



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
MAYOR'S OFFICE OF STRATEGIC PLANNING & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
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PLANNING DIVISION

TO: Zoning Board of Appeals
FROM: Planning Staff
DATE: March 17, 2015
RE: 654 Mystic Avenue

The Special Permit with Site Plan review application at 654 Mystic Avenue was last reviewed by the Zoning Board of Appeals on February 18, 2015. At that meeting the Board asked the applicant and owner to supply the following information.

- A site plan showing landscaping and a maximum of 18 parking spaces.
- A barrier at the property line to prevent cars from backing out onto the sidewalk.
- An evaluation from an engineer on the stability of the wall.

We received the site plan with landscaping, parking spaces for 18 cars, and a fence location at the back of the sidewalk. We have not yet heard from the owner regarding a study of the stability of the retaining wall.

While the site plan does provide for a better layout than the original one proposed, Staff do not find that it meets the concerns expressed by the Board and neighbors during the public hearing process.

After hearing additional information provided during the public hearing process, Staff have updated the following findings which do not support approval of the use and site as proposed.

13. Enhancement of Appearance: *The Applicant must demonstrate that "the natural character and appearance of the City is enhanced. Awareness of the existence of a development, particularly a non residential development or a higher density residential development, should be minimized by screening views of the development from nearby streets, residential neighborhoods of City property by the effective use of existing land forms, or alteration thereto, such as berms, and by existing vegetation or supplemental planting."*

~~The appearance of the site will remain consistent with existing conditions which locates several parked cars on site.~~

Staff learned that the prior use did not involve parking several cars on the site. The appearance of the lot as a used motor vehicle sales and service business will change and negatively impact the appearance of the lot. The parking spaces will not be screened and the landscaped proposed is not sufficient to provide screening or greening of the lot.

The landscaping proposed is minimal. Shrubs are proposed to be 2 feet wide and the trees proposed are dwarf and low to the ground. The plants are spaced 6 feet on center. Eleven plants are proposed on the 1,266 square foot area on the southern corner of the site, 8 plants are proposed on the 313 square foot area along Moreland Street and 2 plants are proposed for the landscaped area in front of the building. Landscaped areas should have layers of vegetation to provide tall, middle level and groundcover that are densely grouped so that the landscaped area does



not look like small green elements spaced far apart and surrounded by dirt or mulch. Staff find that the landscape plan does not create the greening of the site that the Board discussed.

18. Prevention of Adverse Impacts: *The Applicant must demonstrate that “provisions have been made to prevent or minimize any detrimental effect on adjoining premises, and the general neighborhood, including, (1) minimizing any adverse impact from new hard surface ground cover, or machinery which emits heat, vapor, light or fumes; and (2) preventing adverse impacts to light, air and noise, wind and temperature levels in the immediate vicinity of the proposed development.”*

~~The project does not propose a detrimental effect to adjacent properties or the general neighborhood as the site will remain similar to existing conditions in that cars will be parked in an organized manner and there are no proposed physical changes.~~

Neighbors have expressed that they have been negatively impacted by the used car business that has been in operation at this site. Impacts include disruption of the sidewalk and street from cars pulling out of the lot. A recommended condition of approval is that vehicles not back out onto Mystic Avenue and vehicles shall not be parked or stored on the right of way. The updated site plan better addresses this issue, however, it is a difficult condition to enforce and since this has already been an issue with the limited time the business has been open, it will likely continue to be an issue in the future.

Documentation of the stability of the retaining wall and the ability for the area at the top of the wall to support vegetation has not yet been submitted.

21. Screening of Parking:

~~Screening the parked vehicles eliminates visibility from Mystic Avenue, which is auto-oriented and consistent with the proposed use of this site.~~

Screening can occur with dense landscaping or the appropriate fence height and still maintain visibility from Mystic Avenue. The updated site plan does not address this issue.