



City of Somerville

PLANNING BOARD

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

TO: Planning Board
FROM: OSPCD Staff
SUBJECT: 74 Middlesex Avenue (ZP25-000076)
POSTED: August 5, 2025

RECOMMENDATION: Approve with Conditions (SP)

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 74 Middlesex Avenue, 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 July 24, 2025, and is scheduled for a public hearing on August 21, 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

74M Property Owner, LLC seeks to install non-conforming wall signs in the Assembly Square Mixed-Use District (ASMD) per SZO § 7.4.9.b., which requires a Special Permit.

SUMMARY OF PROPOSAL

The Applicant is proposing non-conforming wall signs on the first floor exterior on the building at 74 Middlesex Avenue. The building is a recently constructed 525,000 SF 16-story Commercial Building containing laboratory and office uses with first floor retail and active uses and below-grade parking. The wall signs, three (3) in total, are building address logos to be installed above the north, south, and west entries meant to provide wayfinding for the building.

They do not comply with the standards set forth in SZO § 10.8. Development Standards for Commercial Signs, and therefore require a Special Permit per SZO § 7.4.9.b. Signs.

BACKGROUND

74 Middlesex Avenue is located in the Assembly Square Mixed Use (ASMD) zoning district at the corner of Kensington Avenue and Middlesex Avenue, represented by Ward 1 Councilor Matthew McLaughlin. Installing non-conforming wall signs in the ASMD district requires a Special Permit. The Planning Board is the decision-making

authority for all (non-variance) discretionary or administrative permits required for the ASMD zoning district.

ANALYSIS

The proposed wall signs are non-conforming in the following ways:

- The Signs have a diameter (and, therefore a height, as they are circular) of 5 feet, thereby exceeding the maximum allowable height of such signs by 1 foot (See Section 10.8.11.a.);
- The Signs provide the address identification (in the form of the “74m” in the center of the circle) for the Building and are not technically for a “ground story business” (See Section 10.8.11.b.i.);
- The Signs are adhered to the glass curtain wall above the entry doors and, therefore, technically are located on a window, which is prohibited by Section 10.8.11.b.iii.;
- The Signs provide property information for the Building and do not contain a “business name and logo”, which information is not technically permitted on a Wall Sign (See Section 10.8.11.b.vii); and
- The Signs are located at three (3) separate entrances on the Building, the north and south entry doors as well as the westerly entry door to the bicycle room serving the Building, which exceeds the number of signs permitted for a single user of 1 per Tenant or 2 per Corner Tenant (See Section 10.8.11.a. “Location”). As property identification signage, it serves the entire Building and not an individual Tenant, so the number of Signs does not technically comply with the limitations of Section 10.8.11.a.

PPZ Staff recommends that **the diameter (and therefore height) of proposed signage be reduced to 4 FT** from the currently proposed 5 FT, so that the sign complies with Section 10.8.11.a. Staff have no concerns with the other provisions from which relief is being sought relating to the location and content of the sign.

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.

Section 15.2.1.e

- i) The comprehensive plan and existing policy plans and standards established by the City.

- ii) The intent of the zoning district where the property is located.

Section 7.4.9.b.iii.a).

- i) The creation of legible urban environment free from the overuse of signs.
- ii) Aesthetics, proportion, scale of the proposed sign in relation to the building or storefront.
- iii) Design, location, and context of other signage on the building and on surrounding properties.

Information relating to the required considerations is provided below:

Special Permit

Section 15.2.1.e

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

Staff believe the proposal is compatible with the values of SomerVision 2040, the City's Comprehensive Master Plan, including:

- Prioritizing walking, biking, and transit access.
- Encourage more commercial development.
- Help promote accessibility and universal design in businesses.

The proposed signage will provide wayfinding for pedestrians and cyclists navigating through Assembly Square, and is simple and legible for differently abled community members. Moreover, permitting these signs will allow the commercial development at 74 Middlesex Avenue to move forward.

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

Staff believes the proposal is consistent with the intent of the ASMD zoning district which is, in part, "To improve utility infrastructure, thoroughfares, off-street pedestrian and bicycle paths, and physical connections to surrounding areas, including East Somerville, Ten Hills, and Sullivan Square", as the proposed signs provide wayfinding.

Section 7.4.9.b.iii.a).

- i. The creation of legible urban environment free from the overuse of signs.*

The proposed signs are visible to the pedestrian realm, but the color of the graphic and text matches the existing color and aesthetic of the facade. The font is minimalist but provides a helpful wayfinding function that contributes to a legible urban environment.

ii. Aesthetics, proportion, scale of the proposed sign in relation to the building or storefront.

The building is 16 stories in height, and comparatively the proposed circular signs are small. They complement the façade and are no larger than necessary to convey information to the pedestrian realm.

iii. Design, location, and context of other signage on the building and on surrounding properties.

Other visible signs on the building also match the materials used on the façade. The surrounding properties, located to the south on Middlesex Avenue, also have glass curtain walls; the proposed signage is semi-transparent and goes not detract from this building's matching glass curtail walls.

PERMIT CONDITIONS

Should the Board approve the required **Special Permit for non-conforming signs**, Planning, Preservation & Zoning Staff recommends the following conditions:

1. The diameter of the signage must be 4 FT in compliance with SZO § 10.8.11.a.

Permit Validity

2. This Decision must be recorded with the Middlesex South Registry of Deeds.
3. 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

4. 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.
5. 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.