



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
MAYOR'S OFFICE OF STRATEGIC PLANNING & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
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Case #: PB 2016-03
Date: February 25, 2016
Recommendation: Conditional Approval

PLANNING STAFF REPORT

Site: 181 Washington Street

Applicant Name: Somerville Community Corporation
Applicant Address: 337 Somerville Ave, 2nd fl, Somerville, MA 02143
Owner Name: Somerville Community Corporation
Owner Address: 337 Somerville Ave, 2nd fl, Somerville, MA 02143
Agent Name: Robert McWatters

Legal Notice: : Applicant & Owner Somerville Community Corporation seeks a Special Permit to establish an approx. 2,400 sf office on the ground floor of the building per SZO §7.13.A. CCD55 zone. Ward 3.

Dates of Public Hearing: March 3, 2016

I. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

1. Subject Property: The Planning Board approved a redevelopment of the subject site on March 6, 2014. Two mixed-use buildings were approved as part of a joint site plan for 181 and 197 Washington Street. The proposed building at 181 Washington Street, also referred to as the SCC building, is the site that is the subject of this proposal. The building on this lot will be 46,305 net square feet. It is four stories and 47 feet tall. The approval includes 2,403 square feet of commercial/retail on the first floor and 35 apartments on floors 2, 3 and 4.

The Planning Board approved a version of the project in 2013 that was appealed and subsequently replaced with the later 2014 approval. The 2013 version of the plan included the 2,403 square feet along the street that was to be occupied by the retail and service use cluster and a 2,000 square foot office was located on the first floor behind the retail space. The appeal caused a decrease in the square footage of the building and the office space was removed from the plan.



The 181 and 197 Washington Street buildings will share a driveway off of Washington Street. There will be a total of 65 parking spaces behind the buildings. The Applicants obtained a special permit for parking on a separate lot so that the required parking for each building can be located on the abutting parcel.

The 181 Washington Street building should be complete in July of 2016.



2. Proposal: The proposal is to locate an office for the Somerville Community Corporation (SCC) in the 2,403 commercial square footage along Washington Street. There will be 13 employees working in the office during the week. The hours of operation will be 9 to 5 and 2 to 3 times per week there will be evening hours for meetings or classes.

3. Green Building Practices: The building will be LEED and Energy Star certified.

4. Comments:

Fire Prevention: Fire Prevention has asked for the area between the buildings to be marked as a fire lane because of where the emergency panels are located. The loading area may need to be eliminated to satisfy this request. *The loading dock is no longer required with the change in uses at the site.*

Ward Alderman: Alderman McWatters has been informed of this proposal.

Design Review Committee: When the DRC reviewed the project on October 23, 2014 they recommended that the window frames on the 181 Washington Street building be one color. A light frame was recommended with a dark trim.

II. FINDINGS FOR SPECIAL PERMIT (SZO §7.13.A):

In order to grant a special permit, the SPGA must make certain findings and determinations as outlined in §5.1.4 of the SZO. This section of the report goes through §5.1.4 in detail.

1. Information Supplied:

The Staff finds that the information provided by the Applicant conforms to the requirements of §5.1.2 of the SZO and allows for a comprehensive analysis of the project with respect to the required Special Permits.

2. Compliance with Standards: *The Applicant must comply "with such criteria or standards as may be set forth in this Ordinance which refer to the granting of the requested special permit."*

Per Zoning Amendment 2014-06, a Special Permit is required to establish a ground floor office in the CCD zoning district per SZO 7.13.A. The Special Permit review was established to evaluate the situation of each location to ensure that the use and design does not negatively impact the block. Offices, while encouraged, often do not create the vibrancy that is desired along retail corridors. Offices can also disrupt retail continuity which is important for retail business' success as it keeps pedestrians engaged in continuing to walk down city blocks.

The block east of the subject property has number of storefronts and the building west of the subject property is under construction and will have a retail store and café. A break in the retail continuity along Washington Street beginning at McGrath Highway is not ideal. The Washington Street Green Line Station will generate a lot of pedestrian activity from the station to Union Square and the route will be past this property. The design and conditions of approval will help to keep the building interesting for pedestrians and bridge the gap in the retail activity on either side of the subject location. A condition of approval will limit the timeframe of approval based on the opening of the Green Line Station at Washington Street so that when the station is fully functional the office use at the subject property will need to be reevaluated to determine if another use would better engage pedestrians to the space's full potential.

Another consideration for interim approval for this office is that space will be used for SCC's community meetings which will activate the space at night. Two to three times per week there will be evening meetings or classes for Somerville residents, low-income families, and the local work force.

