



City of Somerville

PLANNING BOARD

City Hall 3rd Floor, 93 Highland Avenue, Somerville MA 02143

TO: Planning Board
FROM: OSPCD Staff
SUBJECT: 51 Prospect Street, P&Z 21-181
POSTED: April 26, 2023

RECOMMENDATION: Approve with Conditions (SP)

Staff memos are used to communicate background information, analysis, responses to public comments, review of statutory requirements and other information from Planning, Preservation, & Zoning Staff to the Review Board members.

This memo summarizes the development review application submitted 51 Prospect Street, 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 March 31, 2023, and is scheduled for a public hearing on May 4, 2023. Any Staff recommended findings, conditions, and decisions in this memo are based on the information available to date prior to any public comment at the scheduled public hearing.

LEGAL NOTICE

Eversource Energy seeks to establish a Minor Utility Facility Use in the Commercial Core and Mid-Rise 4 zoning districts, which requires a Special Permit.

SUMMARY OF PROPOSAL

Eversource Energy is proposing to establish a Minor Utility Facility Use in the Commercial Core (CC4) and Mid-Rise 4 (MD4) zoning districts. The Applicant intends to install a third transformer onto the property. The new transformer is proposed to be screened with perimeter walls and the majority of the existing substation will be screened with new mesh fencing.

BACKGROUND

51 Prospect Street is located in the 0.25 mi Transit Area in the Mid-Rise 4 (MR4) and Commercial Core 4 (CC4) zoning district in the Union Square neighborhood represented by Ward 2 Councilor JT Scott¹. Establishing a Minor Utility Facility use in the MR4 and CC4 district requires a Special Permit. The Planning Board is the decision-

¹ The Ward 2 City Councilor is JT Scott, however, they have recused themselves from this project and Ward 3 Councilor Ben Ewen-Campen acted as the Ward Councilor for this Special Permit application.

making authority for all (non-variance) discretionary or administrative permits required for the MR4 and CC4 zoning districts.

Eversource Energy has been working with City over the last two (2) years concerning upgrades at the existing Eversource substation at 51 Prospect Street in Union Square. The existing property consists of a 155-kV/14-kV distribution substation known as Somerville Substation #402, which contains two (2) transformers. The northeast side of the property is vacant, and the vast majority of the development will occur on that side of the property. Prior to the application submission for a Minor Utility Facility Use Special Permit, a lot merger for the property was approved by the Director of Planning, Preservation & Zoning in fall of 2021, which merged two (2) lots into one (1).

Three (3) neighborhood meetings were held for this proposal, spanning from early 2022 to spring 2023. This proposal only requires one (1) neighborhood meeting per the standards of the SZO, however, the Applicant voluntarily worked with City Officials to hold additional meetings to provide further opportunities for input from the community. The design of the proposal has gone through a variety of schematic designs, and the most up-to-date proposal that was provided in the application was presented to members of the public at a neighborhood meeting held on April 11, 2023.

The Inspectional Services Department (ISD) has confirmed that the Special Permit request for a Minor Utility Facility use only applies to the new transformer. All other work proposed in the application materials for the existing equipment is considered general maintenance and community mitigation so the screening can be permitted by-right. The zoning regulations that apply to this project include SZO Section 10.7.4.b.i. The zoning requirements for Fences & Walls laid out in SZO Section 10.5 do not apply to this project, as the proposal is for the development of mechanical equipment and not a new principal building. The Applicant is proposing to provide screening elements around the entirety of the substation, which includes the existing substation equipment. This is a voluntary endeavor by the Applicant, out of concerns raised by the public at neighborhood meetings and discussions with City Staff and Officials.

NEIGHBORHOOD MEETINGS

The first neighborhood meeting was hosted by Ward 3 Councilor Ben Ewen-Campen and the Applicant on February 23, 2022, via the Zoom meeting platform. A second, non-required neighborhood meeting was hosted by Ward 3 Ben Ewen-Campen and the Applicant on December 12, 2022 via the Zoom meeting platform. A third, non-required neighborhood meeting was hosted by Ward 3 Councilor Ben Ewen-Campen and the Applicant on April 11, 2023 via the Zoom meeting platform.

ANALYSIS

51 Prospect Steet is located right within the heart of the Union Square, and directly adjacent to existing residential and commercial development, as well as nearby new construction, including the D2.3 Podium Tower Building, D2.1 Lab Building, and the

Union Square Green Line Station. The existing substation has existed since the 1960s and is serviced by the Mystic generating facility that is located in Everett, Massachusetts. The substation is part of Eversource's larger distribution network and currently supplies Somerville as well as parts of the City of Cambridge.

Eversource has forecasted that the capacity of the existing substation will be exceeded by the summer of 2024, which will jeopardize the Company's ability to provide reliable electric service. The addition of a third transformer will aid with the substations capability to provide adequate and needed service to Somerville and East Cambridge. The third transformer will increase the substation's capacity by 62%. As noted in the Applicant's project narrative, the long-term solution for supplying energy to future developments includes the improvements of other nearby substations in the City of Cambridge.

