



City of Somerville

PLANNING BOARD

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

TO: Planning Board
FROM: OSPCD Staff
SUBJECT: 20-23 Cummings Street, ZP24-000046
POSTED: November 27, 2024

RECOMMENDATION: Approve with Conditions (MPSP)

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 for 20-23 Cummings St, 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 September 25, 2024, and is scheduled for a public hearing on December 5, 2024. 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

Greystar Development East, LLC proposes a Master Plan in the Assembly Square Mixed-Use (ASMD) special district, which requires a Master Plan Special Permit.

SUMMARY OF PROPOSAL

Greystar Development East, LLC is proposing a master plan for a 3.33 acre development site roughly bounded by Mystic Avenue/Fellsway to the west and Middlesex Avenue to the east, McGrath Highway to the south, and the State Courthouse to the north. The proposal includes the following:

- Two (2) lab buildings
- One (1) general building
- Two (2) civic spaces
- Three (3) thoroughfares
- 1,254,800 SF of Lab/R&D uses
- 162,500 SF of hotel/hospitality uses
- 15,900 SF of food/beverage and child daycare uses

| Project | Phase | Specific Type | Floor Plate | Stories | GFA | Site/Lot Area |
|--------------|-------|--------------------------|-------------|-----------------|------------|---------------|
| Building | 1 | Lab | 35,000 SF | 18 ¹ | 633,000 SF | |
| Building | 2 | Lab | 35,000 SF | 18 | 630,000 SF | |
| Building | 3 | General | 10,000 SF | 17 | 170,000 SF | |
| Civic Space | 1 | Central Plaza | | | | 19,000 SF |
| Civic Space | 2 | Green | | | | 9,800 SF |
| Thoroughfare | 1-3 | Commercial Shared Street | | | | 9,600 SF |
| Thoroughfare | 2-3 | Commercial Shared Street | | | | 8,600 SF |
| Thoroughfare | 2 | Alley | | | | 11,000 SF |

BACKGROUND

20-23 Cummings Street is located in the 0.5mi Transit Area in the Assembly Square Mixed-Use (ASMD) special zoning district in the Assembly Square neighborhood represented by Ward 1 Councilor McLaughlin. Development of two (2) or more lots or the development of any building over fifty thousand (50,000) gross floor area requires a Master Plan Special Permit (MPSP) in the ASMD district. If the MPSP is approved, entitlement of each individual thoroughfare, civic space, and building in the Master Plan will occur through subsequent development review by the Planning Board. The Planning Board is the decision-making authority for all (non-variance) discretionary or administrative permits required for the ASMD special zoning district.

The applicant has also applied for several waivers from the provisions of SZO §7.4.7 dimensional standards, which requires a Special Permit and Special Permits for occupancy of a single commercial space greater than ten thousand (10,000) SF in leasable floor area and modifications to the provisions of Section 11.2 Motor Vehicle Parking. The applicable case number is ZP24-000085. For information related to that application, please see the Staff Memo dated November 27, 2024.

NEIGHBORHOOD MEETINGS

One (1) neighborhood meeting was hosted by Ward 1 Councilor McLaughlin and the applicant on July 26, 2023, via a hybrid meeting setting at Zoom meeting platform the Public Storage Community Room at 50 Middlesex Avenue in Somerville. The following feedback has been summarized from comments made by members of the public at the neighborhood meetings:

- The applicant should collaborate with MassDOT, especially with a cleaning schedule. Community would like to see a stronger connection.
- The applicant should explore a shuttle service to bring people from the Orange Line Station to the site.
- Positive feedback regarding usable open space.

¹ Building 1 will include a mezzanine.

- Applicant should pay attention to emissions from the highway. What are the considerations for air filtration in the buildings?
- Better connection from the rest of Somerville to Assembly Square.
- Some voiced less parking is preferred
- The applicant should establish a partnership with the Mystic River Watershed on invasive plan removals.
- Winter-focused programming for open spaces.

ANALYSIS

Staff analyzes proposed master plans based on the regulatory requirements of the area where the property is located, consistency with SomerVision, neighborhood plans, and urban design frameworks (if applicable), as well as planning and urban design principles to achieve the City's objectives. A Master Plan Special Permit is required for development in the ASMD special zoning district that involves the subdivision of a development site, development of two (2) or more lots, or the development of any building over fifty thousand (50,000) gross floor area.

