



Joseph A. Curtatone
Mayor

George J. Proakis
OSPCD Executive Director

CITY OF SOMERVILLE

Office of Strategic Planning & Community Development

TO: Planning Board
FROM: Planning & Zoning Division
DATE: Updated June 5, 2020
RE: 74 Middlesex Avenue, EDGE Assembly

This memo summarizes the master plan submitted for “EDGE Assembly” by 74 Middlesex Ave. Owner LLC (“Applicant”) identifies the review that is required by the Somerville Zoning Ordinance and provides related analysis or feedback as necessary. The application was deemed complete on April 14, 2020, was opened by the Planning Board at a public hearing on May 7, 2020, was heard on May 21, 2020, and will be taken up again on June 11, 2020. Comments from City departments and divisions have been provided in separate memos.

NOTE: this memo is substantially different from the draft memo dated May 7, 2020 so the changes have not been specifically highlighted.

SUMMARY OF PROPOSAL

The “EDGE Assembly” master plan proposes a single-phase development including an estimated 525,000 square foot commercial building with underground structured parking and over 20,000 square feet of civic space, inclusive of improvements to the existing Kensington Park.

REVIEW NECESSARY

EDGE Assembly is in the Assembly Square Mixed-use (ASMD) special district in the Assembly Square neighborhood represented by Ward 1 Councilor Matt McLaughlin. Development of any building over 50,000 gross square feet in the ASMD requires a Master Plan Special Permit (MPSP) as a prerequisite to the development review required for the building. Per Section 15.2.2 of the SZO, the Planning Board, at their discretion, may permit the review procedures required for Special Permits to be conducted simultaneously with the MPSP approval process. The Applicant is requesting that the Planning Board approve Special Permits for the following:

- To exceed the maximum Floor Area Ratio (FAR) of 10.0.
- To exceed the maximum permitted building height of 125 feet.
- For the occupancy of any single commercial space over 10,000 SF of leasable floor area by any permitted use.

93 Highland Avenue
Somerville, MA 02143
(617-625-6600 ext.2500
TTY: (617) 666-0001
www.somervillema.gov
www.somervillezoning.com

NEIGHBORHOOD MEETING

Section 10.2.2 of the SZO requires a neighborhood meeting prior to the submittal of a master plan. The Applicant held a Neighborhood Meeting hosted by Ward Councilor Matt McLaughlin on January 22nd, 2020. The summary of this meeting included in the materials submitted to the Planning Board is an accurate account of the event.

The Applicant, at the request of neighborhood groups and the Ward Councilor, also hosted an additional meeting to discuss the proposal via a virtual participation platform on April 2, 2020.

URBAN DESIGN ANALYSIS

The proposal of this MPSP is a high-rise commercial building (office/lab/R&D) with a full block footprint, a new Civic Space at the edge of the ASMD, effectively bounded by Interstate 93 and Middlesex Avenue. It is approximately a 10-minute walk from the MBTA Assembly Orange Line Station, providing an important transit connection to downtown Boston and the suburbs to the north. The site is a short walk from the restaurants, amenities, and employment opportunities associated with Assembly Row and close to the on-going planned development associated with XMBLY at 5 Middlesex Avenue. The design of the project is intended to integrate into the fabric of ASMD and the context of the continued buildout of the neighborhood.

As part of this master plan, public open space around the site will provide gathering areas and visual permeability for community connection. There are several additional proposed improvements that will enhance the larger neighborhood and the connection between Assembly and the riverfront open spaces to the commercial uses and residential neighborhoods of East Somerville. The first is a proposed public-private partnership to provide the Civic Space required by the Somerville Zoning Ordinance. The project envisions repurposing Kensington Avenue adjacent to the building site to create a new Through Block Plaza (called “Kensington Plaza” in the application package) including new hardscape materials, trees, plantings, seating, public bicycle storage, signage, and lighting to create an active and safe space. The City of Somerville would retain ownership of the Kensington Avenue right-of-way, and the Applicant is prepared to design, install, and maintain the improvements. It is anticipated that the City would grant an easement that dedicates the new civic space to the public in perpetuity.

Additional off-site improvements are also proposed. The Applicant is proposing an upgrade to the adjacent City-owned Kensington Park (referred to as “Middlesex Avenue Open Space” in the application package) to create an attractive gateway to the ASMD for pedestrian and bicycle access from the T station and Foley Street through the Kensington Connector (I-93 underpass) to the Stop and Shop and Garfield Avenue neighborhood to the west. This project will be combined with the design of the Through Block Plaza to create a Neighborhood Park as identify by the Civic Space Study (Appendix F of the application package). This area is not used to contribute to the project’s Civic Space commitment; this upgrade will be considered off-site improvements to City-owned land. The Applicant will improve (design, process through approvals and permitting, and construct) and maintain these off-site improvements. Integrated design of these spaces will yield a more connected, safe, and vibrant

public realm and integrated with the adjacent existing hardscaped seating area north of the Public Storage building.

