

Daniel Bartman
Deputy Director of Planning and Zoning

Development Review Application
c/o Planning & Zoning Division
City of Somerville
93 Highland Avenue
Somerville, MA 02143

November 2, 2021

RE: Development Review Application for 599 Somerville Avenue

Dear Mr. Bartman,

The Applicant, 599 Somerville Ventures LLC (the “Applicant”) is pleased to submit an application for the development of a new, three story, Commercial Building Type at 599 Somerville Avenue.

Project Description

The Applicant proposes the demolition of a one story, existing 21,960 sf building and construction of a new three-story, 42 ft high commercial building located at the corner of Somerville Avenue and Spring Street. The project intends to create a neighborhood mainstreet building that is lab and R&D-ready, providing a moderate floor plate size for the growing ecosystem of Tough Tech companies starting up in Somerville. The building will create a widened and improved sidewalk along both Somerville Avenue and Spring Street to help contribute to enhanced pedestrian activity and sense of place. The building will be primarily commercial, with the ground floor designed to be flexible and accommodate a range of commercial and storefront uses. The proposed development will pursue LEED Gold certifiable requirements. The building has been designed to prioritize flexible, daylit tenant spaces, and an active ground floor that engages pedestrians along its 197 ft long frontage on Somerville Avenue.

Intent

The project intends to enhance this specific section of Somerville Avenue by creating a smaller scale, commercial building that will bring jobs and activity to the surrounding mainstreet area. The following SomerVision comprehensive plan goals have been considered throughout the project:

- Increasing daytime population to support existing and new small, local businesses

- Enhancing commercial corridors and creating pedestrian friendly access ways that encourage community engagement
- Widening sidewalks and incorporating permeable pavements
- Planting native plants and trees
- Opportunity for new job creation through construction and permanent operating jobs on site (The project is anticipated to create 90-100 construction jobs and 98 permanent jobs.)
- Investment in building resiliency, sustainability and reduction of carbon emission
- Investment in water and sewer system and implementation of stormwater management plan
- Provide EV Stations to mitigate air pollution

Development Review

The Applicant is seeking a special permit for Site Plan Approval as well as a special permit for Alternative Compliance of the minimum required vehicular parking spaces. Attached are the required materials requested for review.

Lot and Building Placement Summary

The project site is 20,386 sf - located within the MR3 (Mixed-Use Mid-Rise 3) zoning district in Somerville's Spring Hill neighborhood and is fully compliant with the massing and setback requirements described in the Somerville Zoning Ordinance. The proposed project would include 43,200 sf of commercial space (located on the first, second, and third floors), 500 sf of ground floor retail and approximately 13,000 sf of underground parking that would provide 33 parking spaces, 8 of which would be designated for use by green vehicles as they would be equipped with EV charging stations, and 10 covered, secure bicycle parking spaces. Additionally, 3 outdoor bicycle racks would accommodate 6 bicycles. The proposed project would provide 17% of the lot area as Open Space.

The Project site is bounded by Somerville Avenue to the south, Spring Street to the east, and existing residential and commercial buildings to the north and west. The Project is located approximately one-half mile from Porter Square, which is served by the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) Red Line, supporting transit-oriented development (TOD) as it connects a new commercial building with the greater metropolitan region.

The primary pedestrian entrance to the building will be provided along Somerville Avenue with entrances to the building lobby, ground floor retail, and ground floor tenant space(s). A driveway located on Spring Street along the east side of the building will serve the underground parking garage, loading dock and service entrance bringing all vehicles and deliveries off Somerville Avenue and Spring Street. The Project will reduce the size of the existing curb cut on Spring Street along the east side of the building from 39 ft to 30 ft improving pedestrian safety on Spring Street and will create a new Parklet at the enlarged bump-out proposed for the corner of Somerville Avenue and Spring Street.

A 10 ft wide continuous and lushly landscaped buffer located along the northern perimeter of the building will help achieve the required light and air set back requirement while enhancing the property line with greenery (including 34 new planted trees) and a 6 ft high fence for screening as well as the intention to ease the transition between the proposed commercial building and the existing residential neighbors. The landscaped buffer as well as the relative elevations of the planting beds were redesigned during the community process to ensure that the landscaped buffer was located at a similar elevation as the residential abutters to the north allowing for maximum enjoyment and view of these plantings.

Massing and Height Summary

The proposed building envelope is 197 ft wide and varies in depth resulting in an L-shaped building footprint, meeting the 90% lot coverage threshold, but exceeding the minimum open space requirement with 17% being proposed. The primary front setback is 3'-5" and the secondary front setback is 8'-2", resulting in 12' wide sidewalks along both street frontages. The average floor plate size is approximately 15,000 sf. To accommodate the floor to ceiling height requirements of potential lab and R&D users, each story has a 14'-0" floor to floor height, making the second floor, third floor, and roof heights 14 ft, 28 ft, and 42 ft, respectively. The Project proposes a flat roof type with a 16 ft high Mechanical Penthouse which was noted by the Urban Design Commission to be shorter than the average mechanical penthouse for this type of building use. The Mechanical Penthouse has a 10 ft step back on all sides.