This Master Plan proposes two high-rise lab buildings (lab/R&D uses), a high-rise general building (hospitality), two civic spaces, and three thoroughfares. The site, bounded by Fellsway to the west and Middlesex Avenue to the east, is approximately a ten (10) minute walk from the MBTA Assembly Square Orange Line Station, providing an important transit connection to downtown Boston and surrounding areas to the north. The site is a short walk from the restaurants, amenities, and employment opportunities associated with Assembly Row and close to the on-going and planned development associated with XMBLY at 5 Middlesex and the 74 Middlesex Avenue development next door. The project design intends to integrate into the fabric of ASMD and the context of the continued buildout of the Assembly Square neighborhood.

The 2000 Assembly Square Neighborhood Plan (2000 ASQ Plan) reflects community demands for mixed-use development and transit access. The plan called for the creation of the Assembly Square MBTA Orange Line Station, Assembly Row, and Mass General Brigham, as well as changes to the Assembly Marketplace. With a twenty (20)-year planning horizon, the plan has seen much of its goals realized over the past twenty (20) years. Development has accelerated, with many new developments built in the last ten years and permits still in the development pipeline, including existing Planned Unit Developments like XMBLY.

The draft neighborhood plan (<https://voice.somervillema.gov/assemblynp>) addresses market demands changes and the areas in the neighborhood that remain to be developed. The five (5) big ideas the plan calls for includes:

1. Build great places
2. Increase access to nature and build sustainably
3. Demand safe, comfortable, and interesting streets and increased transit availability
4. Grow revenue-generating uses for Somerville

5. Cultivate the Assembly community & reconnect physically and socially to the broader city

The plan calls for the Middlesex Avenue corridor development to be primarily workplace, commercial, and civic space uses. Middlesex Avenue is planned as a complete street with new street trees, cycle tracks, wide sidewalks, and on-street parking. The plan also calls for new connections, especially to extend the neighborhood's east-west streets and better the pedestrian crosswalk at Fellsway West.

Proposed Buildings

The Master Plan proposes three (3) total buildings. Buildings 1 and 2 are proposed as commercial buildings, consistent with the lab building typology found in the High Rise zoning district of the SZO. Buildings 1 and 2 will have the same floor plate of thirty-five thousand 35,000 SF, eighteen (18) stories, and approximately two hundred and ninety (290) feet in height. Building 3 will be consistent with the general building typology found in the High Rise zoning district. Building 3 will have a proposed floor plate of ten thousand (10,000) SF, seventeen (17) stories, and one hundred and seventy-five (175) feet in height.

Building 1 will primarily house Lab and R&D uses on floors two (2) through eighteen (18), with the ground floor containing a lobby, a proposed daycare facility, and back-of-house support functions. A five (5) level below-grade parking garage will be accessed from Thoroughfare 2. Building 2 will primarily house Lab and R&D uses on floors two (2) through eighteen (18), with the ground floor containing a lobby, food and beverage use, and back-of-house support functions. A five (5) level below-grade parking garage will be accessed from McGrath Highway. Building 3 will operate as a two-hundred (200) key hotel, with the ground floor containing a lobby, food and beverage use, and back-of-house support functions.

Proposed Civic Spaces

The Master Plan proposes almost thirty thousand (30,000) SF of publicly accessible civic space through two (2) planned civic spaces. The applicant intends the civic spaces to function as passive, active, accessible, and multi-use spaces serving as a connection between the neighborhoods of Ten Hills, East Somerville, and Winter Hill, and Assembly Square. Both civic spaces will be physically linked by Thoroughfare 1 and further activated by ground-floor retail and lobbies of the buildings.

Civic space 1 will be located directly in front of Building 1, with frontage along Thoroughfare 1. The space is proposed to be approximately nineteen thousand (19,000) SF. Civic Space 2 is proposed to be approximately nine thousand and eight hundred (9,800) SF. This civic space will be located in the frontage area of Building 2.

