



City of Somerville

PLANNING BOARD

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

TO: Planning Board
FROM: OSPCD Staff
SUBJECT: 181 Pearl Street, ZP25-000030 (SPA), ZP25-000055 (Special Permit)
POSTED: August 1, 2025

RECOMMENDATION:

Approve with Conditions (SPA)
Approve with Conditions (SP for Residential Housing Use)

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 Site Plan Approval and Special Permit applications submitted for 181 Pearl 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 June 10, 2025, and is scheduled for a public hearing on August 7, 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 Pearl St. LLC. seeks to develop an Apartment Building in the MR3 zoning district, which requires Site Plan Approval.

181 Pearl St. LLC. Seeks to establish a residential housing use in the MR3 zoning district, which requires a Special Permit.

SUMMARY OF PROPOSAL

181 Pearl St. LLC. is proposing to construct a 3-story Apartment Building on an MR3-zoned lot. The proposed development will produce 3,572 square feet of residential housing, three (3) dwelling units, no new motor vehicle parking spaces, 2 short-term bicycle parking spaces, 3 indoor long-term bicycle parking spaces, and the proposed landscape will earn a Green Score of 0.341.

BACKGROUND

181 Pearl Street is located in the 0.05 mi Transit Area in the MR3 zoning district in the Winter Hill neighborhood represented by Ward 1 Councilor Matthew McLoughlin. Establishing an apartment building in the MR3 district requires Site Plan Approval. Site

Plan Approval is the administrative review and approval of conforming development to address any potential impacts as necessary. Establishing a residential housing use in the MR3 district requires a Special Permit. The Planning Board is the decision-making authority for all non-variance discretionary or administrative permits required for the MR3 zoning district.

The Applicant has received four (4) Hardship Variances from the Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) exempting them from providing the following:

- The façade buildout requirements under SZO § 4.1.7.c. The minimum primary front façade buildout in the MR3 zoning district is 80%, whereas the applicant proposed a primary front façade buildout of 67.3%.
- The principal entrance requirements under SZO § 2.4.5.b.i.a, which require principal entrances to be on the front facade. The placement of the principal entrance is through the courtyard on the left (side) elevation, rather than on the front façade.
- The sidewalk width requirements under SZO § 4.1.16.a.i. Under the requirements of the SZO, any lot abutting a sidewalk less than twelve (12) feet in width, must pave the frontage area to provide a sidewalk that is at least twelve (12) feet in total width. Here, proposal is for a sidewalk that is 7' 3¾" on the Pearl Street facing side of the building and a 6' 11½" sidewalk on the Dana Street facing side of the building.
- The landscape buffer requirements of SZO § 10.3.6.a.i. Under this section of the SZO, "Any lot in the MR, HR, FAB, CC, CI, or CB district abutting the side or rear lot line of a lot in the NR district must be screened by a landscape buffer". Here, there is no landscape buffer screening the property.

All of the above Hardship Variances are current and valid.

NEIGHBORHOOD MEETINGS

The first neighborhood meeting was hosted by Ward 1 Councilor Matthew McLaughlin and the applicant team on January 3, 2024, via the Zoom meeting platform. The applicant team provided an overview of the project, and attendees asked a range of questions on subjects including (but not limited to) the parking, roof height, and how deliveries will be handled.

The second neighborhood meeting was hosted by Ward 1 Councilor Mathew McLaughlin and the applicant team on November 14, 2024, via the Zoom meeting platform. The applicant team provided an overview of the process, including a summary of the design review process, and an attendee asked one question regarding on-street parking.

DESIGN REVIEW

The proposal was reviewed by the Somerville Urban Design Commission (UDC) via the

Zoom meeting platform on September 10 and October 8, 2024. The Commission provided its official recommendation on October 8, 2024. During design review, updates to the design were made, including:

- improving the landscape and streetscape to better integrate them the architecture,
- redesign the metal panels on the façade for a more elegant appearance, increasing the variation of the West façade,
- improvements to the entrance to the site that align with the stoop culture of the neighborhood highlighted,
- consideration for additional colors for the recessed balconies,
- and redesigning the roof to support future PV.

The UDC provided additional recommendations related to the continued evaluation of how light can be integrated into the entrance and the canopy and continued evaluation of the materials of the canopy.

