



City of Somerville

# ZONING BOARD OF APPEALS

City Hall 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, 93 Highland Avenue, Somerville MA 02143

**TO:** Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA)  
**FROM:** Planning, Preservation, & Zoning (PPZ) Staff  
**SUBJECT:** 1 McGrath Highway, ZP26-000034 & ZP26-000052  
**POSTED:** June 11, 2026

**RECOMMENDATION:** ZP26-000034: Approve  
ZP26-000052: None

Staff memos are used to communicate background information, analysis, responses to public comments, review of statutory requirements and other information from PPZ staff to the Review Board members.

This memo summarizes the Hardship Variance request(s) submitted for 1 McGrath Highway, 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 May 28, 2026, and is scheduled for a public hearing on June 17, 2026. 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

### **1 McGrath Highway - ZP26-000034**

Somerbridge Hotel LLC seek relief from SZO 5.1.16.b.i parking types, to build a surface level parking in the High-Rise (HR) zoning district, which requires a Hardship Variance.

### **1 McGrath Highway - ZP26-000052**

Somerbridge Hotel LLC seek relief from SZO 10.3.7 parking lot landscaping requirements in the High-Rise (HR) zoning district, which requires a Hardship Variance.

## SUMMARY OF PROPOSAL

Somerbridge Hotel LLC is requesting relief from requirements SZO 5.1.16.b.i to build a surface level parking lot, and SZO 10.3.7 parking lot landscaping standards. The Applicant is proposing to construct a cross municipal boundary (Cambridge and Somerville) 6 story hotel. The proposed building type is a General Building, the hotel will have 145 rooms, 95 of them will be in Somerville. The proposed parking lot will have 33 motor vehicle spots, 20 of these will be in Somerville. The project will have bicycle parking on site for 5 short-term bicycles and 10 long-term bicycles on the Somerville side.