Staff note that as identified in the applicant's Civic Space Assessment, there is a lack of active space and connectivity to outdoor amenities within the Assembly Square

Neighborhood at the neighborhood scale. Even though there are many identified active parks and open spaces within a half mile walk, many of these spaces are only accessible by crossing large vehicular corridors which create open space barriers, preventing easy access for the Assembly Neighborhood. Staff will continue to work with the applicant with later entitlement processes for the Civic Spaces to make sure there is active recreation and connectivity to the rest of the neighborhood. Staff have recommended a condition that Civic Space 1 must incorporate elements of active recreational programming such as a playground, basketball court, pickleball court or outdoor workout equipment.

Proposed Thoroughfares

A total of three (3) new thoroughfares are proposed as part of this Master Plan. Both Thoroughfare 1 and 2 are proposed to be Commercial Shared Streets. Thoroughfare 3 is proposed as an alley.

Thoroughfare 1 will link the pedestrian crossing at Fellsway West to the development site and beyond into Assembly Square. This thoroughfare is not intended to be a vehicular cut through to any other streets. It will function as a one-way system for slow-moving vehicular traffic. Daily use of Thoroughfare 1 will allow vehicular and pedestrian traffic, and the development site roadway network will allow for the street to be closed for programmed events such as farmers markets and fairs. Thoroughfare 2 will provide access to the below-grade parking for Buildings 1 and 3 and drop-off access to Building 3. Thoroughfare 2 will extend the existing Cummings Street and provide circulation to parking and load areas for Buildings 1 and 3. Thoroughfare 3 will be constructed parallel to Fellsway West, providing looped circulation for ride-share drivers, drop-off zones, and delivery truck access for all buildings.

Site Design & Layout

Staff have collaborated with the applicant to design the site and circulation to ensure ample space for safe pedestrian and bicycle travel from Fellways into Assembly Square through the development site. A twelve (12) foot multi-use path is proposed as part of this Master Plan (see supplemental document from applicant dated November 27, 2024) for pedestrian and bicycle travel. This path will be located adjacent to Building 1 to the north and Thoroughfare 1 to the south. The path will follow the alignment of proposed Thoroughfare 1 and Cummings Street. This pathway will resemble the one currently under construction at the neighboring 74 Middlesex Avenue civic space, which connects under I-93 to East Somerville.

This new link will provide an important car-free connection for pedestrians and cyclists to this site and beyond to Assembly Square, serving the broader community and reducing vehicular use on the site. When combined with multi-use paths that MassDOT will construct at the adjacent 28/30 interchange and along the Fellsway, as well as the bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure proposed for the upcoming McGrath Boulevard, this multi-use path will connect this site and Assembly Square directly into the broader

transportation network, offering a safe and comfortable facility separated from moving motor vehicles.

Engineering Staff note that the construction of new roads requires a Streetscape Construction Permit (SCP) that need to be approved by the City before starting the project. These permits must include detailed engineering plans. The current plan is missing important utility drawings, which are necessary for approval. The project cannot handle all rainwater on-site, so it needs to be connected to the city's storm drain system. The plan must reduce the amount of rainwater runoff during heavy storms to prevent flooding. The plan also needs to address groundwater management. Ideally, no water should be removed from the ground during construction. If some removal is necessary, it must be managed on-site and not sent to the city's storm drain system. Any water that enters the city's sewer system must be treated to prevent pollution. These items will be handled through subsequent permitting processes with relevant City Departments.

Parking and Mobility

The Mobility Division has provided a supplementary staff memo that addresses mobility and parking items in greater detail related to this application. Please review that supplementary staff memo dated November 27, 2024 for all staff analysis relating to mobility and parking.

Sustainability

The applicant has committed to minimizing energy consumption, reducing carbon emissions, and achieving the overall sustainability goals outlined in SomerVision 2040 according to their Master Plan narrative. While the typical documentation for sustainability and resilience is not required for the Master Plan process, the applicant intends for the proposed buildings to meet the following sustainable design and operation standards:

- Buildings 1 and 2 will be constructed to meet the minimum requirements to achieve a LEED Platinum Certifiable level.
- Building 3 will prohibit on-site combustion for HVAC and cooking uses and be constructed to meet the standards of either Zero Carbon or higher from the International Living Future Institute or PHIUS+ from the Passive House Institute.