Per SZO §6.1.22.G, all new developments shall meet the following standards:

Pedestrian Oriented Requirements. To promote pedestrian activity, buildings shall be designed with separate front entrance doors to lobbies, cultural spaces, retail and business, and other sources of pedestrian activity. These entrances shall be oriented to existing public sidewalks and other open space (as opposed to a central "mall" entrance).

The front door to the office space will be on the sidewalk. Other entrances could be added into the storefront if the space was divided up for other tenants in the future.

Lighting. Lighting shall be appropriate to the historic and pedestrian-oriented character of surrounding neighborhoods and buildings, and shall enhance safety and security while minimizing glare and light trespass.

There will be light fixtures at the height of the sill of the second story windows that will cast light on the sidewalk.

The parking requirements for the permitted use for the site and the proposed use as office are the same.

Prior Approval for Use Cluster B – Medium Retail and Service, 1 parking space per 800 nsf

Current Proposal for Use Cluster A – Office, 1 parking space per 800 nsf

2,349 sf in SCC building = 3 required parking spaces

The three parking spaces will be provided in the 65 space parking lot as originally planned.

The bicycle parking requirement increases for an office space over a retail use but for the square footage of the space the required number of bicycle parking spaces is the same.

Prior Approval for Use Cluster B – Medium Retail and Service, 1 bicycle parking space per 5,000nsf

2,349 sf in SCC building = 0.5 bicycle spaces

Current Proposal for Use Cluster A – Office, 1 bicycle parking space per 3,000 nsf

2,349 sf in SCC building = 0.8 bicycle spaces

There is no loading requirement for an office of less than 10,000 square feet. There is also no loading requirement for the other uses in the 181 and 197 Washington Street buildings that were permitted with a joint site plan including a total of 65 residential units, 2,700 square feet of Eating and Drinking and 1,060 square feet of Retail.

3. Consistency with Purposes: *The Applicant has to ensure that the project "is consistent with (1) the general purposes of this Ordinance as set forth in Article 1, and (2) the purposes, provisions, and specific objectives applicable to the requested special permit which may be set forth elsewhere in this Ordinance, such as, but not limited to, those purposes at the beginning of the various Articles."*

The proposal is consistent with the general purposes of the Ordinance as set forth under §1.2, which includes, but is not limited to conserving the value of land and buildings.

The proposal is also consistent with the purpose of the Corridor Commercial Districts to increase commercial investment in high-profile, accessible areas in multi-tenanted, mixed use buildings.

4. Site and Area Compatibility: *The Applicant has to ensure that the project "(i)s designed in a manner that is compatible with the characteristics of the built and unbuilt surrounding area, including land uses."*

The Design Guidelines for the CCD in §6.1.22.H specify the following for storefronts and signage.

Thirty-foot-wide commercial bays with independent entrances onto the street are typical in Somerville and should be repeated in new developments to create visual and pedestrian interest. Varied architecture should be created and flat facades avoided by using recessed or projected entryways, bays, canopies, awnings, residential balconies on 2nd floor or above, and other architectural elements. Non-residential ground floor façades should have a minimum seventy-five (75) percent transparent material, and second floor facades should have a minimum of forty (40) percent transparent material. These openings should provide views into the building and should not be blocked by interior storage, nonartistic displays, or greater than thirty (30) percent internally mounted signage.

The retail portions of the façade meet the guideline for having 75 percent transparent material on the ground floor. The windows will be conditioned to maintain the ability for pedestrians to view the interior of the space as specified in this guideline.

Signage and awning design should respect buildings' context (e.g., scale, design, style, colors,

materials), be oriented to pedestrians, and be subordinate to the overall building composition. Creative shapes must be carefully designed and coordinated with the overall appearance of the building. The design should also maintain an existing "signage line" and respect the character, scale, and locations of adjacent signs and awnings. Large, interior-lit or back-lit signs or awnings, neon "open" signs, vinyl or plastic materials and overly bright colors are generally discouraged. To add interest and character to the retail environment signs or awnings may convey interesting elements or logos without excessive wording. They should be limited to advertising the business name and its main goods or services, with minimal or no national brand names or logos. Type styles should enhance readability of the sign and provide information simply and legibly. Use awnings to create pleasant shaded spaces in front of a building. Signs and awnings should enhance important architectural details and not conceal or obliterate them.

The signage has not yet been designed, however, the proposed location is indicated on the elevation. The location will be above the door to the office space. This is where the signage line on the building is typically located and it will not obscure detailing on the building. The design of the signage will be conditioned to not be made of vinyl or plastic, not be overly bright, have clearly legible wording and be submitted to Planning Staff for review and approval to ensure the guideline is met.