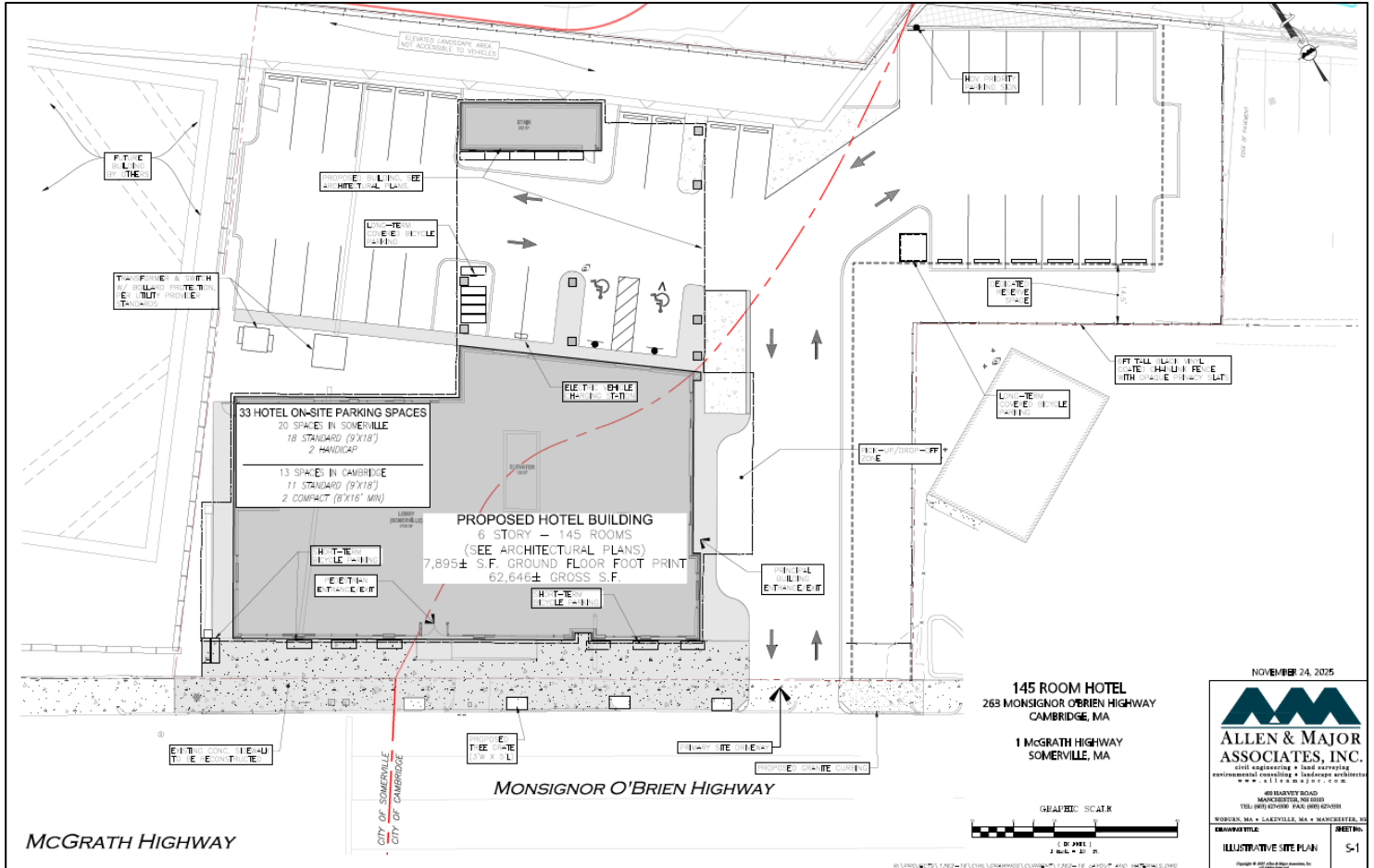


Figure 1 - Site Plan of current proposed development

**BACKGROUND**

1 McGrath Highway is located in the 0.50 mi Transit Area in the High-Rise (HR) zoning district in the Inner Belt neighborhood, represented by Ward 2 Councilor J.T. Scott. Following the Board’s decision regarding the requested Hardship Variances, the proposal will require Major Site Plan Approval and Special Permits for a Hotel and Formula use. The Planning Board is the decision-making authority for all (non-variance) discretionary or administrative permits required for the HR zoning district. The Applicant has applied for the Major Site Plan Approval and Special Permits with the Planning Board; the public hearing to review the application is scheduled for June 18, 2026.

During review of the application for Major Site Plan Approval and Special Permits, ISD (Inspectional Services Department) and PSUF (Public Space and Urban Forestry Department) determined that the parking lot as designed requires Hardship Variances for the construction of the surface level parking, as this is not allowed in this district. Furthermore, the proposed parking lot does not meet all landscaping development standards. The Applicant has subsequently submitted this application for Hardship Variances in tandem with its applications to the Planning Board.

1 McGrath Highway has gone through a few permitting processes between 2017 - 2024. In 2017 the Applicant first permitted this property as a 120-room hotel. Due to environmental complications and its location between the Community Path Extension and Grand Junction Path, the project did not proceed with its permits in a timely manner.

In 2019, the Applicant received a Special Permit and Variances from the ZBA for the construction of 135 room, 6-story hotel (case #[ZBA 2018-138](#)) and extended the approval in 2020 (case #[ZBA 2018-138-E1](#)).

In 2023, the Applicant received Site Plan Approval and Special Permits from the Planning Board and a Variance from the ZBA for the construction of a 199 room, 6 story hotel, relief from the minimum motor vehicle parking requirement, as the Applicant proposed only 13 parking spaces (none of which were located in Somerville), and relief from the façade build out requirements. The respective permits for the mentioned cases are [P&Z 21-028](#) and [P&Z 23-032](#). In 2024, the ZBA extended the Variance in case [ZP24-000011](#). As part of this proposal the Applicant worked with the abutting building developer at 15-21 McGrath Hwy (see figure 2) to create a shared driveway for both projects, and for the hotel to use parking of the building lab. Since this permit was issued, the neighboring lab developer paused construction indefinitely after digging a large foundation pit. As a result, this application had to redesign the hotel to move it away from the pit for structural safety and relocate the shared driveway to the Cambridge side of the property.

## **ANALYSIS**

As noted above, the current proposal does not meet SZO 5.1.16.b.i to build a surface level parking lot, and SZO 10.3.7 parking lot landscaping standards requirements for the HR district.

The Applicant is required to provide an argument addressing each of the review criteria for the requested Hardship Variances. The Applicant's arguments are provided in the Development Narratives, which have been submitted to the ZBA as part of the application, and summarized below.

Pursuant to MGL Chapter 40A, Section 10, the Application must meet the following criteria to qualify for a Hardship Variance:

- a) Special circumstances exist relating to the soil conditions, shape, or topography of a parcel of land or the unusual character of an existing structure but not affecting generally the zoning district in which the land or structure is located;
- b) Literal enforcement of the provision of this Ordinance for the district where the subject land or structure is located would involve substantial hardship, financial or otherwise, to the petitioner or appellant due to said special circumstances; and
- c) Desirable relief could be granted without causing substantial detriment to the public good and without nullifying or substantially derogating from the intent and purpose of the Neighborhood Residence district in this Ordinance or the Ordinance in general.

