



City of Somerville

PLANNING BOARD

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

TO: Planning Board
FROM: OSPCD Staff
SUBJECT: 120-132 Middlesex Ave, ZP26-000038
POSTED: August 14, 2026

RECOMMENDATION: Continuance

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 application submitted for 120-132 Middlesex Ave, 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 is scheduled for a public hearing on August 20, 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.

The Division of Public Space and Urban Forestry (PSUF) has not been able to confirm compliance based off the applicant's latest set of landscape plans, submitted on August 6, 2026.

LEGAL NOTICE

DWCH Assembly Row, LLC proposes to develop a 19-story lab building in the Assembly Square Mixed-Use District (ASMD), which requires Site Plan Approval.

SUMMARY OF PROPOSAL

DWCH Assembly Row, LLC is proposing to construct a 19-story LEED Platinum lab building. The proposed development will produce 596,000 square feet of office, research and development, lab, and retail uses, 520 motor vehicle parking spaces, 165 long-term bicycle parking spaces, 34 short-term bicycle parking spaces.

BACKGROUND

120 Middlesex Ave is located in the 0.5 mi Transit Area in the Assembly Square Mixed-Use (ASMD) zoning district in the Assembly Square neighborhood represented by Ward 4 Councilor Jesse Clignan. Establishing a lab building in the ASMD district requires Site Plan Approval. Site Plan Approval is the administrative review and approval of conforming development to address any potential impacts as necessary. The Planning

Board is the decision-making authority for all discretionary or administrative permits required for the ASMD zoning district.

On November 30, 2020, the previous applicant applied (via application MP 2020-0003) for a [MPSP to construct a 19-story lab building](#) with up to 596,000 square feet of floor area. This application also included requests for concurrent Special Permits to waive certain dimensional standards of the (ASMD district, specifically building height and floor area ratio. Additionally, the applicant sought a Special Permit for authorization of commercial spaces exceeding 10,000 square feet for any permitted use. The applicant received approval for the MPSP and all associated Special Permits on April 30, 2021. Subsequently, on May 1, 2024, the applicant received an extension for this MPSP through application P&Z 23-065.

A major amendment to the MPSP was approved in 2024 (ZP24-000108). The revision included changes to the building's height, relocation of the loading area, and relocation of the parking, a change of building shape to create open space (the "Triangle") on the southwestern portion of the site, the inclusion of street-facing retail on the northern portion of the eastern façade and active uses along Cumming Street, rather than on the western or northern façade.

On November 18, 2020, the Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) granted the applicant a [Hardship Variance from SZO Article 7.4.6.b.i.](#), exempting them from the requirement to dedicate 25% of the development site to Civic Space, as mandated by zoning. This variance, atypical in its two-year expiration, differed from the typical one-year expiration period for most hardship variances under the Somerville Zoning Ordinance and M.G.L. Ch.40A, Section 10. On November 3, 2021, the current applicant, DWCH Assembly Row, LLC, appeared before the ZBA to confirm the validity of the existing Hardship Variance. The ZBA granted a six-month extension, shifting the expiration date from November 18, 2021, to May 18, 2022. On August 3, 2022, as the previous Hardship Variance could not be extended further, the Applicant requested and received another Hardship Variance from the ZBA, exempting them from the Civic Space requirement as outlined in the Master Plan Standards. This variance was valid from August 17, 2022, to August 17, 2023. On July 19, 2023, the Applicant requested and received a six-month extension to the Hardship Variance, extending its validity from August 17, 2023, to February 17, 2024. Finally, on April 2, 2024, the Applicant received approval for the same Hardship Variance again.

A minor site plan approval for a lot merger must be completed on this site in order to comply with SZO 7.4.7.a.i.. An application for this merger has been submitted by the applicant and is currently under review by ISD and Planning Staff.

NEIGHBORHOOD MEETINGS

The first neighborhood meeting was hosted by Ward 4 Councilor Jesse Clingan and the applicant on October 29, 2025, via the Zoom meeting platform. The applicant presented

an overview of the project. No public comments were made, and no questions were asked by members of the public.

The second neighborhood meeting was hosted by Ward 4 Councilor Jesse Clingan and the applicant on March 19, 2026, via the Zoom meeting platform. The applicant presented an overview of the project and discussed the feedback from the Urban Design Commission they incorporated into the project. No public comments were made and no questions were asked by members of the public.

DESIGN REVIEW

The proposal was reviewed by Somerville Urban Design Commission (UDC) via the Zoom meeting platform on November 25, 2025. The Commission provided its official recommendation on January 13, 2026. The UDC provided the following final guidance and recommended design modifications:

- To clad the hanging boxes on the second story in a different material to give them a warmer appearance and to carry it through to the balconies.
- No illumination at the external face of the penthouse.
- The illumination must be minimized at the mechanical floors that are clad in glass and vision glass.
- Include curved glass on the second floor (as shown in the rendering that was presented at the November 25, 2025 meeting).