Retail storefronts along Middlesex Avenue and an entry lobby along Kensington Avenue will activate the ground plane. The retail and lobby facades recede from the pedestrian space, providing an enlarged sidewalk width along east and south frontages, enhancing the public realm. The Middlesex Avenue streetscape will continue to be coordinated with the Mobility and Engineering divisions as the revised section for that thoroughfare is still being refined. Once a final design section is understood, the Applicant will need to design the landscape areas in conjunction with the Division of Public Space & Urban Forestry (PSUF).

REQUIRED MPSP FINDINGS

Per Section 15.2.2 of the Somerville Zoning Ordinance, the Planning Board must make findings considering, at least, the following review criteria in its discretion to approve or deny a Master Plan Special Permit:

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. The proposed alignment and connectivity of the thoroughfare network
4. The gross floor area allocated to different use categories
5. Mitigation proposed to alleviate any adverse impacts on utility infrastructure.
6. Proposed development phasing.
7. Proposed on-street parking to address demand by customers of Retail Sales, Food & Beverage, or Commercial Services principal uses.

This application for a MPSP is responsive to SomerVision goals and objectives and meets the intent of the ASMD. The proposed program includes a mix of uses on the ground floor but is a single-phase development project of one Commercial Building and one Civic Space. The alignments of the thoroughfare network are remaining with some modifications to use – redesigned Middlesex Avenue cross section and Kensington to open space - and will continue to be refined and detailed with subsequent SPA applications. The Applicant has been coordinating with Engineering and the Office of Sustainability & Environment to ensure that there are no adverse impacts to infrastructure.

REQUIRED SP FINDINGS

Per Section 15.2.2 of the Somerville Zoning Ordinance, the Planning Board must make findings considering, at least, the following review criteria in its discretion to approve or deny a Special Permit:

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. Considerations indicated elsewhere in this Ordinance for the required Special Permit.

The Planning Board must also make findings considering the following for the occupancy of any single commercial space greater than ten thousand (10,000) square feet in leasable floor area by any permitted use:

1. Compatibility with the intensity of activity associated with the surrounding land uses.
2. Capacity of the local thoroughfare network providing access to the site and the impact on pedestrian, bicycle, and vehicular traffic and circulation patterns in the neighborhood.

Below is an analysis concerning the additional Special Permits request by the Applicant.

Exceeding the maximum Floor Area Ratio (FAR)

The project is greater than 50,000 gross floor area (GFA), the maximum FAR permitted by Section 7.4.6 is 10.0. As proposed, the total FAR for this project is 14.2. However, the ASMD is a Transform Area as identified in SomerVision. As such, increased density is supported in this area, especially on this site adjacent to the elevated interstate.

As conceptual presented, the building features an atrium, interconnecting staircases, and breakout areas throughout the project that create spaces for collaboration and interaction but increase the size of the floor plate and, therefore, the overall square footage of the building. The Applicant prioritizes sustainability to optimize building performance, influence material selections and to drive reductions in energy use by incorporating outdoor areas, biophilia, improved indoor air quality, and optimal daylight in the building which are all supported by the goals and desires of the City.

Exceeding the maximum building height requirement of 125 feet

As mentioned above, this project meets the goals of SomerVision by proposing new development in a Transform Area and is expected to provide significant employment opportunities. In the ASMD, building height is measured and regulated regarding distance from the Mystic River. This site is more than 350 feet from the river and over 1,000 feet from the MBTA station so per Table 7.4.6 the maximum height is 125 feet.

The proposed massing rises 18 stories, to a height of approximately 275 feet from grade to the top of the roof (the mechanical penthouse height will be verified during subsequent required Site Plan Approval). As mentioned above, the project site is immediately adjacent to I-93 so additional height in this location does not create any adverse impacts on adjacent parcels. Depending on the final mix of uses, the Applicant anticipates that the floor-to-floor height and the total number of floors may change slightly; however, the final building will not exceed the maximum approved height.

Any single commercial space over 10,000 SF of leasable floor area by any permitted use

SomerVision identifies a community shared value to “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” and specifies a goal to “Make Somerville a regional employment center with a mix of diverse and high-quality jobs”. This proposal of approximately 498,000 SF of office, lab, and research/development uses (along with 27,000 SF of retail uses) supports those comprehensive statements.