Uses and Features Summary

At ground floor, the building will include a 500 sf retail space, 9,400 sf of commercial/R&D space as well as approximately 2,600 sf of accessory, mechanical, and circulation area. The second and third floors both have 15,000 sf floor plates primarily dedicated to commercial/R&D space with 325 sf of accessory, mechanical, and circulation area. The max commercial space depth of 75 ft is designed to accommodate R&D space uses.

The proposed project will largely increase the percentage of fenestration at ground level as compared to the existing building which largely has a blank wall along its primary frontage on Somerville Avenue. The proposed would provide 70 % fenestration at the ground level and 38% fenestration on the second and third stories. Five separate entrances to the building along Somerville Avenue would be located approximately every 30 ft.

Development Benefits Summary

The urban infill nature of the site at 599 Somerville Avenue creates an incredible opportunity for benefits to the neighborhood through various infrastructure improvements that would provide pedestrian and transit improvements along Somerville Avenue. These enhancements include: a widened sidewalk along Somerville Avenue and Spring Street, an inline bus stop with a new Bus Shelter, an enlarged pedestrian bump-out at the corner of Somerville Avenue and Spring Street, a new Parklet with plantings and seating, a pedestrian Crosswalk across Somerville Ave at Spring Street, a reconstructed bicycle lane that will allow cyclists to be protected from vehicular traffic and ride at sidewalk level, and an innovative landscaped buffer designed to

elevate the plantings to be at grade with the abutting neighbors. In addition to contributions that total over \$160,000 towards Affordable Housing and Employment Linkage Fees, these proposed infrastructure improvements represent a neighborhood benefits package of approximately \$365,000.

Façade and Architectural Design

The facade and architectural design of the proposed buildings comply with the design guidelines per the requirements of the Somerville Zoning Ordinance (page 132). The building façade design, which is divided to read as two distinct but complementary buildings, is inspired by materials, proportions, and architectural cadence found in other key corner buildings along Somerville Avenue.

The facade provides solid material framing at each storefront and lobby entrance. The storefront and lobby entrances are set within the resulting frame. Materials framing each storefront and lobby entrance are integrated into the design of the facade. Mechanical louvers necessary for venting purposes are not located within the required frame. The ground story is differentiated from the upper stories through changes in material, a detailed string course, and changes in window sizes and proportions, while keeping the entire height of the ground story in the facade base. The design of the base and the upper floors turns the corner and therefore align horizontally on both of the buildings' street frontages. The facade provides surface relief from the average plane through the use of various architectural elements and piers. Since the facade is greater than 100 feet in width, it is designed to read as two distinct buildings differing in cornice heights, wall material, and canopy design.

The two facades are visually divided into a series of architectural bays with piers extending all the way to the ground and each bay aligning with storefronts and lobby entrances, projecting forward, and uninterrupted by any horizontal articulation.

Building Components

Entry canopies are provided at storefront and lobby entrance locations to provide shade, protect pedestrians from the elements and reduce glare for storefront display areas. The lobby entrance is near the corner of the building at Somerville Avenue and Spring Street. The entry is close to the Parklet, providing those coming and going with convenient outdoor seating. A high canopy that continues along the length of the lobby demarcates the building's entrance. The remaining storefront entrances are located to the west of the lobby entrance after the change in facade and are articulated by shorter, individual canopies spanning approximately 25 ft in length each.

Parking & Mobility Summary

The City of Somerville Zoning Ordinance establishes requirements for vehicle and bicycle parking for new developments. Parking shall be designed in accordance with the Somerville Zoning Ordinance (Article 11: Parking & Mobility), as well as requirements specific to the land use district to minimize parking supply and encourage alternative modes of transportation. The Zoning Ordinance specifies parking ratio maximums if a site is located within a quarter-mile or half-mile transit area walkshed and parking ratio minimums if the site is outside of the half-mile

transit area walksheds. Per the City of Somerville Transit Area Map, the Project Site is located approximately one block outside of the half-mile walkshed and is therefore subject to a parking minimum requirement. The minimum vehicle parking space requirements for the MR3 zone are as follows:

Office: Research and Development or Laboratory: 1 per 1,000 sf (43 spaces)

Retail: Formula Retail: 1 per 750 sf (1 space)

Although Article 11 of the Somerville Zoning Ordinance requires 44 spaces, the neighborhood residents strongly advocated reducing the number of parking spaces provided in the underground garage. Furthermore, the site is located just one block outside the half-mile transit area walkshed. The pedestrian and bus enhancements the project is also creating will further position this location as a transit-oriented site and, as such, reinforce the logic to provide fewer vehicle parking spaces. In response to the community request and given the City's goals to discourage single occupant vehicle trips and the site's robust access to public transit, the Applicant proposes a reduction of 11 spaces and requests a special permit in accordance with Article 11.2.6. of the Somerville Zoning Ordinance.