Community Feedback

Several neighborhood meetings were held for this proposal and the project's design has evolved substantially from the initial neighborhood meeting to the most recent neighborhood meeting. At the first neighborhood meeting, the Applicant team introduced the project to the community, which included new fencing and landscaping around the existing equipment and a new proposed transformer. The following concerns and comments were raised at the first neighborhood meeting, but are not limited to:

- Noise.
- Landscaping.
- Concerns around the substation's improvements impeding on the possibility of a future Green Line extension to Porter Square.
- Requests for the substation to be undergrounded, moved, or fully enclosed.
- Appearance and maintenance of the site.

In response to input received at the first neighborhood meeting, the Applicant worked with City Staff on a new proposal. The new design of the substation included a newly proposed wall enclosure around the substation (including the existing equipment) on three sides of the site. The proposed wall was designed to be a building-like façade around the equipment and an improved fence on the Newton Street side of the site. The Applicant team also reached out to representatives with the MBTA on the project's potential to impede the future possibility of a Green Line extension to Porter Square. The MBTA confirmed that the installation of a new transformer would not have any impact on the MBTA ROW running along the south of the property.

At the second voluntarily held neighborhood meeting, the Applicant team presented their revised proposal to the community. At that meeting, members of the public provided questions and concerns including, but not limited to:

- What is the projected electric demand forecast for the new development within Somerville?
- Design concerns and sentiment around the proposed screening.

Many members of the community were not satisfied with the conceptual design of the building-like facade screening around the new transformer and existing equipment, with many members of the public pointing out that it resembles a “movie set”. In response, the Applicant team continued to work with City Staff to come up with another proposal in response to the comments raised by the Community. After working in collaboration with City Officials and Staff, the Applicant team submitted a new proposal with their application package, which consists of opaque fencing around the Prospect Street viewed, a new building-like façade only around the new transformer, and an improved privacy fence around the Newton Street side of the parcel. This proposal was presented at the third neighborhood meeting.

At the third voluntarily held neighborhood meeting, the Applicant was able to present the updates plans that were included in the Applicant’s application materials. The following comments were made by members of the public:

- Why is there a break in the mesh fence along Webster Avenue?
- How does the Art Council get involved and when?
- The project should go through design review with the Urban Design Commission for input on design options.
- Native species should be incorporated into the landscaping.

The Applicant’s neighborhood meeting report for this meeting provides detailed responses for the above inquiries. Generally, Special Permits do not require design review by the City’s Urban Design Commission per SZO Section 15.2.1.d. Staff have recommended conditions relating to the incorporation of public art and native species in more detail below.

Community Mitigation

In response to the project’s impact on the surrounding neighborhood and input received from neighborhood meetings by members of the public, Staff have recommended several conditions for community mitigation from the industrial impacts due to the addition of a new transformer. The intention for the recommended conditions are outlined below.

Staff have recommended that the screening around the new proposed transformer incorporate architectural brick materiality on the projecting pilasters. Staff believe that this will create an interesting architectural element and mimic the nearby urban environment without trying to “hide” the transformer. Staff further recommend that the existing equipment on the property be cleaned and painted and that nothing preclude the possibility for a decorative lighting element, which could add vibrance during the evening hours (e.g., multicolor illumination).

The Union Square Neighborhood Plan (USNP) calls for the incorporation of public art or a showpiece at the existing Eversource substation, to help screen the existing mechanical equipment. To facilitate this objective, Staff have recommended a condition that the Applicant work with the Somerville Arts Council (SAC) on an art installation to

be completed by the time construction is near completion. The Applicant must solicit local artists in collaboration with SAC.

Staff recommend several revisions to the applicants proposed landscape plan. Staff would prefer that the proposed evergreen hedge along Prospect Street be changed to at least one (1) large canopy tree to mimic street trees, with additional shrubs and groundcover. Staff further recommend that the types of plant species introduced follow the City's Native Species Ordinance. To confirm an appropriate range of species, Staff have recommended on condition that the final landscaping details are reviewed by Public Space and Urban Forestry Staff.

The Applicant has proposed to replace the existing sidewalk ramp with a new ADA accessible ramps and the existing crosswalk to be updated. To ensure coordination with relevant City Departments and the intent of pedestrian-priority, Staff have recommended a condition that all proposed public improvements to any sidewalk around the property be reviewed prior to the start of construction.

CONSIDERATIONS & FINDINGS

The Planning Board is required by the Somerville Zoning Ordinance to deliberate each of the following considerations at the public hearing. The Board must discuss and draw conclusions for each consideration, but may make additional findings beyond this minimum statutory requirement.

