



City of Somerville

# PLANNING BOARD

City Hall 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, 93 Highland Avenue, Somerville MA 02143

**TO:** Planning Board  
**FROM:** Planning, Preservation & Zoning Staff  
**RE:** 495 Columbia Street (P&Z 21-009)  
**POSTED:** January 14, 2022

**RECOMMENDATION:**     **Approve with Conditions (SPA)**  
                                  **Approve (In-lieu Civic Space payment contribution SP)**  
                                  **Approve (Contributing lot SP)**

Staff memos are used to communicate background information, analysis, responses to public comments, review of statutory requirements and other information from the Planning & Zoning staff to the Review Board members.

This memo summarizes the development review application submitted for 495 Columbia Street, identifies any additional discretionary or administrative development review that is required by the Somerville Zoning Ordinance (SZO), and provides related analysis or feedback as necessary. The application was deemed complete on June 22, 2021, with application amendment documents deemed complete on November 15, 2021, and is scheduled for a public hearing on January 20, 2022. Any Staff recommended findings, conditions, and decisions in this memo are based on the information available to date prior to any public comment at the scheduled public hearing.

## LEGAL NOTICE

Boynton Gateway LLC proposes to develop a 9-story LEED Platinum lab building in the High Rise (HR) zoning district which requires Site Plan Approval and two (2) Special Permits.

## SUMMARY OF PROPOSAL

Boynton Gateway LLC is proposing to construct a 9-story, approximately 240 foot wide, LEED Platinum lab building that will be approximately 313,500 gross square feet. The building will have 170 below-grade parking spaces, 90 interior long-term secured bicycle parking spaces, and approximately 17 short-term bicycle parking spaces. The proposed landscape design will earn a compliant Green Score of 0.356, above the district minimum of 0.20.

## ADDITIONAL REVIEW NECESSARY

495 Columbia Street is located in the High Rise (HR) zoning district in the Boynton Yards Sub-area Master Planned Development overlay district and the Boynton Yards neighborhood represented by Ward 2 Councilor J.T. Scott. The proposed lab building

requires Site Plan Approval, and the applicant is seeking a Special Permit for a Contributing Lot and a Special Permit for a Civic Space In-Lieu Payment. Site Plan Approval is the administrative review and approval of conforming developments and is intended to address any potential development impacts, if necessary. The Planning Board is the decision-making authority for all (non-Variance) discretionary or administrative permits required by the HR zoning district.

## **NEIGHBORHOOD MEETINGS**

An initial neighborhood meeting was hosted by Ward Councilor J.T. Scott and the development team on February 2, 2021, via a web meeting platform. A second neighborhood meeting was hosted by Ward Councilor J.T. Scott and the development team on May 13, 2021, via a web meeting platform.

## **DESIGN REVIEW**

The proposal was reviewed by the Somerville Urban Design Commission via the GoToWebinar meeting platform on March 13 and 23, 2021, and April, 13 2021. The Commission provided its official recommendation on May 23, 2021. The Commission reviewed an updated proposal on October 12, 2021 via GoToWebinar and provided an updated recommendation which was issued on November 1, 2021.

## **BACKGROUND**

The Applicant originally submitted an application for site plan approval of a 12-story lab building in June 2021. The application was deemed complete by staff on June 22, 2021. In conjunction with the proposed development at 495 Columbia St, the Applicant also applied, a 5-story Commercial building at 64 Webster Avenue. The original proposal had the buildings operating as “one” building from the interior but articulated to read as two buildings from the exterior.

Shortly after submitting applications for both projects, the Applicant entered into voluntary negotiations with abutting neighbors at 80 Webster Avenue over the proposal and its impacts on adjoining properties. A sequence of discussions occurred with the Applicant, 80 Webster, and City Officials. After a series of negotiations, a compromise design solution was reached resulting in a new 9-story building with massing that covered the entirety of the Applicant’s properties (495 Columbia St and 64 Webster Ave.).