They proposed an additional condition to their recommendations, requiring the review of materials prior to submission of application for a Building Permit. The full UDC recommendation is provided as part of the application.

ANALYSIS

Building/Land Use

The proposed development is a 3-story Apartment Building. Three (3) residential units are proposed (one per story). Each unit will have two bedrooms. The proposal does not trigger an affordable housing requirement, and no affordable units are being proposed. The proposal will result in a total of 3,572 sq. ft. of residential housing on a 2,024 sq. ft. lot.

The Applicant has received multiple Hardship Variances (see list at outset of report) from the Somerville ZBA. The ZBA found the small size of this lot compared to other MR3 lots to be a qualifying hardship for the granted variances. The lot is about one-third the size of the average MR3 parcel. The lot is also an MR3 lot, abutted by two NR lots and is not part of a larger commercial area. Furthermore, the neighboring property at 4 Dana Street is using part of the property on the 181 Pearl Streer lot as a driveway. The driveway encroachment is 3'6" wide along the entire northern lot line. Although the applicant has not indicated that a binding easement exists that requires this to continue, they have stated that they will allow the neighbor to continue using this portion of the property as a driveway.

No additional motor vehicle parking is proposed for the site. There are two short-term bicycle parking spaces proposed outdoors and three long-term spaces proposed indoors.

Landscape and Public Space

The proposal includes permanent planters as well as some in-ground plantings and permeable pavers. Public Space and Urban Forestry (PSUF) has confirmed compliance with the Green Score. A Hardship Variance has been granted for the landscape buffer requirements under SZO § 10.3.6.a.i.

Sustainability & Environment

The Applicant completed the sustainable building questionnaire required by the Office of Sustainability & Environment and were issued a Certificate of Received Materials (CRM).

Mobility and Streetscape

As noted earlier, no motor vehicle parking spaces are proposed, while two (2) short-term and three (3) long-term bicycle parking spaces are proposed. The proposed bicycle parking complies with the dimensional and spacing standards of the SZO. However, the Mobility Division recommends that the Applicant adjust the spacing of their long-term bicycle parking so that the bicycle racks are three feet apart on-center, rather than four feet apart as shown. This adjustment would allow for the most efficient use of this space, which could then accommodate an additional bicycle parking space or possibly another use of the reclaimed space.

Given the ongoing design of a City reconstruction project on Pearl Street adjacent to the property, the Mobility Division has requested that, given the ongoing design of a City reconstruction project on Pearl Street adjacent to the property, the Applicant coordinate with the Mobility Division on the final streetscape design, prior to issuance of Building Permit.

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. Engineering staff has requested eight additional conditions be added so that this project is in compliance with these practices.

CONSIDERATIONS & FINDINGS

The Planning Board 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

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:

- Increase the housing supply, including housing that is contextual to the existing neighborhood.
- Prioritize walking, biking, and transit options and minimize space dedicated to personal vehicles
- Provide development that limits greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.
- Ensure the diversity of housing stock

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

The intent of the MR3 zoning district is, in part: "To create, maintain, and enhance areas appropriate for smaller scale, multi-use and mixed-use buildings and neighborhood serving commercial uses."

Staff also believe that this project meets the broader intent of the Somerville Zoning Ordinance, including 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 provide a range of housing types, unit sizes, and price points to accommodate the diverse household sizes and life stages of Somerville residents at all income levels.
- To encourage contemporary architectural design for new construction that compliments the established character of existing buildings.

- 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 believe, as conditioned, the proposal does not produce any impacts that require additional mitigation.

PERMIT CONDITIONS

Special Permit

Should the Board approve the required Special Permit to establish a Residential Housing use, OSPCD Staff recommend 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. Digital copies 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.

Site Plan Approval

Should the Board approve the required Site Plan Approval for the 3-story Apartment Building, OSPCD Staff recommend 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 to the Inspectional Services Department at least ten (10) working days in advance of a request for a final inspection.

Public Record

3. 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.
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.

Site and Building Design

5. Utility and mechanical equipment are not permitted on any façade or within the frontage area of the lot.
6. Electrical transformers and other mechanical equipment are not permitted above ground within the frontage area of any lot.
7. 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.

