

**DEVELOPMENT NARRATIVE
FOR HARDSHIP VARIANCE FOR PARKING LOT LANDSCAPING**

Property: 1 McGrath Highway
Applicant/Owner: Somerbridge Hotel LLC
Agent: Adam Dash, Esq.
Zoning Designations: High-Rise (“HR”) District/Half Mile Transit Area/Not in PSD

Summary

The property is currently a 32,806 sf lot, of which 17,316 sf are in Somerville and known as 1 McGrath Highway, and 15,490 sf are in Cambridge and known as 263 McGrath Highway/Monsignor O’Brien Highway.

The hotel project contemplated by Somerbridge Hotel LLC will be developed and operated by Colwen Management Inc. as a Moxy brand hotel.

This proposed 145 key hotel crosses the municipal boundary of Somerville and Cambridge. 95 of the proposed keys are located within Somerville bounds.

Applicant first permitted a hotel at the property in 2017 as a 120-room extended-stay hotel. During permitting hearings, the developers discovered the site was uniquely located to provide a portion of the link necessary to accomplish a connection between the Community Path Extension and the Grand Junction Path. Due to unforeseen environmental complications, the original project did not proceed forward with the permits in a timely manner. As the environmental solution required a redesign of the project, 8’ of land along the Cambridge property line was reserved for a future ramp connection to the proposed Community Path.

Applicant then received a special permit with site plan review and variances from the Somerville Zoning Board of Appeals (“ZBA”) for the construction of a 135- room, six-story hotel at the property in case #ZBA 2018-138 on March 12, 2019. That approval was extended by the ZBA on March 25, 2020, in case # ZBA 2018-138-E1.

In 2023, Applicant obtained special permits and site plan approval from the Somerville Planning Board, and a variance from the ZBA, for the construction of a 199 room, six-story hotel at the property in cases P&Z 21-028 and P&Z 23-032, respectively. The ZBA extended said variance in 2024 in case ZP24-000011.

As part of said 2023 Planning Board and ZBA approvals, Applicant worked with the abutting lab building developer at 15 McGrath Highway to create a shared driveway for both projects and for Applicant to use parking in the lab building’s parking garage. The lab building at 15 McGrath Highway was permitted, a large pit was dug when the developer of said lab building stopped the project and is not currently looking to re-start it for, at least, several years.

As a result of the pit next-door, and there being no lab project going forward, Applicant is forced to move its proposed hotel building away from the pit for structural reasons, move the previous

shared driveway to the Cambridge side of the property, and to make other changes to the previously approved hotel project described herein.

The Applicant has demolished the commercial car wash structures in Somerville, and the commercial structure in Cambridge, and intends to begin environmental remediation at the property. The proposed six-story hotel is proposed to be a Moxy hotel brand, which is a stylish, casual brand with a playful atmosphere that focuses on younger guests.

The property is located in the HR zoning district and is in the Half Mile Transit Area. It is not located in a Pedestrian Street District.

The building would be a total of 62,646 sf, with 44,508 sf in Somerville and 18,138 sf in Cambridge. The Building Type would be “General Building”.

The project has 20 motor vehicle parking spaces provided on the Somerville portion of the property, plus 13 motor vehicle parking spaces provided on the Cambridge portion of the property.

There will be bicycle parking on site for 5 short-term bicycles and 10 long-term bicycles on the Somerville side of the property, which will meet the Somerville requirements, and for 3 short-term bicycles and 3 long-term bicycles on the Cambridge side of the property.

As with the version of the project approved in 2023, Applicant will continue to provide space for a 14 foot clear ramp to be built across the Cambridge portion of the property to connect the McGrath/O’Brien Highway with the Community Path Extension via a spur to be constructed on MBTA property at the rear of the site.

Relief Requested

Applicant now seeks the following relief from the ZBA:

- Variance under Somerville Zoning Ordinance Section 10.3.7 for parking lot landscaping.

In the companion cases ZP25-000113, ZP25-000114 and ZP25-000115, Applicant is seeking the following relief from the Planning Board:

- Revision of the previous Site Plan Approval under Somerville Zoning Ordinance Section 5.1.6.b, 15.2.4 and 15.3.2 for the new “General Building” type structure.