Due to design changes, several new steps needed to be undertaken for this project to move through the Site Plan Approval process. The Chair of the Planning Board requested that the project go in front of the Urban Design Commission (UDC) again to present the updated building massing. In addition, it was requested that the Commission review the façade design to ensure that it was consistent with the previously-issued UDC recommendation. Staff then asked the Applicant to submit a

new application reflecting the updated proposal. This new application which was deemed complete on November 15, 2021.

In order for the new proposal to be compliant with the SZO, several zoning amendments were enacted including:

- map change amendment to rezone 64 Webster from Mid-Rise 5 to High Rise,
- new alternative compliance standards for the Boynton Yards sub-area Master Planned Development (MPD) overlay district,
- new contextual design standards.

The zoning amendments were adopted by the City Council on November 29, 2021, and December 9, 2021.

## **ANALYSIS**

Development in the Boynton Yards MPD overlay district may occur via two permitting routes: multiple lots may be developed together by first receiving a Master Plan Special Permit followed by site-specific reviews for each component identified in the master plan, or specific lots may be developed alone subject to a 'contributing lot' special permit. The latter is the permitting route for this proposal. Regardless of which permitting path is used, the zoning ordinance requires all development within the Boynton Yards MPD overlay district to be consistent with the Union Square Neighborhood Plan and the Boynton Yards Urban Design Framework.

The project is consistent with Union Square Neighborhood Plan which envisions Boynton Yards becoming an urban employment center and anticipates the neighborhood absorbing a large percentage of new development in Somerville.

The proposed project will include approximately 313,500 SF of floor area for office, research and development/lab-enabled uses, as well as tenant retail space. The project anticipates creating approximately 1,000 new jobs relating to office/R&D/lab, life sciences, retail, and parking uses. Approximately 15,675 SF of the floor area will be reserved for arts/creative enterprise uses as required by the SZO. The project is also consistent with the vision of the Boynton yards Urban Design Framework which "envisions new development in the district to be primarily high-rise commercial buildings that bring a mix of diverse, high-quality jobs to the area."

The primary concerns raised at the two neighborhood meetings were from residents at the abutting property, 80 Webster Ave. Many of the concerns raised by 80 Webster were resolved during voluntary negotiations between the Applicant and representatives of 80 Webster. Collaboration resulted in a design solution that reduced overall building square footage by approximately ten (10) percent and reduced the shadow impact on 80 Webster. Changes that were made during the negotiation process included the following:

- Reallocating the building height formerly associated with the 12-story tower across the project site so that the project would be constructed as one building reaching a maximum height of nine (9) stories.

- Further increase the rear setback between the project and 80 Webster by six (6) feet.

Following the negotiation process and pause in the original SPA permitting timeline, the City Council adopted several zoning amendments that affected the project. The following adopted amendments made the compromise design solution compliant with the SZO:

- Map change amendment for 64 Webster Ave property from Mid-Rise 5 to High Rise
- Alternative compliance standards for the Boynton Yards MPD overlay district
- Contextual design standards for the Boynton Yards MPD overlay district

The map change from MR5 to HR was necessary in order to allow for a 9-story massing across the whole extent of the Applicant's properties. The 9-story massing also helped alleviate some of the negative shadows casted by the original 12-story massing on abutting properties.

The purpose of the new contextual design standards in the Boynton Yards MPD overlay district is to provide an increased rear setback between new construction neighboring buildings with a noncompliant rear setback by allowing the new construction to decrease the required front sidewalk width and reduce certain floor space requirements. These zoning standards are applicable to the proposed project because it is located within the High-Rise district and abuts another lot which has a principle building that is noncompliant to the required minimum rear setback. In addition, now that the floor plate is restricted, the requirements for Arts & Creative Enterprise use has been reduced to five (5) percent (down from ten (10) percent) of the total non-residential gross floor area of the building.

As required for a complete application, the Applicant submitted a wind study with their previous application that analyzed the impacts of this proposal on pedestrian-level wind speeds around the building. That initial study showed that under "full build" conditions the proposal would have created "uncomfortable" wind conditions at nineteen (19) points around the building. Mitigation should occur at locations where wind velocities exceed acceptable wind levels for various pedestrian activities.

