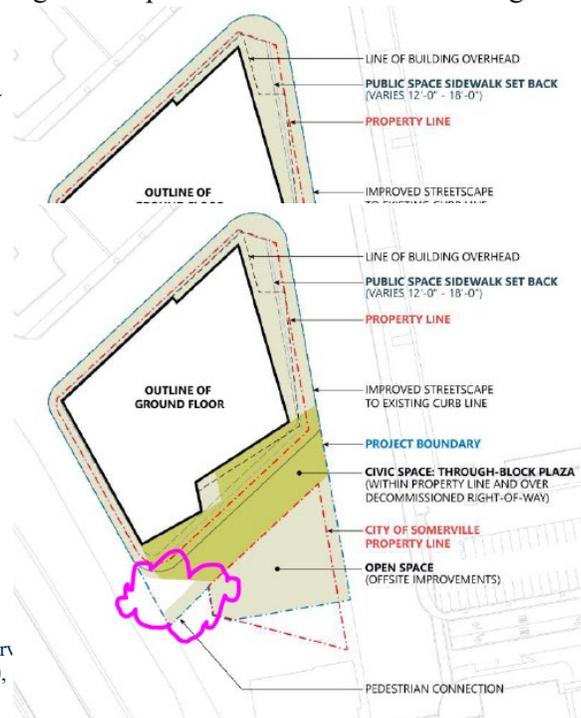
PSUF Comments

The Division of Public Space and Urban Forestry are supportive of the Proponents commitment to deliver a new public space that better serves the community and is compliant with the Landscaping and Civic Space requirements from the new Somerville Zoning Code. The PSUF team looks forward to further developing the design and programming with the Edge team as they prepare their Site Plan Permit submittal.

As identified in the Civic Space Assessment, there is a lack of connectivity to outdoor amenities within the Assembly Square Neighborhood at the neighborhood scale. Even though there are many identified parks and open spaces within a half mile walk, many of these open spaces are only accessible by crossing large vehicular corridors which create open space barriers, preventing easy access for the Assembly Neighborhood. With this in mind, we recognize the Proponents identification of this space as a “Through Block Plaza”, however we also see merit in some of the permitted Civic uses for Pocket Parks such as play and discovery elements for children. Discussions about programming were begun at a February 13 meeting with follow up of supportive images sent to the Edge team by Director Oliveira. The Edge team should continue to work with PSUF to develop program elements as part of their Site Plan approval.

As stated several times within the MSPS, the space is a gateway between the East Somerville and Assembly Square Neighborhoods. There are many vulnerable users that walk and use non-vehicular modes of transportation which may sometimes be in conflict with each other. A family with children may be at risk of being hit by a fast moving bicycle. During the Site Plan development the PSUF team would like the Edge team to respond to concerns about pedestrian and bike conflicts on the shared paths that have been identified from the Kensington Connector path under I-93 to create a safe travel way for all, not a dedicated bike lane.

Lastly, the PSUF team is supportive of the Edge development pledging to take on Civic Space maintenance in perpetuity and have concerns about an unclaimed triangle of off site open space, that left unmaintained will detract from the gateway concept and become unruly, unkempt, and not plowed in winter if not adopted by the Edge development. We recommend the Edge development include this off site space in their proposed development. Please see location bubbled in magenta below:





Finally, during Site Plan Review, the Edge team should meet regularly with PSUF to work collaboratively on a design that meets both City quality standards and resident needs. As plans develop, they should be submitted to PSUF for a departmental review at every step and documented, and responded to, in a PSUF Review Form.

Sincerely,

Luisa Oliveira, ASLA

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