Per 7.4.7.c.ii., “Occupancy of any single commercial space greater than ten-thousand (10,000) square feet in leasable floor area by any permitted use requires a Special Permit.” While tenanting of this project is a few years away, it is anticipated that the occupants will be more than one tenant over 10,000 SF. A commercial building this size could be a single business entity such as a corporate headquarters which also requires relief from this section.

As required by SZO Per 7.4.7.c.iii. this Special Permit must also be considered with regard for the intensity of activity to be compatible with the surrounding land uses and the capacity of the local thoroughfare network. This project, as proposed, is appropriate for this site and area of the city. The surrounding land uses are in flux as the neighborhood transforms from a former manufacturing facility to a shopping center to a regional commercial destination and employment hub. The transit-orientation and the network of people-powered transportation to and from this site has been carefully considered, along with vehicular circulation, and has been addressed in the Mobility Management Plan.

CONDITIONS

Should the Planning Board approve this Master Plan Special Permit and any associated Special Permit(s), the Planning & Zoning Staff recommends the following conditions:

Conditions Required by the SZO

1. The Applicant must fund the purchase and installation of a 19-bike Bluebikes bike share station to mitigate transportation impacts attributable to the proposed development.
2. The Applicant must continue working with the Divisions of Engineering and Mobility to determine the curb location required as by the Middlesex Avenue redesign and with the Divisions of Engineering and Public Space & Urban Forestry on the landscaping of the new sidewalk area to mitigate infrastructure impacts attributable to the proposed development.
3. At issuance of the notice to vacate, the Applicant must provide two months rent to the existing restaurant tenant (“Sunrise Cuisine” at 76 Middlesex Avenue) and then provide reasonable relocation expenses, up to \$25,000, to secure a space and assist with the transition to that new location in Somerville (or an immediately adjacent municipality), to mitigate community impacts attributable to the proposed development.
4. The Applicant must provide a performance bond for one hundred and twenty five percent (125%) of the estimated costs of the proposed Through Block Plaza Civic Space prior to receiving a Building Permit for the proposed Commercial Building.

Legal Agreements

5. Prior to any subsequent Site Plan Approval application being opened by the Planning Board, the Applicant must execute and provide evidence of recording at the Middlesex South Registry of Deeds, a Development Covenant by and between the City of Somerville and the Applicant.
6. The Applicant must provide evidence to the Director of Planning & Zoning that easement rights to the City right-of-way currently referred to as Kensington Avenue has been acquired prior to a subsequent Site Plan Approval application for the Through Block Plaza Civic Space.
7. Upon approval of a subsequent Site Plan Approval for the Through Block Plaza Civic Space, the Applicant must execute and provide evidence of recording at the Middlesex South Registry of

Deeds, a Land Disposition Agreement, Maintenance Agreement, including any easements necessary to effectuate Applicant's maintenance obligations, for that parcel between the City of Somerville and Applicant.

Sustainability

8. Included with the subsequent Site Plan Approval application for the proposed commercial building, the Applicant shall continue to provide information in each LEED certifiability narrative required for the proposed commercial building detailing efforts to utilize building systems technology, to every extent practicable, to reduce the building's energy use intensity and increase net zero capability.
9. The Applicant shall continue to provide information with the subsequent Site Plan Approval application detailing the sites potential flood risk (sea level rise or precipitation-based) and how flooding will be managed within the underground parking structure, including how the electric vehicle charging equipment and other electrical infrastructure will be protected from damage in the development review application for the proposed Commercial Building.

Civic Space

9. Prior to application for the subsequent Site Plan Approval of the Through Block Plaza Civic Space, the Applicant shall continue to coordinate the design with the Division of Public Space & Urban Forestry to address potential pedestrian and bicycle conflicts on the proposed shared paths (which must provide a safe travel way for all users, rather than a dedicated bike lane) from the Kensington Connector under I-93 to Middlesex Avenue.
10. Upon approval of a subsequent Civic Space Permit for the Through Block Plaza, the Applicant will work with the Legal Department and Division of Public Space & Urban Forestry to combine the area of the Through Block Plaza and the existing Kensington Park. The Applicant and the Division of Public Space & Urban Forestry will design the combined parcels as a Neighborhood Park in accordance with the provisions of the Somerville Zoning Ordinance. Emergency vehicle access must remain within the Through Block Plaza. The Applicant is solely responsible for the costs of the design, the review and approval process of a subsequent Site Plan Approval application, all permitting, and construction (including any utility or underground infrastructure relocation) to City standards or greater for the Neighborhood Park as an off-site improvement to this MPSP.

Mobility

11. The property owner shall comply with the Mobility Management Plan submitted for the EDGE Assembly Square master plan dated April 2020, as approved and conditioned by the Director of Mobility.