



City of Somerville

ZONING BOARD OF APPEALS

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

TO: Zoning Board of Appeals
FROM: OSPCD Staff
SUBJECT: 282 McGrath Hwy, ZP25-000024
POSTED: March 21, 2025

RECOMMENDATION: Approve with Conditions (Special Permit)

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 Special Permit application submitted for 282 McGrath Hwy, 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 7, 2025, and is scheduled for a public hearing on April 2, 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

181 Bonfire Corp., d/b/a Bonfire Boston, seeks a Special Permit to establish a Restaurant use in the Small Business Overlay District where the underlying zoning district is Neighborhood Residence.

SUMMARY OF PROPOSAL

The Applicant is proposing to establish a Restaurant use in a pre-existing nonconforming commercial building in the Small Business Overlay District, where the underlying zoning is the Neighborhood Residence zoning district. The Applicant is not proposing any changes to the exterior of the property that would require additional review.

BACKGROUND

282 McGrath Hwy is located in the 0.25mi Transit Area in the Small Business Overlay District (underlying zoning being the Neighborhood Residence zoning district) in the Union Square neighborhood represented by Ward 2 Councilor J.T. Scott. Establishing a Restaurant use in the Small Business Overlay District where the underlying zoning is the Neighborhood Residence zoning district requires a Special Permit. The Zoning Board of Appeals is the decision-making authority for all discretionary or administrative permits required for the NR zoning district. If the Board grants this Special Permit, the project will require a building permit to open.

As noted in the Applicant's Narrative, a bar/restaurant previously occupied the building from the 1970s until March 2020. At that time, the property was only zoning Neighborhood Residence (not Small Business Overlay District), and restaurant was considered a pre-existing nonconforming use. Due to the building's vacancy and the fact that the use was not reestablished after two years, the property lost the vested right for the use. In 2024, the Applicant applied to rezone the property to be within the Small Business Overlay District. Recognizing the existing conditions and history of the property, the City Council approved the zoning map change.

The Small Business Overlay District allows a range of additional commercial uses by right or by Special Permit, including food and beverage service uses.

NEIGHBORHOOD MEETINGS

The required neighborhood meeting was hosted by Ward 2 Councilor J.T. Scott and the applicant on February 5, 2025, via the Zoom meeting platform. Comments from the public were minimal but positive, and no one expressed concerns or requested changes.

ANALYSIS

Site and Neighborhood Context

The site at 282 McGrath Hwy is within the Union Square Neighborhood. The stretch of McGrath Hwy where the site is located is between Somerville Ave to the south and Washington St to the north, with the Brickbottom neighborhood directly across McGrath Hwy to the west. The building is one of several pre-existing commercial buildings on the block and was previously a restaurant from the 1970s until 2020. A range of commercial uses are within walking distance of the site, and although residential uses abut both sides and the rear of the property, the immediate neighborhood and surrounding area can be considered mixed-use.

Economic Development Division staff have noted the proposal will benefit the area by updating the building and site; activating the space and supporting activity on the street, particularly by pedestrians and bicyclists; improving wayfinding by providing an active and visible commercial use; and providing a neighborhood-serving restaurant use.

Site and Exterior Building

The site includes a single-story commercial building and a driveway to the right of the building. The Applicant has proposed improvements to the exterior of the building that require building permits, but no Site Plan Approval or other discretionary review.

No landscaping or public realm improvements are being proposed as part of this permit application. Signage must be reviewed for zoning compliance under a separate building

permit and is not part of this application (although signage is shown in submitted plans for illustrative purposes).

Mobility

There are no parking minimum requirements for this project. No vehicular parking is being proposed for the project, consistent with the historic use of the property. The site is less than 0.25 miles from the East Somerville GLX station and less than 0.5 miles from the Union Square GLX station, and surrounded by pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure that facilitates alternative modes of transportation, consistent with Somerville's Comprehensive Plan.

Under the Somerville Zoning Ordinance, bicycle parking is required for restaurant uses; this restaurant use requires four (4) short-term bicycle parking spaces and one (1) long-term bicycle parking space, due to the floor area. The Applicant has not yet submitted plans demonstrating the location of these bicycle parking spaces or zoning compliance, although compliance with this requirement can be determined at the time of application for a Building Permit. City staff have added a condition related to this requirement to help ensure compliance.

CONSIDERATIONS & FINDINGS

The Zoning Board of Appeals 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.

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

- Protect and foster the diversity of our people, culture, and economy.
- Create an environment that enables existing small businesses to thrive and produce entrepreneurial opportunities for new ones. Ensure that the regulatory environment supports the innovative business models necessary for businesses to adapt.

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

Staff believes the project meets the intent of the Small Business Overlay zoning district, which is, in part: "To create, maintain, and enhance locations appropriate for neighborhood- and community-serving businesses."

PERMIT CONDITIONS

Should the Board approve the required Special Permit to establish a Restaurant use in the Small Business Overlay District, OSPCD Staff propose the following conditions:

Permit Validity

1. This Decision must be recorded with the Middlesex South Registry of Deeds.
2. 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

3. 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.
4. 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.

Mobility

5. Updated plans demonstrating compliant short- and long-term bicycle parking must be submitted to ISD and the Mobility Division for review prior to the issuance of a Building Permit.