As part of the future Site Plan Approval process for the buildings, each building will need to submit individual documentation to the Office of Sustainability & Environment related to sustainability, LEED, etc.

The applicant should consider flood resiliency for both sea level rise and precipitation flooding. Precipitation flooding is likely to be the more problematic aspect for this project area. The Engineering Division can provide the applicant with the City's most recently modeled precipitation and sea level rise flood elevations.

Economic Development

Economic Development Staff have conducted a thorough review of all plans and related documents and have provided the following comments:

- **Active ground floor spaces and facades:** The Master plan will help activate ground floor spaces and facades by proposing retail shops, restaurants, lobbies, and a daycare facility.
- **Interplay of ground floor space and open space:** The Master plan will help improve the interplay of ground floor space and civic space by located the proposed civic spaces next to the proposed active ground floor uses.
- **Building signage and wayfinding:** The Master Plan will help improve signage and wayfinding at the site by replacing the two (2) current buildings on site with surrounding parking with a coherent block of buildings with transparent ground floors connected with welcoming, legible civic space.
- **Outdoor dining and commercial activity outside:** See comment above.
- **Ground floor layout:** The Master Plan will replace two current buildings on the site with buildings that will have much more transparent ground floors through large windows
- **Bicycle and pedestrian access:** The Master Plan will provide new pedestrian-oriented thoroughfares integrated with the proposed civic spaces and retail uses while providing extensive bicycle parking on site.

Phasing

The applicant intends to develop the proposed Master Plan over three (3) total phases. Phase 1 will develop the 23 Cummings Street parcel, including Building 1, Civic Space 1, a parking ramp to the underground parking facility, and the temporary paving of Thoroughfare 1. Phase 2 will develop 20 Cummings Street, including Building 2, Civic Space 2, Thoroughfare 3, and the temporary paving of Thoroughfare 2. Phase 3 will conclude with the development of Building 3 and the completion of Thoroughfares 1 and 2. The applicant notes in their application that the construction of Building 3 may fit better in phases 1 or 2, depending on economic conditions. Staff have recommended a condition that reflects the possibility of moving the building to another phase without necessitating a major amendment to the application.

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.

Master Plan 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. The proposed alignment and connectivity of the thoroughfare network.
4. The gross floor area allocated to different use categories.
5. Mitigation proposed to alleviate any adverse impacts on utility infrastructure.
6. Proposed development phasing.
7. Proposed on-street parking to address demand by customers of Retail Sales, Food & Beverage, or Commercial Services principal uses.
8. Consistency with the ASQ Plan.

Information relative to the required considerations is provided below:

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

Staff believes that the proposal will help to achieve the following from SomerVision 2040 which is, the comprehensive Master Plan for the City of Somerville:

- 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.
- Promote a dynamic urban streetscape that embraces public transportation, reduces car dependence, [] and safe for all pedestrians, bicyclists, and transit riders.
- Minimize the overall land use in Somerville dedicated to personal vehicles while encouraging alternative modes.
- Ensure Somerville civic spaces are for the entire community. They should be welcoming and easily accessible, and people should feel empowered to enjoy them and improve them.

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

Staff believes that the proposed Master Plan is consistent with the Assembly Square Mixed-Use (ASMD) special zoning district which, is in, part [t]o redevelop underutilized areas within close walking distance to the Assembly Square T-station with mixed-use, mid-rise and high-rise, transit-oriented development that will support the transformation of Assembly Square into an urban commerce center.

3. The proposed alignment and connectivity of the thoroughfare network.

Staff believes that the proposed alignment and connectivity of the proposed thoroughfare network is consistent with the future planned network for the neighborhood.

4. The gross floor area allocated to different use categories.

Staff believes that the gross floor area allocated to different use categories is consistent with the goals of SomerVision 2040 around developing new commercial spaces for employment opportunities and the ASQ Plan for research and development uses in the Assembly Square neighborhood. Ground floor retail and food & beverage uses will complement the proposed commercial uses along with new civic spaces in the Master Plan area.

5. Mitigation proposed to alleviate any adverse impacts on utility infrastructure.

Staff believes that the proposed Master Plan does not create any adverse impacts on existing utilities and that proposed improvements are in accordance with all City standards and will be reviewed further via subsequent permitting processes.

