

## 148 Morrison Avenue Narrative

Homeowners Leighton and Cathy Collis seek Zoning Board of Appeals approval of their project to renovate their residence and add a rear dwelling unit. The proposal seeks no variance.

### Existing Conditions

The property, part of an 1883 rowhouse, is located at the corner of Morrison Avenue and Clifton Street, at the western end of a five-residence building. The property currently includes additions built in the 1970s: two rear extensions with fire escapes on Clifton Street, and a three-car garage with a rooftop sports court. The garage footprint is non-conforming and lacks any setback from the property line. Three large asphalt parking spaces were added on Clifton Street. The additions and the concrete block garage do not reflect the historic architecture of the home.

### Proposed Alterations

The renovation plan proposes to:

- Demolish the 1970s additions and three-car garage and rooftop sports court
- Remove three asphalt parking spaces
- Expand the main house with a conforming rear addition that cleans up the prominent corner that is a gateway to the Somerville Community Path
- Dig out the basement and add window wells to create a basement apartment
- Construct a rear dwelling (backyard cottage)
- Implement comprehensive landscaping to maximize trees and convert the grass and asphalt covered site into park-like green space

### Somerville Zoning Ordinance (SZO) Criteria

The proposed site plan and building design address specific criteria established by the City as follows:

#### 1. The Comprehensive Plan and existing policy plans and standards established by the City (SZO 15.2.1.e.)

The design proposal aligns with **SomerVision 2040**'s goals regarding displacement and rising cost of living. The current use of the property changes from a rental property to an owner-occupied property with two rental units. The garden unit and backyard cottage unit provide housing options for different household types and sizes, increasing the diversity of available housing in the neighborhood. Household Living is permitted in the NR district and does not require a special permit.

#### 2. The intent of the zoning district where the property is located (SZO 15.2.1.e.)

The existing rowhouse is a non-conforming building type but is also an historic structure. The proposed alterations reflect the intent of the NR district as follows:

- Modifications to the rowhouse comply with **SZO 3.3.a** by creating a second residential unit in the basement. This unit is design for future connectivity to the unit on the first and second

floors, anticipating a growing household and reflecting **SZO 3.3.d**: "To create dwelling unit types, sizes, and bedroom counts ideal for larger households in houses, semi-attached houses, duplexes, and triple-deckers."

- The backyard cottage complies with **SZO 3.6.d** with building components permitted by **SZO 3.1.13** and fulfills **SZO 3.3.d**: "To create dwelling unit types, sizes, and bedroom counts ideal for smaller households in cottages and backyard cottages."

### **3. The extent and nature of the proposed alteration (SZO 14.1.5.e.)**

While the existing rowhouse is a non-conforming building type, proposed modifications (rear addition and dug-out basement) comply with **SZO 14.5.c** and do not create any new nonconformity or increase any existing nonconformity. The proposal removes non-historic 1970s additions and replaces them with architecture sensitive to the historic character of the 1883 structure. The proposal also reduces the overall lot coverage, so there is more pervious and landscaped areas.

### **4. The ability of conforming alterations to meet the demonstrated need of the Applicant (SZO 14.1.5.e.)**

The owners purchased this property to occupy the first and second floors. The basement dig-out will serve as a rental unit in the short term, with the anticipation of accommodating the owners' children in the future. The rear dwelling provides additional rental income while maintaining the historic character of the main house.

### **5. Consistency of the proposed alterations with the evolution of neighboring structures (SZO 14.1.5.e.)**

The Historic Preservation Commission provided a Conditional Certificate of Appropriateness for the project on April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2025.

The existing rowhouse was built in 1883 and serves as the terminus of the rowhouses along Morrison Avenue. The expansion allows the Mansard roof to turn the corner, creating a cohesive and attractive end to the historic rowhouse block that is architecturally consistent with the neighborhood's evolution.

### **6. Establishment of permeable lot surface, to the maximum extent possible (SZO 14.1.5.e.)**

The existing property includes large areas of impervious surface and parking spaces. The proposed alterations significantly increase permeable surfaces to 22.53% of lot area and landscaped areas to 31.90% of lot area. Impervious surfaces, excluding the building footprint, cover only 5.78% of the lot area, representing a substantial improvement over existing conditions.

### **7. Conformance to design guidelines applicable to the district where the property is located (SZO 14.1.5.e.)**

The design has been approved by the Historic Preservation Commission and employs building components and architectural details that respect the historic character of the 1883 Mansard row house. The proposed landscaping proposal enhances this corner lot, which serves as the neighborhood's gateway to the rail trail in an area with significant pedestrian traffic.

## **Conclusion**

The project is aligned with the zoning objectives and urban vision of the city. The architectural additions are sensitive to history, and the plan is responsive to the housing goals of Somerville, adding two residential rental units that serve the needs of diverse households. The proposal has successfully addressed the vision and requirements of the Somerville Zoning Ordinance and we are delighted to replace urban blight with sensitive architecture framed by thoughtful landscaping. While it has been difficult to accommodate sometimes conflicting City requirements, we are pleased to have done the work to make our corner of our neighborhood more attractive, more livable and more shareable.