



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

5 SEPTEMBER 2024 MEETING MINUTES

This meeting was conducted via remote participation via Zoom.

NAME	TITLE	STATUS	ARRIVED
Michael Capuano	Chair	<i>Present</i>	
Amelia Aboff	Vice Chair	<i>Present</i>	
Jahan Habib	Clerk	<i>Present</i>	
Michael McNeley	Member	<i>Present</i>	
Debbie Howitt Easton	Alternate	<i>Present</i>	
Luc Schuster	Alternate	<i>Present</i>	

City staff present: Madison Anthony (Planning, Preservation, & Zoning); Sarah Lewis (Planning Preservation, & Zoning)

The meeting was called to order at 6:00pm and adjourned at 8:41pm.

Member Howitt Easton noted that she is stepping down from the Board. The Board thanked her for her service.

PUBLIC HEARING: 71-72 Union Square (ZP24-000059)

(continued from 15 August 2024)

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (6-0) to continue this hearing to 19 September 2024.

RESULT:

CONTINUED

GENERAL BUSINESS: Meeting Minutes

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (6-0) to approve the 1 August 2024 meeting minutes, as amended.

PUBLIC HEARING: 393 Highland Ave (ZP24-000058)

(continued from 15 August 2024)

The applicant team explained that the property in question is the long vacant, former Walgreens/Rite Aid/Osco Pharmacy. Healthworks Fitness would like to open a gym under its Republic Fitness Brand at this location. The property abuts a pedestrian street, which requires a Special Permit for a fitness use on the first floor. The team noted that a Special Permit is also required for over 10,000 leasable square feet for fitness use services. Exterior work is currently being completed on the building, which was previously permitted under a Site Plan Approval that was revised in 2022. The team stated that the building is not changing in footprint or height, and there will be no motor vehicle parking, and none is required, because the property is in the one quarter mile transit area. The property will have nine short-term bike parking spaces along the Highland Avenue building on city-owned property, which will require a permit from the City Council. Two long-term bike parking spaces are proposed right

by the front door. They also noted that although no Arts and Creative Enterprise (ACE) space is required, the applicant is proposing to add a mural on the left façade of the building facing the municipal parking lot. They stated that they meet the requirements for both Special Permits under Sections 9.2.6.K.2 and 9.1.7.C.1, as it provides a fitness services use in the CC4 district, which is a permitted use, in compliance with the plans and standards of Somerville. It will also activate the pedestrian street. They believe it meets the intent of the CC4 zoning district and will fill a long vacant space. It also maintains a diverse blend of commercial uses in the neighborhood; there is only one other gym in the area and there is a need for more gym space in Davis Square. A neighborhood meeting on June 12th showed a lot of support for the project.

Staff stated that this hearing was only noticed for the Special Permit for a fitness center use facing a pedestrian street. As it was not legally noticed for the additional Special Permit, Staff believes that the Board is not able to make a deliberation regarding the second Special Permit request tonight. The Board asked that Staff expedite the noticing for the second Special Permit as much as possible for the next available meeting. The Board stated that it would hear more about the use Special Permit this evening but would wait and vote on both Special Permits at a future meeting.

Chair Capuano opened public testimony for the use Special Permit at this time.

Amy Bantham (57 Meacham Road) – stated that she is greatly in favor of fitness services in Davis Square due to the incontrovertible link between movement and physical and mental health, the need for the expansion of access to physical activity opportunities in safe spaces, and the nature of Healthworks Fitness.

Hearing no additional testimony for or against, Chair Capuano closed public testimony. He stated that the written public testimony period would be kept open until noon on 27 September 2024.

The Board stated that this application seems appropriate. There was a question as to whether the number of short term bike spaces being provided is sufficient or should be a topic of possible increase. The applicant team noted that the number proposed is the zoning requirement. There are an appropriate number of other multimodal ways to access this property.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (6-0) to continue this hearing to 3 October 2024.

RESULT:

CONTINUED

PUBLIC HEARING: 290 Revolution Drive (ZP24-000024)

(continued from 15 August 2024)

The applicant team explained that the original owner, as part of the Site Plan Approval, referred to the space along Revolutionary Drive facing the Cambridge Health Alliance property as active retail. This traveled with the Special Permit, and the original Site Plan Approval. The property has since been sold and has sat vacant for almost three years. The current owner began conversations with Liberty Mutual, who owns Comparison, about this space and found out that it was still referenced as being active retail. There were conversations regarding if Liberty's use qualified as retail active space; it was determined it did not. A Major Amendment was then filed for.

The applicant team noted that Staff did not recommend supporting this and expressed concerns about the alignment and relationship with the park across the street. A suggestion was made by Staff for the applicant to include storage or meeting space to support park activities. A memo was then issued by the legal team on behalf of Liberty stating that the applicant would grant use of some space for purposes of park support or meeting space. A second memo was then issued by Planning Staff, requesting Liberty for a change to the original request from storage and meeting space to an art studio with access to public bathrooms. Unfortunately, Liberty's mission is

insurance, and the space needs to be secure. They are not comfortable overseeing an art space or providing public bathrooms. Although Liberty is still willing to provide supportive space for the park.

The Board noted that the location of this site, in the broader context of Assembly Square, fronts directly on the park space.

Chair Capuano opened public testimony at this time. Hearing no testimony for or against, Chair Capuano closed public testimony.

Staff explained that the intent of the no recommendation from Staff was to leave it up to the Board as professionals to evaluate and make a determination as they see fit.