The Applicant provided an updated memo from their wind consultant (RWDI) that discusses any change in wind patterns due to the building design revisions. In that memo dated October 27, 2021, RWDI concluded that the proposed building changes will significantly change the findings and recommendations made in the original wind study report. The consultant recommended the Applicant conduct another wind tunnel test to validate the findings and refine mitigation solutions. In their updated application, the applicant states that they plan on conducting further wind tunnel testing as the project advances and will explore incorporating mitigation elements to address uncomfortable pedestrian conditions. Staff has recommended a condition that the Applicant conduct another wind tunnel test and incorporate any mitigation elements that are recommended from that updated report into the building design.

Due to the size of the building, this proposal is required to meet LEED Platinum certification. The proposed lab building is seeking to pursue 85 LEED credits which, if achieved, puts it over the minimum 80 required credits to achieve LEED Platinum certification. The project aims to achieve an estimated 31.6 percent reduction in stationary source greenhouse gas emissions by reducing overall energy consumption by about 34 percent below an ASHRAE 90.1-2013 baseline. The project proposes to incorporate several energy conservation measures and energy-efficient design strategies including reduced air filtration, high-efficiency glycol heat recovery loop, high efficiency chilled water plan, high efficiency boilers, light and Smart Stack Exhaust monitor and control system on exhaust air handling units. To help address climate change-related impacts, the project includes the integration of new trees and drought resistant plantings, and a reduction of the site's overall impervious surface area from its existing conditions.

After review of all submitted sustainability documentation, Staff have noted several items that should be given more attention and exploration. Given the high loads of the proposed lab building and limited capacity for renewables, electrification should be given more consideration. Given that only 40 percent of the space will be designated as lab related uses, Staff have recommended a condition that, as part of stage 2 sustainability materials, a document explaining why there was an exclusion of electrification technologies must be submitted to the Office of Sustainability and Environment (OSE). The submitted pilot low load building energy calculator results suggest that the proposed lab building does not fully align with Somerville's carbon neutral goals. Staff have also recommended as a condition that as part of stage 2 sustainability materials, the Applicant must provide more details on how this project will align with Somerville's carbon natural goals going forward.

In response to feedback received from the community and City Officials, the project proposes 180 below-grade parking spaces, reduced from the 200 spaces originally proposed. The proposed parking results in an average parking ratio of 0.53 spaces per 1,000 SF, an important measure to reduce additional vehicle trips and other associated impacts. The proposed parking ratio is one of the lowest parking ratios seen with new development in the city and well below the parking maximums of the SZO.

Based on the project scale and impacts, district-wide multi-modal transportation goals, and existing deficiencies in adjacent bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure, Staff recommend conditioning that a curb-separated bicycle facility be incorporated along both the Webster Ave and Columbia St frontages (East and West block) of the project site and that this be interconnected with existing and planned bicycle facilities, as well as associated pedestrian infrastructure improvements to the streetscape along those frontages.

In order to ensure that the long-term secured bike room is safely accessible to all, Staff have recommended a condition that the bike room be constructed at grade. Further, to help achieve district-wide public realm streetscape standards, Staff have also

recommended a condition that final streetscape standards be approved by relevant City Departments.

## **CONSIDERATIONS & FINDINGS**

The Planning Board is required by the Somerville Zoning Ordinance to deliberate each of the following considerations at the public hearing. *The Board must discuss and draw conclusions for each consideration detailed below but may make additional findings beyond this minimum statutory requirement.*

### Site Plan Approval + Special Permit Considerations

1. The comprehensive plan and existing policy plans and standards established by the City.
2. The intent of the zoning district where the property is located.
3. Mitigation proposed to alleviate any impacts attributable to the proposed development.

### Contributing Lot Special Permit Considerations

4. Consistency with the approved Urban Design Framework for the sub-area where the subject property is located.

### Civic Space In-lieu payment contribution Special Permit Considerations

5. If receipt of an in-lieu payment is advantageous to the City in creating or preserving civic space as compared to the civic space that would have been otherwise provided.