The Project will take advantage of the nearby public transportation alternatives (including a bus stop directly in front of the building) and excellent pedestrian and bicycle facilities. The Project is served by the MBTA Red Line, the Fitchburg Line of the Commuter Rail, and six MBTA bus routes. The Project is located approximately one-half mile from Porter Square served by the Red Line and Fitchburg Line as well as four bus routes including the Route 77, Route 83, Route 87, and Route 96. Routes 83 and 87 operate along Somerville Avenue adjacent to the Project Site with a bus stop in front of the building. Other nearby routes include Route 88 and Route 90, which operate along Highland Avenue, and Route 85, which provides service along Summer Street. A designated bike lane also runs along Somerville Avenue and will be enhanced as a part of the sidewalk widening and bus stop integration being proposed.

Public Realm

The project's landscape design strives to create a visually and spatially dynamic urban environment by intentionally creating a street "furniture zone" along Somerville Avenue, which shall include an inline bus stop with a new shelter, bike racks, street trees, and an extension of the southeast corner curb line to create a Parklet element for increased engagement with the public. The Applicant has worked extensively with the Mobility, Public Space and Urban Forestry, and Engineering Divisions to design a Somerville Avenue crosswalk at Spring Street. This mobility and public space improvement was specifically requested by the community at the Applicant's first neighborhood meeting on April 5, 2021 and the project has committed to continuing to work with the City on the final design for this crosswalk and to construct these improvements concurrently with the construction of the building.

Urban Design Commission Recommendations

The Applicant's project team met with the Urban Design Commission on June 8, 2021 and June 22, 2021. The following recommendations came out of those two meetings: (A detailed

response to the Urban Design Commission's recommendations and a description of any changes to the proposed development made as a result of the feedback are included below).

Recommendation #1: Limit the mechanical penthouse height to 16 ft.

The Applicant agreed to this limitation for the main sound walls and penthouse structure and will continue to work with project engineers and acoustical consultants to accommodate this dimensional requirement.

Recommendation #2: Unified Color palette like Façade Option #3 presented during the June 8 UDC meeting.

The Applicant agreed to study the unified color further and to incorporate this approach into the future façade design and will incorporate a black, grey, and white color palette of materials into the final façade design. The UDC approved the use of this color palette during the discussion at the June 22nd meeting.

Recommendation #3: Move the "seam" between the two façades design on Somerville Ave to the west.

The Applicant agreed to study the location of the "seam" and has relocated the "seam" to align with the lobby demising wall. During the UDC meeting on June 22nd, the design team presented two options for relocating the "seam" with the revised façade design. The UDC selected the proposed preferred design option that located the "seam" to create a narrower building façade on the north side of the seam at the corner of Spring Street and a longer façade design for the portion of the project to the west of the "seam". The UDC felt this was a strong improvement to the overall design of the project and approved the façade design.

Recommendation #4: Study the design of the "seam" between the two facades.

At the June 8th meeting the UDC discussed alternative ideas for the design of this element of the building. There was a general interest in keeping the treatment of this "seam" as separate from the other two façade designs, but it needed to be further studied in conjunction with the relocation of the "seam" per recommendation #3. At the June 22nd meeting two alternative designs for the "seam" element of the façade were presented as follow:

- Option 1 created a brick "zipper" detail to transition between the façade elements.
- Option 2 applied the design language of the façade to the west of the "seam" to the "seam" itself creating a more unified design language.

The UDC selected Option 1 of the design and approved this approach to this specific façade element.

Recommendation #5: Improve the sideyard setback planting area on the North side of the project.

At the June 8th meeting the UDC discussed how the landscaping to the north of the project could be enhanced to better improve the relationship between the project and the residential neighbors to the north. The project site design was changed to accommodate this request. A 6' landscaped planting stripe was added to the northern edge of the driveway. Several retaining walls were also introduced to lift the finish grade of the planting areas to match the grade of the corresponding rear yards of the properties to the north effectively allowing these neighbors to have more visible landscaping behind their rear yards. The design was also amended to step back the massing of the building

at the northwest corner of the site to create a 502 sf intensive green roof on the second floor. The trees and landscaping on this green roof will be visible to the neighbors to the north due to the relative grade of the project being lower than their rear yards. This solution further enhanced the landscaping as request by the UDC.

Recommendation #6: Utilize standard City details and street furniture on Somerville Ave. Focus on a creative proposal for the proposed “parklet”.

The UDC recommended meeting with staff to confirm that the streetscape design was using City standard streetscape and planting details. The UDC also requested that creativity in the streetscape design be focused on the proposed “Parklet” feature to be located at the increase sidewalk bump-out at the corner of Spring Street. The applicant met with City staff and updated the design to conform with the required standards. The streetscape design was also updated to enhance the seating and planting options at the parklet.

The design team appreciates the recommendations that were received by the Urban Design Commission and feel that the amendments made to the project have resulted in an improved building and design approach to the public realm. At this time, the Applicant believes that the recommendations have been fulfilled to the UDC’s satisfaction. It is the Applicant’s intent to begin demolition in Q4 of 2021 and desire to begin construction on the proposed project in February 2022 with a construction duration of 18 months.

We look forward to working with your office and staff in advancing the review of the proposed project at 599 Somerville Avenue. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions.

Sincerely,

Russell Preston

Principle