- Special Permit under Somerville Zoning Ordinance Section 5.1.14 and 9.9.1 to establish a hotel use.

- Special Permit under Somerville Zoning Ordinance Section 9.1.7.d for a formula business use.

Applicant will only address the variance request in this Development Narrative. There is one other variance being requested from the ZBA regarding this application, one being to allow surface parking (ZP26-000034).

Variance for Parking Lot Landscaping

Per Section 15.3.e.i of the Somerville Zoning Ordinance:

The Zoning Board of Appeals may only grant a Hardship Variance upon finding all of the following:

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 a specific district in this Ordinance or the Ordinance in general.

- a. The property is of an unusual and unique shape, and contains a very large retaining wall of noteworthy significance in the rear which abuts the new community path and Green Line Extension land. The property is located both in the cities of Somerville and Cambridge, with the city line running through the proposed building, which carries with it separate municipal zoning standards and requirements.

Included in the different zoning standards in the two different cities is that Cambridge allows surface parking at the Property, but Somerville does not.

The property is also contaminated. As such, digging for underground parking would be cost-prohibitive.

SZO Section 10.3.7 states that “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.”

This requirement would mean that two islands would have to be added to the parking plan, which would remove parking spaces needed for the hotel’s use.

Applicant cannot comply with these requirements and still have a functional parking lot which meets the hotel’s needs.

The building has nowhere to shift due to the pit next door at 15 McGrath Highway, the rear retaining wall and community path limitations. As part of the project, the Applicant is allowing part of its property to be used for the construction of a ramp from the McGrath/O’Brien Highway up to the new community path behind the property, which dictates the location of the new building on the site. These hardships make it difficult to construct a project which meets the parking lot landscaping requirements while being both zoning compliant and harmonious with the neighborhood.

Due to the size of the large wall behind the proposed hotel, and the pit to the left side of the property at 15 McGrath Highway, nobody would see such parking lot landscaping from neighboring properties or thoroughfares.

The community path is set back above the wall to the rear of the property, and people on the path would not be able to see landscaping down below, even if it could be installed.

There is no other property in the neighborhood of the size, shape, multi-municipality configuration and hotel use as this one. In addition, the proposed ramp to the community path and current pit next door at 15 McGrath Highway are unique and take up surface area that could be used for additional parking.

All of these hardships regarding the lot require relief in order for the hotel use to create parking, and the hotel use is an allowed use in the HR zoning district.

- b. Literal enforcement of the parking lot landscaping requirement would involve substantial hardship because it would impose different requirements on the Somerville portion of the property as opposed to the Cambridge portion of the property. The lot has an unusual shape and configuration making the parking lot size needed for the hotel difficult to have with the landscaping required in Somerville. The parking lot landscaping would not be visible from any public way or thoroughfare, even if it could be installed.

- c. The parking lot landscaping relief on the Somerville portion of the property can be granted without causing substantial detriment to the public good or substantially derogating from the intent and purpose of the HR district.

The relief will not cause substantial detriment to the public good because the unique configuration of the building means that the parking lot landscaping would not be visible from a public way or thoroughfare.

There will be surface parking on the Cambridge portion of the property without the parking lot landscaping required by Somerville, so having such landscaping only on the Somerville portion of the property does not make a lot of sense.

The project will not substantially derogate from the intent and purpose of the HR district because it improves the existing decrepit, abandoned commercial lot with a six-story hotel in the HR zone, which is fitting for a commercial zone such as this.

The project meets the goals of the SomerVision 2040 Strategic Plan of creating a transit-oriented development, local job creation, sustainable open space, significant publicly accessible civic space, and a healthier, more prosperous, more attractive place to live, work, play, and raise a family.

Allowing the project to not have the required parking lot landscaping is still harmonious with the Somerville Zoning Ordinance and not injurious to neighborhood because there are existing hotels along the McGrath and O'Brien Highway corridor without such parking lot landscaping, and the Cambridge portion of the property will not have it.

Conclusion

Applicant/Owner respectfully asks for a Hardship Variance for parking lot landscaping on the Somerville portion of the property on the grounds that its proposal meets all of the criteria set forth in the SZO, while providing additional benefits to the communities of both Somerville and Cambridge.