Information relative to the above considerations is provided below:

### **Site Plan Approval + Special Permit Considerations**

1. *The comprehensive plan and existing policy plans and standards established by the City.*

Staff finds that the proposal will help to achieve the following from SomerVision, the comprehensive Master Plan of the City of Somerville:

- Make Somerville a regional employment center with a mix of diverse and high-quality jobs.
- Support a business-friendly environment to attract and retain a diverse mix of businesses that can start here, grow here and stay here.
- Invest in the talents, skills, and education of people to support growth and provide opportunities to residents of all social and economic levels.
- Link our corridors, squares, and growth districts to support future development and economic activity.
- Transform key opportunity areas [], Boynton Yards and [] portion of Union Square into dynamic, mixed-use, and transit-oriented districts that serve as economic engines to compliment the neighborhoods of Somerville.
- Increase the recognition of Somerville as a center of arts and creativity.
- Expand bike and pedestrian use by transforming existing infrastructure with accommodations for all bicyclists and pedestrians, resulting in safe, accessible, and well-connected networks.

- Invest in the growth of a resilient economic base that is centered around transit, generates a wide variety of job opportunities, creates an active daytime population, supports independent local businesses, and secures fiscal self-sufficiency.

2. *The intent of the zoning district where the property is located.*

Staff finds that the proposal is consistent with the intent of the HR zoning district which is, in part, “[t]o accommodate the development of areas appropriate for an intense mix of multi-story multi-unit, mixed-use, and commercial buildings; neighborhood-, community-, and regional-serving uses; and a wide variety of employment opportunities.”

Staff finds that the proposal is also consistent with the intent of the Boynton Yards overlay district which, is in, part, “[t]o permit taller and denser development than would otherwise be permitted in the HR district; To require a minimum percentage of developed floor space to be set aside for occupancy by non-residential principal uses; and to constrain the supply of motor vehicle parking spaces to encourage the use of public transit, bicycles, and walking in lieu of driving.”

3. *Mitigation proposed to alleviate any impacts attributable to the proposed development.*

Staff finds that the proposal includes several design features in response to community feedback received at neighborhood meetings as well as multiple negotiations with direct abutters on the massing of the proposed lab building. As conditioned, the proposal is not anticipated to have any negative impacts.

### **Contributing Lot Special Permit Considerations**

4. *Consistency with the approved Urban Design Framework for the sub-area where the subject property is located.*

Staff finds that this project is consistent with the approved Boynton Yards Urban Design Framework.

### **Civic Space In-lieu payment contribution Special Permit Considerations**

5. *If receipt of an in-lieu payment is advantageous to the City in creating or preserving civic space as compared to the civic space that would have been otherwise provided.*

Staff finds that a receipt of an in-lieu payment will be more advantageous for the City’s open space goals than creating a civic space on site. Staff find that the lot where the proposed building is located is not adequately sized for a civic space.

## PERMIT CONDITIONS

Should the Board approve the *required Site Plan Approval for the 9-story LEED Platinum lab building*, Planning, Preservation & Zoning Staff recommends the following conditions:

### Permit Validity

- This Decision must be recorded with the Middlesex South Registry of Deeds.
- This Decision is not valid unless a land plat is approved to establish the 495 Columbia Street lot and recorded with the Middlesex South Registry of Deeds.
- This Decision does not authorize the removal of any public shade trees or private trees, which is subject to the Tree Preservation Ordinance (Chapter 12, Article VI) of the Somerville Code of Ordinances.

### Public Record

- Physical copies of all development review submittal materials, as permitted by the Planning Board, must be submitted to the Planning & Zoning Division for the public record.
- A copy of the recorded Decision stamped by the Middlesex South Registry of Deeds must be submitted to the Planning & Zoning Division for the public record.