The Board discussed other bank/coffee shops, and the different use proposed for this property. The applicant team explained that this type of office is unique, in that it will sell over 50 different companies' products. This will be a draw for locals and executives of those companies.

The Board asked about the proposed hours of operation and access to the supportive use space in off-hours. The applicant team explained that the proposed hours of operation are 8:30am-5pm on weekdays, with the ability for off-hours appointments in the evenings and on weekends. The supportive use space is a separately secured space and will be available off-hours.

The Board asked about the terms of the lease for this tenant. The applicant team explained that this is a five year lease. The Board discussed allowing a version of this to move forward, while considering a mechanism to allow this applicant, with the right use for this supportive space, to advance, while still maintaining a requirement in the future for a more active space. This use was not envisioned for this space per Assembly's plan, and the inclusion of storage space is antithetical to the goal to revert this to the active use that it was intended for. However, the retail use is not currently strong, and if this use changes over in the future, a more active use could then be considered. The applicant team explained that the storage space was broached during a meeting with Staff, but there could be other uses considered, such as meeting space. They stated that the investment being made in the space is fairly significant.

The Board discussed concern with the storage support use for the park. This does not meet the criteria for what was expected for this space or the one acre park in the middle of Assembly Square. This will be a dark storefront for a majority of time that the park space will be used. This is not what the Board intended for Assembly Square, or for this particular site. It was suggested that the applicant team and Staff continue to work together to find alternate solutions.

The applicant team stated that they are open to additional considerations for a meeting or storage space but, beyond that, does not believe that additional meetings with Staff will be helpful. Liberty has to move forward with a flagship headquarters in this region and would prefer a vote on this item this evening.

The Board stated that there are a number of uses less disruptive than an art studio but are still more aligned with the spirit and intent of the area, such as a gallery or service outlet for the Library, which could be considered by the applicant team. The applicant team stated that art in the window of the supportive space could be considered, and a complete gallery space could be considered as part of a meeting space. The applicant team is comfortable with the space being able to be utilized off-hours. However, an active artist space will not work with Liberty's use.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (6-0) to deny the Major Amendment to the previously issued Special Permit with Site Plan Review (PB 2018-12) in the Assembly Square Mixed-Use District.

RESULT:

DENIED

The Planning Board took a brief recess at 7:20pm and reconvened at 7:26pm.

OTHER BUSINESS:

- **Recommendations to City Council from the Joint Hearing on the following items:**
 - 14 registered voters requesting a Zoning Text Amendment to amend the Zoning Ordinances to add Section 8.4.19, Somernova Innovation Sub-Area (File #24-0679).
 - 15 registered voters requesting a Zoning Map Amendment to include 8 Park Street, 10 Park Street, 504 Somerville Avenue, 7-9 Properzi Way, 15-27 Properzi Way, 29 Properzi Way, 26-32 Park Street, 8-14 Tyler Street, 40 Park Street, 15 Dane Street, 7-9 Tyler Street, 30 Dane Street, 24-28 Dane Street, 460 Somerville Avenue, 444 Somerville Avenue, 440 Somerville Avenue, and 502 Somerville Avenue in the Somernova Innovation Sub-Area (File #24-0680).

The Board noted that it received a letter dated 20 August 2024 from the Historic Preservation Commission, specifically discussing the American Tube Works Building. The applicant team explained that the one building on Tyler Street, which was part of the discussion, is planned to be retained.

Staff explained that FAB 2.0, as it relates to the artists specifically, has repercussions that Staff are not happy with, in terms of what happens to Greentown Labs. There is no schedule for this to share at this time.

The Board stated that it was interested in a process that adopted many facets of this proposal but was fundamentally a city-led process. Staff stated that a full neighborhood plan would likely have a timeframe of approximately 1.5-2 years. There are options for more limited approaches to this, but these would be difficult. If this is approved, the next step would be a Master Plan Special Permit process. This would include a public process review with a Neighborhood Meeting. Each individual site plan, building, street, or civic space would then each have their own Site Plan Approval process.

The Board discussed being generally supportive of the idea of re-envisioning and reimagining what this area could be, could look like, and how it could function which would facilitate the expansion of incubator spaces, protect art spaces, protect historic buildings, add housing, and work with the neighborhood to make sure that it works cohesively in a way that is more thoughtful and long ranging.

The Board discussed giving no recommendation with guidance to the Land Use Committee that the Planning Board is generally supportive of the idea of moving forward with this in a way that is aligned with the proposal in a more inclusive and formalized process. The proposal is not the way this process is usually done. All of these changes are ones that run with the land and the buildings. These are not changes that are specific to Rafi Properties. There was a lot of community feedback and engagement and a lot of positive community response. None of that is codified in a map change or a text amendment. It is important for this to be a city-led process.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (6-0) to make no recommendation to the Land Use Committee, incorporating the discussion on this topic.

RESULT:	NO RECOMMENDATION
----------------	--------------------------

OTHER BUSINESS: Brickbottom Neighborhood Plan

Staff explained that they reviewed the design guidelines section and simplified it. There is also a proposal to remove the recommendation regarding a Special Permit for lab uses, as this does not seem necessary. General clarifications and updates for readability were made.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (5-0) to adopt the Brickbottom Neighborhood Plan as an appendix and an implementation plan of SomerVision.

RESULT:

ADOPTED

OTHER BUSINESS: Review of Standard Conditions of Approval

The Board reviewed its standard conditions of approval. The Board agreed to continue this discussion at future meetings.

NOTICE: These minutes constitute a summary of the votes and key discussions at this meeting. To review a full recording, please contact the Planning, Preservation & Zoning Division at planningboard@somervillema.gov.