- 7. Housing Impact: Will not create adverse impacts on the stock of existing affordable housing.

The proposal involves commercial spaces and not housing.

- 8. SomerVision Plan: Complies with the applicable goals, policies and actions of the SomerVision plan, including the following, as appropriate: Preserve and enhance the character of Somerville's neighborhoods, transform key opportunity areas, preserve and expand an integrated, balanced mix of safe, affordable and environmentally sound rental and homeownership units for households of all sizes and types from diverse social and economic groups; and, make Somerville a regional employment center with a mix of diverse and high-quality jobs. The areas in the SomerVision map that are designated as enhance and transform should most significantly contribute towards the SomerVision goals that are outlined in the table below. The areas marked as conserve are not expected to greatly increase the figures in the table since these areas are not intended for large scale change.

<u>SomerVision Summary</u>	<i>Existing</i>	<i>Proposed</i>
<i>Commercial Sq. Ft.:</i>	2,349 sf	2,349 sf
<i>Estimated Employment:</i>	? for retail or prior use as Boys and Girls Club	13

- 9. Impact on Affordable Housing: In conjunction with its decision to grant or deny a special permit for a structure of four or more units of housing, the SPGA shall make a finding and determination as to how implementation of the project would increase, decrease, or leave unchanged the number of units of rental and home ownership housing that are affordable to households with low or moderate incomes, as defined by HUD, for different sized households and units.

The proposal involves commercial space and not housing.

III. RECOMMENDATION

Special Permit under §7.13.A

Based on the materials submitted by the Applicant, the above findings and subject to the following conditions, the Planning Staff recommends **CONDITIONAL APPROVAL** of the requested **SPECIAL PERMIT**.

The recommendation is based upon a technical analysis by Planning Staff of the application material based upon the required findings of the Somerville Zoning Ordinance, and is based only upon information submitted prior to the public hearing. This report may be revised or updated with new recommendations, findings and/or conditions based upon additional information provided to the Planning Staff during the public hearing process.

#	Condition	Timeframe for Compliance	Verified (initial)	Notes								
1	Approval is for the establishment of a 2,349 sf office. This approval is based upon the following application materials and the plans submitted by the Applicant:	BP/CO	ISD/Plng.									
	<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Date (Stamp Date)</th> <th>Submission</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Jan 28, 2016</td> <td>Initial application submitted to the City Clerk's Office</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Jan 22, 2016</td> <td>Modified plans submitted to OSPCD (Floor Plan)</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Aug 1, 2014</td> <td>Modified plans submitted to OSPCD (Elevation)</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>				Date (Stamp Date)	Submission	Jan 28, 2016	Initial application submitted to the City Clerk's Office	Jan 22, 2016	Modified plans submitted to OSPCD (Floor Plan)	Aug 1, 2014	Modified plans submitted to OSPCD (Elevation)
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Any changes to the approved elevations or use that are not <i>de minimis</i> must receive SPGA approval.												
2	The SP approval: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Is granted only to this applicant and is not transferrable b. Shall terminate immediately if Somerville Community Corporation ceases to occupy the space c. Shall expire twenty-four (24) months after the opening of the Washington Street Green Line Station but not less than six (6) years from the date of this approval, at which point all office use of the Property shall be discontinued. A new Special Permit application and approval would be required in order to extend the timeframe of the office use at this location. 											
Design												
3	The window frames on the storefront shall have a light frame with dark trim.											

4	The storefront windows should provide views into the building and should not be blocked by interior storage, nonartistic displays, or internally mounted signage or film. Window shades shall be transparent enough to provide views into the space. Window shades shall be raised at night or when not needed to block the sun.			
Public Safety				
5	The Applicant or Owner shall meet the Fire Prevention Bureau's requirements.	CO	FP	
6	The light fixtures on the façade shall be kept on to illuminate the sidewalk from dusk until at least 11pm.	Cont.	Plng.	
Signage				
7	Signage will be limited in size and location to that shown in the elevation diagrams.	CO/Cont.	Plng.	
8	Signage shall not be made of vinyl or plastic, not be overly bright, have clearly legible wording and be submitted to Planning Staff for review and approval to ensure that the signage design guideline is met.	Installation of sign	Plng.	
Final Sign-Off				
9	The Applicant shall contact Planning Staff at least five working days in advance of a request for a final inspection by Inspectional Services to ensure the proposal was constructed in accordance with the plans and information submitted and the conditions attached to this approval.	Final sign off	Plng.	