PPZ Staff believe that the division of the Somerville/Cambridge municipal boundary line, with their separate municipal zoning standards, the shape of the lot, the existing retaining wall, and the existing pit in the abutting parcel, do limit the ability for the development to comply with SZO 5.1.16.b.i.

Regarding relief from SZO 10.3.7, PPZ staff agrees that there are several challenges on site, however per the following comment provided by PSUF planner during review of the application for Major Site Plan Approval which states

*“The surface parking lot must meet the design requirements specified in 10.3.7. Parking Lot Landscaping. “A landscape island must be provided every five (5) parking spaces and at the end of every row of parking spaces” and they “must be at least eight (8) feet in width and the same length as the parking spaces. Each island must include one (1) large tree.” Expanding the planting beds and adding large trees in each of the leftmost end of both rows of parking is acceptable to meet this goal to ensure plantings that meet SZO screening and stormwater goals.”*

PPZ staff believe that this requirement could be met without the requirement for a Variance.

Generally, PPZ Staff do not provide analysis or recommendations concerning the existence of actual hardship, financial or otherwise, regarding the second Hardship Variance criterion.



Figure 2 - Aerial image of locus, abutting property, and its proximity to the neighboring municipality.

Upon analysis of the materials submitted by the Applicant, PPZ Staff do not believe that the granting of the requested hardship variances would cause a substantial detriment to the public good or nullify or substantially derogate from the intent and purpose of the High Rise (HR) district, copied here:

### **Intent**

- To implement the objectives of the comprehensive plan of the City of Somerville.
- To accommodate the development of areas appropriate for an intense mix of multi-story multi-unit, mixed-use, and commercial buildings; neighborhood-, community-, and region-serving uses; and a wide variety of employment opportunities.

### **Purpose**

- To permit the development of multi-unit, mixed-use, and commercial High-Rise buildings.
- To provide quality commercial spaces and permit small and medium-scale, neighborhood-, community-, and region-serving commercial uses.
- To permit increased residential density for buildings that meet the definition of both Net Zero Ready and LEED Platinum Certifiable buildings.

Additionally, PPZ Staff believe that granting the requested hardship variances would support the broader intent of the Somerville Zoning Ordinance, including, but not limited to, the following:

- To permit development and redevelopment according to plans that are collaboratively developed with the Somerville community.
- To preserve and enhance the design of Somerville's public realm.
- To increase commercial tax base in support of the fiscal health of the City.
- To protect and promote a diverse mix of businesses.
- To capture a fiscal return on investments made in transportation infrastructure by locating higher intensity development, employment opportunities, and a broad mix of uses along major corridors and within walking distance of transit stops.

Massachusetts courts have stated that variances will naturally deviate from the intent and purpose of a zoning ordinance to some degree and that the discretionary approval of a variance is defensible if the deviation is not substantial or significant in comparison to the intent and purpose for the district in appraising the effect of the proposal on the entire neighborhood, including future impacts and other development approved or denied in the general vicinity of the development site.

### **CONSIDERATIONS & FINDINGS**

In accordance with the Somerville Zoning Ordinance, the Zoning Board of Appeals may grant a Hardship Variance only upon deliberating and finding all of the following at the public hearing for each requested variance:

### Hardship Variance Considerations

1. Special circumstances exist relating to the soil conditions, shape, or topography of a parcel of land or the unusual character of an existing structure but not affecting generally the High-Rise (HR) zoning district in which the land or structure is located;
2. Literal enforcement of the provision of this Ordinance for the district where the subject land or structure is located would involve substantial hardship, financial or otherwise, to the petitioner or appellant, Somerbridge Hotel LLC, due to said special circumstances; and
3. Desirable relief could be granted without causing substantial detriment to the public good and without nullifying or substantially derogating from the intent and purpose of the High-Rise (HR) zoning district in this Ordinance or the Ordinance in general.

### PERMIT CONDITIONS

Should the Board approve the required Hardship Variance for **building a surface level parking**, PPZ Staff recommend the following conditions:

#### Permit Validity

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

#### Public Record

- 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.

Should the Board approve the required Hardship Variance for **parking lot landscaping requirements**, PPZ Staff recommend the following conditions:

#### Permit Validity

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

#### Public Record

- 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.