### Construction Documents

- Construction documents must be substantially equivalent to the approved plans and other materials submitted for development review.
- Material specifications from suppliers must be submitted to confirm fenestration glazing is compliant with the VLT and VLR ratings required by the Somerville Zoning Ordinance.
- An outdoor lighting plan and supplier cut sheet specifications of chosen lighting fixtures must be submitted to confirm compliance with Section 10.7 Outdoor Lighting of the Somerville Zoning Ordinance. The site photometric plan must include a keyed site plan identifying the location of all luminaires; total site lumen limit table (calculations from the SZO); lighting fixture schedule indicating the fixture type, description, lamp type, lumens, color temperature, color rendering index, BUG rating, mounting height, and wattage of all luminaires; and notation of any timing devices used to control the hours set for illumination.
- A new wind study with findings and recommendations must be submitted to the Director of Planning, Preservation, and Zoning prior to applying for a Building Permit. Any locations determined to have wind velocities exceeding acceptable levels for the intended pedestrian activities at that location must be mitigated to every extent practicable. Any changes to the approved building design must be submitted to the Director of Planning as a plan revision.

### Transportation Mitigation

- To mitigate transportation impacts, a curb separated bicycle facility must be incorporated along both the Webster Ave and Columbia St frontages and must be interconnected with existing and planned bicycle facilities in the Boynton

Yards subarea district. Final design must be approved by relevant City Departments.

#### Site & Building Design

- Utility meters are not permitted on any façade or within the frontage area of the lot.
- Frontage area provided for a widened sidewalk along Somerville Ave must be designed and paved to properly correspond with any sidewalk improvements approved within the public right-of-way.
- A public right-of-way or pedestrian access easement must be provided in perpetuity by a covenant or other deed restriction for the full area of the sidewalk provided within the frontage area of the lot. Final easement language must be approved by the City Solicitor.
- Any revisions to the approved design of the frontage area provided for a widened sidewalk must be approved by relevant City Departments.
- Bike room must be constructed at grade and final design must be approved by the Mobility Director prior to applying for a Building Permit.

#### Sustainability

- All Stage 2 documentation required by the LEED Certifiability Requirements must be submitted to the Office of Sustainability & Environment and must include the following:
  - A detailed document outlining why the use of electrification technologies were excluded.
  - A detailed document explaining how the proposed lab building will align with the City of Somerville's Carbon Neutral goals.
- All Stage 3 documentation required by the Office of Sustainability & Environment's LEED Certifiability Requirements must be submitted to the Office of Sustainability & Environment.

#### Use

- The underground structured parking must be operated as a Commercial Parking facility principal use.
- The underground structured parking must have a parking access and revenue control system to manage vehicular access and collect parking revenues from patrons.

#### Parking

- The initial operations plan for the Commercial Parking facility identifying, at least, the type and pricing of various passes, rates, and fees must be submitted to the Director of Mobility.
- A pedestrian warning system must be provided for the vehicular entrance to the underground structured parking and loading docks to address potential conflicts between pedestrians, cyclists, and motor vehicles. Final design must be approved by the Director of Mobility and the City Engineer.

- A sign must be provided near the vehicular entrance to the underground parking structured parking that identifies, at minimum, the number of spaces available in real time.
- An annual report, including documentation of any changes to the layout plan or operations plan of the parking facility, must be submitted to the Mobility Division to validate continued compliance with the Somerville Zoning Ordinance, this Decision, and the Director of Mobility's standards for monitoring and annual reporting.

#### Mobility

- The property owner and applicable future tenants shall comply with the Mobility Management Plan submitted February 2021, as approved and conditioned by the Director of Mobility on April 26, 2021.

#### Conditions

- A written narrative or descriptive checklist identifying the completion or compliance with permit conditions must be to the Inspectional Services Department at least ten (10) working days in advance of a request for a final inspection.

The Planning, Preservation & Zoning Staff does not recommend any additional conditions related to the requested *Special Permit for Civic Space In-lieu payment contribution*.

The Planning, Preservation & Zoning Staff does not recommend any additional conditions related to the requested *Special Permit for a Contributing Lot*.