



City of Somerville

PLANNING BOARD

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

TO: Planning Board
FROM: OSPCD Staff
SUBJECT: 53 Chester Street, ZP24-000054 & ZP24-000055
POSTED: January 13, 2025

RECOMMENDATION: Approve with Conditions (SPA)
Approve with Conditions (SP for Residential Housing)

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 53 Chester 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 December 3, 2024, and is scheduled for a public hearing on February 6, 2025. 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

ZP24-000054:

John Greenip proposes to develop a four (4) story general building type along a Pedestrian street in the Mid-Rise 4 zoning district, which requires Site Plan approval.

ZP24-000055:

John Greenip proposes to establish a Residential Housing principal use along a Pedestrian street in the Mid-Rise 4 zoning district, which a Special Permit.

SUMMARY OF PROPOSAL

John Greenip is proposing to construct a four (4) story general building. The proposed development will produce 779 square feet of commercial space, three (3) dwelling, 3 (three) motor vehicle parking spaces, three (3) long-term bicycle parking spaces, four (4) short-term bicycle parking spaces, and the proposed landscape will earn a Green Score of 0.26.

BACKGROUND

53 Chester Street is located on a Pedestrian Street in the 0.25 transit area in the Mid-Rise 4 (MR4) zoning district in the Davis Square neighborhood represented by Ward 6 Councilor Lance Davis. Establishing a general building in the MR4 district requires Site

Plan Approval. Site Plan Approval is the administrative review and approval of conforming development to address any potential impacts as necessary. The Planning Board is the decision-making authority for all (non-variance) discretionary or administrative permits required for the MR4 zoning district.

NEIGHBORHOOD MEETINGS

The first neighborhood meeting was hosted by Ward 6 Councilor Lance Davis and the applicant on June 7, 2023, via the Zoom meeting platform. A second neighborhood meeting was hosted by Ward 6 Councilor Lance Davis and the application on November 28, 2023, via the Zoom meeting platform. At the meetings, members of the Public provided feedback on the following topics, but not limited to:

- Parking and traffic impacts
- Ground floor commercial space
- Construction and demolition impacts
- Type of permits needed for this project
- Desire to see more units than what is proposed
- Deliveries, loading, and trash management
- Site landscaping

DESIGN REVIEW

The proposal was reviewed by Somerville Urban Design Commission via the GoToWebinar meeting platform on July 25, 2023 and August 8, 2023. The Commission provided its official recommendation on September 26, 2023. The UDC provided the following final guidance and recommended design modifications:

- The balcony handrails should be designed to balance opaque and transparent materiality.
- Windows should be revised to be more contemporary-looking.
- Ground floor facade should have a decrease in spandrel glass height and increase with vision-glass.

ANALYSIS

Building and Land Use

The proposed development is a four (4) story general building, with commercial space on the ground floor and residential units on the upper floors. A total of three (3) units are proposed, all are proposed as three (3) bedroom units. Unit 1 will be on the second floor. Units 2 and 3 will be set up a like a duplex with both units splitting both floors three (3) and four (4) with one unit on each side. All units will have access to an elevator. Each unit will have access to outdoor space via a balcony.

The proposed development includes 779 square feet of commercial space. The applicant is proposing the commercial space be used as an art gallery. Though the ground floor commercial use will be determined later on, the commercial use will need

to be an active-oriented use as the space will be fronting on a pedestrian street.¹ Economic Development Staff note that the proposed development will improve ground floor activation by introducing commercial space, particularly for art galleries, if pursued. It will enhance signage and wayfinding with transparent facades and clear entrances. Additionally, it will improve pedestrian and cyclist access with new sidewalks and bike parking.

Landscape and Public Space

At the ground level, the landscape site design includes permeable pavers along the front of the building, reinforced gravel, pea gravel, and a 1.5' planting bed of sedges. The streetscape is enhanced with three (3) street trees, bike racks, a standard bench, and sedges planted around the trees. One (1) 21' yew is proposed for removal. The most substantial landscaping is on the roof. The Green Score was met substantially due to the inclusion of a green roof planted with native ornamental grasses. The roof does not feature recreational space but the planting can be maintained through rooftop access entry.

PSUF Staff notes that the strip of grasses along the back edge of the property may not survive as they are on the north and east sides of the building and will likely not get much sun. There is no access path to allow for maintenance other than walking through the garden bed.

The removal of trees requires review under the Somerville Tree Preservation Ordinance and street tree plantings and species selection must be coordinated with PSUF Staff. Any plantings in the tree wells must be maintained by the property owner and should not block sidewalk access.

