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CITY OF SOMERVILLE

Office of Strategic Planning & Community Development

TO: Planning Board
FROM: Planning & Zoning Division
DATE: June 18, 2020
RE: DRA #2020-0125, 365-369 Somerville Avenue

This memo summarizes the development review application submitted for 365-369 Somerville Avenue, identifies any additional discretionary or administrative development review that is required by the Somerville Zoning Ordinance, and provides related analysis or feedback as necessary. The application was deemed complete on May 19, 2020 and is scheduled for a public hearing on June 25, 2020.

SUMMARY OF PROPOSAL

Nikhilesh Rao Gorukanti is proposing to establish a Health Care Service (a dental office) on a pedestrian street. Two storefronts will be occupied by the business. The proposal is that one storefront will front onto the waiting room and the other will be dedicated to community art space. This use will replace a laundromat and coffeeshop.

REQUIRED FINDINGS

In its discretion to approve or deny a Special Permit required by this Ordinance in §15.2.1.e, the review board shall make findings considering, at least, each of the following including findings established elsewhere in the ordinance. For this use, this includes findings in §9.6.k.iv and §4.13.b because it is a Fitness Services or Health Care Services use requesting to occupy a ground story commercial space fronting a pedestrian street.

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

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SomerVision and the Union Square Neighborhood Plan (USNP) are applicable to this application. SomerVision states the following goals in the Neighborhood and Commercial Corridors District Sections:

- Strengthen and support neighborhood commercial centers that integrate

residential uses, offer lively destinations and contribute to Somerville's unique identity.

- Protect and promote a diverse, interesting mix of small-scale businesses in Somerville's neighborhoods.
- Facilitate thoughtfully-designed, pedestrian-oriented mixed-use development and reuse opportunities in commercial corridors, squares and around transit stations that are sensitive to neighborhood context, and serve existing and future residents and businesses.

The USNP addresses economic development in a Vision for the Future chapter. The plan focuses on establishing a new Urban Employment Center place type while strengthening the existing local center. Union Square's small locally owned businesses are a large part of the Union Square identity (USNP page 74).

B. The intent of the zoning district where the property is located.

The intent of the MR5 district is to implement the objectives of the comprehensive plan of the City of Somerville and to create, maintain, and enhance areas appropriate for moderate scale, multi-use and mixed-use buildings and neighborhood- and community-serving uses.

The use to a dental office is of neighborhood servicing uses but visits are must less frequent than the previous uses.

C. Compatibility with the level of activity associated with surrounding properties

The Union Square Neighborhood Plan talks about strengthening the Local Center that exists at Bow Street and this portion of Somerville Avenue. From page 140 of the plan, "Independent retail and restaurants thrive when they are located fronting on a slow moving, two-way, customer- friendly street. This is the ultimate priority for the entire length of Somerville Avenue. The one-way section of Somerville Avenue between Church and Bow Streets is an auto-centric design to get automobiles through the square as quickly as possible. Union Square Main Streets emphasized the need for "revitalization...the lack of which already impacts the ability of current businesses on this stretch of Somerville Avenue." Converting this stretch of Somerville Avenue back to two-way, as well as creating/maintaining cycling facilities, increasing sidewalk widths, and improving connectivity will increase the positive experience of users and therefore the chances of success for small businesses."

Somerville Avenue is the weaker of the two retail streets, the intent is to strengthen this district. The adjacent businesses in the district in the same building are personal services like tax accountants and engineering firms that have the same level of foot traffic but are not ideal for the district. The businesses to the east, the SomerVelo bike shop and Bow Market are more ideal in creating a more vibrant local center.

D. Location, visibility, and design of the principal entrance, patient drop-off areas, and outdoor amenity space for employees or patients.

The proposal is to take up two storefronts at 365-369 Somerville Avenue. The design of the space has a waiting room flanking the front entrance. The other storefront will have space for community art. The

storefront requirements for Mid Rise districts require that any blocked windows need a 4' shadow box for display. This would be the case for these windows.

E. The maintenance of a diverse blend of commercial uses within the neighborhood.

The dental office is displacing a coffee shop and laundromat. The laundromat is a threatened use in Somerville's business districts because of rising commercial rents. This will decrease the number of laundromats in the immediate area from 2 to 1. The coffeeshop has already relocated within the neighborhood.

F. The existing concentration of uses from the same use category within the neighborhood.

The commercial services category includes uses categories like animal services, assembly or entertainment, banking and financial services, broadcast services, building and home repair services, educational services, and recreational services. On this stretch of Somerville Avenue between Church and Bow Streets there is a heavy concentration of these uses, vacancies, or apartment building frontages.

G. The availability of the same services within the neighborhood.

The dental office is relocating from Bow Street. It will maintain the two dental offices within the immediate neighborhood.

H. The availability of comparable commercial spaces within the neighborhood.

According to Costar, a real estate research platform, the vacancy rate in Union Square For Quarter 2 of 2020 is 3.4%. Of course, this data cannot reflect the turbulent climate that businesses are currently in because of the pandemic.

CONDITIONS

Should the Planning Board approve this Special Permit, the Planning & Zoning Staff recommends the following conditions:

1. All nonconforming window signage should be removed.
2. Any new awnings shall match the color and style already established on the building.
3. All storefront windows should maintain visual transparency with the exception of conforming shadow boxes for artistic display.
4. Any artistic display shall be rotated on a quarterly basis.
5. This use runs with the Applicant, Nikhilesh Rao Gorukanti, and is granted only to this applicant and is non-transferrable. The Special Permit shall terminate immediately if the Applicant ceases to occupy the space.