Special Permit Considerations

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. Need for a facility at the proposed site taking into consideration the proximity of the area of service of the utility.
4. Visual impact and quality of screening from abutting thoroughfares and surrounding properties.
5. Impact and mitigation of offensive noise, vibration, smoke, dust or other particulate matter, heat, humidity, glare or other objectionable effects.
6. Location of access for servicing the facility.

Information relative to the required considerations is provided below:

Special Permit

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

Staff believe that this proposal is consistent with the values of SomerVision 2040, the City's Comprehensive Master Plan, including:

- 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.

As the City continues to develop, especially in the City's transform areas, there is a need for more energy infrastructure and sources. This proposed transformer will help bring more electricity to the City and region, which will help enable the continued commercial and residential development that is envisioned in SomerVision 2040. Further, the City is currently moving towards electrifying buildings, as the City is moving away from relying on fossil fuel energy sources, new transformers will be needed to help with this transition.

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

Staff believes that the proposal is consistent with the intent of the MR4 zoning district which is, in part, "[T]o create, maintain, and enhance areas appropriate for smaller scale, multi-use and mixed-use buildings and neighborhood serving uses."

Staff also believe that the proposal is consistent with the intent of the CC4 zoning district which is, in part, "[T]o create, maintain, and enhance areas appropriate for moderately-scaled single- and multi-use commercial buildings; neighborhood-, community-, and region-serving uses; and a wide variety of employment opportunities."

3. Need for a facility at the proposed site taking into consideration the proximity of the area of service of the utility.

Staff believe that there is a need for a facility at the proposed site. This substation provides regional energy services to both Somerville and East Cambridge. The addition of the third transformer at this site will be used to serve the continuing and future development of Union Square, Boynton Yards, and other major developments in the direct vicinity.

4. Visual impact and quality of screening from abutting thoroughfares and surrounding properties.

Staff believe that the visual impact and quality of screening from abutting thoroughfares and surrounding properties is sufficient. The proposed screening of the new transformer meets the screening requirements of SZO Section 10.7.4.b.ii relating to all mechanical equipment needing to be screen to the height requital to or greater than the height of the mechanical equipment in need of screening. The proposed screening around the new substation will be made out of precast concrete panels and the height at the top of the wall will be thirty four (34) feet.

The Applicant also proposed screening around the entirety of the site voluntarily. The screening around the existing equipment will consist of a semi-opaque screening fence that will be approximately thirty eight (38) feet in height. All other fencing privacy fencing will be eight (8) feet in height, and will also be semi-opaque in materiality and color.

5. Impact and mitigation of offensive noise, vibration, smoke, dust or other particulate matter, heat, humidity, glare or other objectionable effects.

Staff believe that Applicant is providing proper mitigation elements to mitigate from offensive noise, vibration, smoke, dust or other particulate matter, heat, humidity, glare, or other objectionable effects.

6. Location of access for servicing the facility.

Staff believe that the existing driveway and curb cut is a sufficient location for servicing the facility. The site will only be serviced on an as-needed-basis by Eversource employees.

PERMIT CONDITIONS

Should the Board approve the required Special Permit to establish a Minor Utility Facility use, Planning, Preservation & Zoning Staff recommends the following conditions:

Permit Validity

- This Decision must be recorded with the Middlesex South Registry of Deeds.
- A written narrative or descriptive checklist identifying the completion or compliance with permit conditions must be provided to the Inspectional Services Department at least ten (10) working days in advance of a request for a final inspection.

Public Record

- A copy of the recorded Decision stamped by the Middlesex South Registry of Deeds must be submitted to the Planning, Preservation, & Zoning Division for the public record.
- One (1) digital copy of all required application materials reflecting any physical changes required by the Board, if applicable, must be submitted to the Planning, Preservation, & Zoning Division for the public record. Materials must be submitted in accordance with the document format standards of relevant Submittal Requirements.

Site Design

- An art installation must be incorporated onto the screening of the new transformer. Applicant must work with the Somerville Arts Council on a process to solicit a local artist(s) prior to applying for a Certificate of Occupancy.

- Screening of the new transformer must use full dimension architectural brick on the projecting pilasters.
- All architectural materials must be reviewed by the Director of Planning, Preservation, & Zoning prior to applying for a Building Permit.
- Existing equipment on the property must be cleaned and painted and cannot preclude the option to incorporate decorative lighting element. If applicable, a Lighting Plan must be submitted and reviewed by the Director of Planning, Preservation, & Zoning prior to installation.

Mobility

- Proposed public improvements to the public sidewalk along Prospect Street must be reviewed by relevant City departments prior to applying for a Building Permit.

Landscaping

- All newly planted species must be native species in conformance with the City's Native Species Ordinance. Final species selection must be reviewed by Public Space and Urban Forestry Staff, to confirm an appropriate range of species prior to applying for a Certificate of Occupancy.
- Any tree proposed to be removed from any adjacent property by the Applicant must be coordinated with the property owner and all applicable permits must be sought.