Mobility and Streetscape

The proposed development will include three (3) motor vehicle parking spaces. The proposed development will include four (4) bike parking spaces. Both the motor vehicle parking spaces and bike parking spaces will be located in a garage, which is accessed off of Herbert Street. Four (4) short-term bike parking spaces are also proposed in the frontage areas of the site.

Infrastructure and Engineering

Engineering Staff noted that all projects must be in compliance with Engineering Site Construction Rules and Regulations. These regulations address stormwater and groundwater management best practices. Projects must also address inflow and infiltration sewer mitigation as part of the project to manage wastewater.

CONSIDERATIONS & FINDINGS

¹ Per SZO §4.2.13.b.i. occupancy of a ground story commercial space fronting a pedestrian street is permitted as specified in the second column of Table 4.2.13.

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.

Site Plan Approval 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. Mitigation proposed to alleviate any impacts attributable to the proposed development.

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.

Information relative to the required considerations is provided below:

Site Plan Approval and Special Permit for Residential Housing Principal Use

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

Staff believes that this project supports the goals laid out in SomerVision 2040, the City's Comprehensive Master Plan, including the following:

- Significantly increase housing stock to keep up with demand while pursuing the goals of increasing the proportion of affordable housing and housing stock diversity.
- Minimize the overall land use in Somerville dedicated to personal vehicles while encouraging alternative modes.

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

Staff believes that this project meets 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 commercial uses."

Staff believes that this project also meets the intent of the SZO (§1.1.4), including, but no limited to the following:

- To develop and maintain complete, mixed-use, walkable, transit-oriented, and environmentally sustainable neighborhoods that foster a strong sense of community throughout the city.
- To preserve and enhance the design of Somerville's public realm.

- To encourage the use of public transportation, bicycling, and walking in lieu of motor vehicle use when a choice of travel mode exists.

Site Plan Approval Specific

3. *Mitigation proposed to alleviate any impacts attributable to the proposed development.*

Staff believes that, as conditioned, the proposal does not create any impacts which require mitigation.

PERMIT CONDITIONS

Should the Board approve the required Site Plan Approval for the 4-story general building and Special Permit for Residential Housing, Planning, Preservation & Zoning Staff recommends the following any 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 to the Inspectional Services Department at least ten (10) working days in advance of a request for a final inspection.

Public Record

- If the Board requires any changes to the submitted plans, digital copies of all applicable application materials reflecting those changes 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.
- A digital copy of the recorded Decision stamped by the Middlesex South Registry of Deeds must submitted to the Planning, Preservation, & Zoning Division for the public record.

Should the Board approve the required Site Plan Approval for the 4-story general building, Planning, Preservation & Zoning Staff recommends the following any conditions:

Legal Agreements

- A public right-of-way or pedestrian access easement must be provided in perpetuity by a covenant or other deed restriction for the full area of the sidewalk provided within the frontage area of the lot. Final easement language must be approved by the City Solicitor. The easement must be recorded at the Middlesex Registry of Deeds prior to application for a Certificate of Occupancy.

Construction Documents

- Construction documents must be substantially equivalent to the approved plans and other materials submitted for development review.
- Material specifications from suppliers must be submitted to confirm fenestration glazing is compliant with the VLT and VLR ratings required by the Somerville Zoning Ordinance.
- An outdoor lighting plan and supplier cut sheet specifications of chosen lighting fixtures must be submitted to confirm compliance with Section 10.7 Outdoor Lighting of the Somerville Zoning Ordinance. The site photometric plan must include a keyed site plan identifying the location of all luminaires; total site lumen limit table (calculations from the SZO); lighting fixture schedule indicating the fixture type, description, lamp type, lumens, color temperature, color rendering index, BUG rating, mounting height, and wattage of all luminaires; and notation of any timing devices used to control the hours set for illumination.

Site & Building Design

- Utility meters are not permitted on any facade or within the frontage area of the lot.
- Electrical transformers and other mechanical equipment are not permitted above ground within the frontage area of any lot.
- Frontage area provided for a widened sidewalk along Chester Street and Herbert Street must be designed and paved to properly correspond with any sidewalk improvements approved within the public right-of-way.
- A Digital Massing Model of only the building's massing, in SketchUp format (.skp), that is to scale and properly geo-located and oriented for use in placing and viewing the project within the City's digital model of existing buildings in the city must be submitted to the Planning, Preservation, & Zoning Division prior to the issuance of a Building Permit. The model should be the main mass only and should not include any detailed architectural features of the proposed building, including building components or materiality.

Should the Board approve the required Special Permit to establish a Residential Housing principal use, Planning, Preservation & Zoning Staff recommends the following conditions:

Transportation

- The Applicant shall install a bike corral containing a minimum of four (4) short-term bicycle parking spaces onsite.
- The Applicant shall install a minimum of three (3) long-term bicycle parking spaces onsite.