6. Proposed development phasing.

Staff believe that phasing is appropriate for this proposed Master Plan as it consists of multiple buildings, civic spaces, and thoroughfares. Further staff believes that the applicants proposed phasing plan (including the possibility of building 3 being moved from phase 3 to phases 1 or 2) is a logical order of development.

7. Proposed on-street parking to address demand by customers of Retail sales, Food & Beverage, or Commercial Services principal uses.

Staff believes that the proposed Master Plan is providing enough on-street parking to address demand by customers or Retail sales, Food & Beverage, or Commercial Services principle uses.

8. Consistency with the ASQ Plan.

Staff believes that the proposed Master Plan is consistent with the ASQ Plan specifically related to the plan's goal of generating a high amount of commercial office and research and development uses.

Staff also believe that this proposed Master Plan is consistent with the publicly available draft ASQ Plan update including but not limited to the plans goals to make Middlesex Avenue a "research corridor" and developing taller buildings close to I-93 and away from the core of the neighborhood and a creating a pedestrian oriented connection at Fellsway into the Assembly Square Neighborhood.

PERMIT CONDITIONS

Should the Board grant approval for a Master Plan Special Permit, Planning, Preservation & Zoning Staff recommends the following conditions:

Permit Validity

1. This Decision must be recorded with the Middlesex South Registry of Deeds.

2. This MPSP certifies that development may proceed in accordance with the standards of the Assembly Square Mixed-Use district.
3. Applying for development review for any proposed thoroughfare, civic space, or building identified in the submitted Master Plan constitutes substantial use of this MPSP for the purpose of subsequent development entitlement.
4. All approvals are for property located outside the public right-of-way, which is at the discretion of the City.

Public Record

5. A digital 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.
6. 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.

Legal Agreements

7. The property owner(s) and all applicable future tenants must comply with the Master Mobility Management Plan dated February 29, 2024.
8. Thoroughfare lots must be dedicated to the public by a covenant or other deed restriction following completion of construction. Satisfaction of this condition must be approved by the City Solicitor.
9. Civic Space lots must be dedicated to the public by a covenant or other deed restriction following completion of construction. Satisfaction of this condition must be approved by the City Solicitor.

Development Permitting

10. Development must proceed as identified in Phase 1 (Section 1.10.1; Figure 1.14a Phasing Plan – Phase 1), Phase 2 (Section 1.10.2; Figure 1.14b Phasing Plan – Phase 2), and Phase 3 (Section 1.10.3; Figure 1.14c Phasing Plan – Phase 3) of the approved plan except the general building may be moved to Phase 1 or 2 at the discretion of the property owner as a de minimis plan revision.
11. Land platting must result in a number and general configuration of lots and rights-of-way that is substantially equivalent to Figure 1.6 – Proposed Lot Plan of the approved Master Plan.
12. Greystar Development East, LLC must post a performance bond for one hundred and twenty five percent (125%) of the total estimated costs to design and construct Civic Space 1, Civic Space w, and all conditioned transportation impact mitigation prior to applying for any building permit, streetscape construction permit, or civic space permit for development subject to the approved Master Plan.
13. Greystar Development East, LLC may not apply for Site Plan Approval of any thoroughfare, civic space, or building in a succeeding phase until all

thoroughfares, civic spaces, or buildings have received a construction permit (BP, CSP, or SCP) for the proceeding phase.

14. If a period of one (1) year lapses between the Site Plan Approval required for any thoroughfare, civic space, or building types and the date of decision of the preceding Site Plan Approval for any thoroughfare, civic space, or building type in the same phase, the Greystar Development East, LLC must update the Planning Board

Plan Revisions

15. Changes to the number or general configuration of lots; thoroughfares, civic spaces, or buildings; development phases; and the percentages of commercial floor area is a major amendment to the previously approved Master Plan and is permitted only as a revision to this MPSP.

Thoroughfares

16. The general alignment, connectivity, right-of-way, and geometry of thoroughfares must be substantially equivalent to the thoroughfares shown in the approved Master Plan.

Civic Spaces

17. Civic Space 1 must include active recreational elements as part of the Civic Space programming.