Construction Documents

8. Construction documents must be substantially equivalent to the approved plans and other materials submitted for development review.
9. 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.
10. An outdoor lighting plan and supplier cut sheet specifications of chosen lighting fixtures must be submitted to confirm compliance with Section 10.6 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.

Mobility

11. The property owner(s) and applicable future tenants must comply with the Mobility Management Plan dated January 2024, as approved and conditioned by the Director of Mobility's Final Approval dated April 9, 2025.
12. The applicant or their successor shall coordinate with the Mobility Division on the final streetscape design, prior to issuance of Building Permit.

13. The applicant or their successor shall adjust the spacing of their long-term bicycle parking so that the bicycle racks are three feet apart on-center, rather than four feet apart as shown.

Engineering

14. The applicant or their successor in interest shall submit a Construction Management Plan (CMP) for Engineering and Mobility Division review and comment twenty-one (21) days prior to submission of the Foundation Permit. Zero lot line construction on an Urban Principal Arterial street will require engineered site logistic plans to minimize construction impacts to the high volume public right of way.
15. The applicant or their successor must connect a new sewer lateral to the dedicated sanitary sewer in the Pearl Street or Dana Street sidewalk.
16. Any driveway construction will require an Engineering Site Construction Permit (ESC).
17. The Massachusetts Water Resource Authority (MWRA) operates and maintains a 30-inch concrete water main in Pearl Street. Any utility construction encroachment in the MWRA easement will require an 8(m) encroachment permit from MWRA.
18. The applicant or their successor must consider utility conflicts with proposed tree plantings when designing civil plan. Building utilities (water, sewer, drain, electric, etc.) must be routed to avoid tree drip lines, as possible.
19. The applicant or their successor must comply with city Inflow and Infiltration standards. Inflow and Infiltration (I&I) sewer mitigation is required for all projects that increase sewer flows to the City wastewater system. By City ordinance & policy, the City only accepts I&I mitigation via fee. This program is managed by the Engineering Division. See Somerville's Sewer, Drain, and Infiltration/Inflow Policy for more information.
20. The applicant or their successor shall submit a Construction Management Plan (CMP) for Engineering and Mobility Division review and comment twenty-one (21) days prior to submission of the Foundation Permit. Zero lot line construction on an Urban Principal Arterial street will require engineered site logistic plans to minimize construction impacts to the high-volume public right of way.
21. The project must be in compliance with Engineering Site Construction Rules and Regulations (available at <https://www.somervillema.gov/departments/departments-infrastructure-and-asset-management-iam/engineering>) and implement stormwater management BMPs to meet runoff requirements as necessary. Current proposal appears to warrant a Medium Project Review. Any piped, direct connection to the City sewer and drainage system will automatically classify this project as a Large Project Review per the regulations.
22. The application does not include proposed groundwater management best practices. Final design will need to eliminate groundwater dewatering for permanent conditions; if minor dewatering is required, calculations must show that they can be discharged onsite, without entering the City storm drainage system. Construction dewatering may be required. and will be acceptable to the City in compliance with all state & federal requirements.

Maintenance

23. The property owner is responsible for all of the regular and long-term maintenance, replacement, insurance, and other applicable costs associated with all on-site sidewalk improvements.

Legal Agreements

24. 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.

Landscape/Trees

25. The applicant or their successor shall coordinate with the Mobility Division and Public Space & Urban Forestry on the final streetscape design prior to issuance of Building Permit, due to the ongoing design of a City reconstruction project on Pearl Street adjacent to the property.
26. The applicant or their successor shall work with the Urban Forestry team to review street tree planting, preferred street tree species, and the related maintenance.
27. Landscape should be installed with the soil depth shown in the "Concrete Wall" and "Shrub and Perennial Planting" details of the Landscape Plan with over 24" of soil.
28. Landscaping required by this Ordinance must be completed prior to the issuance of a Certificate of Occupancy by the building official. If seasonal or abnormally inclement weather conditions preclude complete installation, the building official may grant a Certificate of Occupancy if the applicant provides letter of commitment to complete installation by the next planting season.
29. All vegetation must be maintained in healthy, growing condition at all times by the property owner(s) or their designated agent(s).