ANALYSIS

The applicant is proposing the development of a 19-story lab building consisting of 596,000 sq ft of gross floor area, with approximately 351,015 sq ft of Research & Development or Laboratory uses, approximately 235,070 sq ft of office uses (and/or lab/R&D uses), approximately 9,915 sq ft of active use space on the first floor containing retail/café uses in the form of Fitness Services (or other Commercial Services) and Food & Beverage Services, and up to 520 below-grade structured parking spaces. Of the 19 stories, 3 will be mechanical, with one mid-level and two penthouse mechanical floors, and the rest will be R&D, office, or commercial space.

Transportation & Mobility Impacts

On-site parking is proposed to be located within a below-grade structured parking Garage containing five and a half below-grade levels, with up to 520 parking spaces, or approximately 0.89 parking spaces per 1,000 sf of GFA, including 12 accessible spaces and 130 electric vehicle spaces. Bicycle parking onsite will consist of 165 long-term spaces, 34 short-term spaces, and a new 19-dock Bluebikes station along Cummings Street.

A loading area and the parking garage entrance will be located along the northern portion of the Property, along Middlesex Avenue. The parking garage and gated loading area will be accessed via a fully screened driveway off Middlesex Avenue

As was required by the Master Plan, a multi-use path on Cummings Street will be installed. The applicant has coordinated with Mobility staff about its general alignment and design, which will be further refined in the streetscape construction permit.

The applicant's Mobility Management Plan received approval, with conditions. The conditions are outlined on the MMP approval letter from Mobility.

The applicant's Transportation Access Plan was approved by Mobility.

Economic Development

The applicant states this project will create 1,900 permanent, on-site jobs relating to these lab/R&D/office, retail, and parking uses.

Under SZO 12.2.3.b.i, all commercial development requiring Site Plan Approval or a Special Permit must provide employment linkage payments in alignment with the standards of SZO 12.2.3. Per SZO 12.2.3.c.iii.a, the employment linkage payments may be made in two installments and the first must be made prior to issuance of first building permit and the second payment must be made prior to issuance of Certificate of Occupancy for the project.

The Economic Development Division has reviewed the DWCH Assembly Row LLC's application #ZP26-000038 for a Special Permit with Site Plan Review to develop a new nineteen story building at 120-132 Middlesex Avenue, with laboratories and offices over a ground floor of active use space, including food and beverage, fitness and retail businesses. The proposed new structure will replace an existing two-story office building and a two-story religious structure and a surface parking lot. The development site spans 596,000 square feet on two parcels totaling 44,992 square feet and lies in the ASMD zoning district. The project site lies within a Transit Served Area and three bus routes. Economic Development determines that the Applicant's proposed improvements to the property will:

1. Help activate ground floor spaces and facades - By creating an active ground floor with food & beverage, fitness and retail uses, as well as streetscape improvements to Middlesex Avenue and Cummings Street.
2. Improve the interplay of ground floor space and civic space - By incorporating extensive glazing on the ground floor façade, pulling the building façade twelve feet back from the property line to allow and wider sidewalks with new street trees, foliage, bike racks and decorative pavers on Middlesex Avenue and Cummings Street.

3. Improve the building's signage and wayfinding around the site - By installing dedicated signage on ground floor façade and in the enhanced pedestrian zone around the site.
4. Enhance the potential for outdoor dining and commercial activity on the site's civic space - By incorporating wider sidewalks with a canopy at the corner of Middlesex Avenue and Cummings Street.
5. Improve ground floor layouts for ACE and retail space by upgrading windows and increasing light transmission - By incorporating large windows and glazed surfaces along the ground floor frontages along Middlesex Avenue and Cummings Street.
6. Improve access to the site to pedestrians and bicyclists - By installing 34 bike racks and a 19-station Bluebikes station near the building entrance.

Economic Development approves the Applicant's proposal in its current form.

Housing

Under SZO 7.4.11.c, all Development in the ASMD must provide linkage payments in accordance with Section 12.2 Linkage . Under SZO 12.2.2.c.iii.a, the affordable housing linkage payments may be made in two installments and the first must be made prior to issuance of first building permit and the second payment must be made prior to issuance of Certificate of Occupancy for the project.

Public Space and Urban Forestry

The applicant has submitted a landscape plan demonstrating their proposed plans for permeable areas, plantings, and trees. The ASMD does not have Green Score requirements.

The applicant submitted updated landscaping documents on August 6, 2026. PSUF has reviewed these documents and noted they will require the following revisions:

1. The proposed planting beds do not meet the requirement of providing at least 1,000 cubic feet of soil volume for each street tree. Additional soil volume may be provided through the use of structural soil systems beneath the sidewalk.
2. Regarding the proposed plantings, the proposed *Amelanchier laevis* 'Cumulus' and *Magnolia virginiana* 'Jim Wilson' do not meet the goal of creating a continuous allée of street trees or providing sufficient shade in an area susceptible to the urban heat island effect. The proposal should be revised to include large-canopy deciduous trees.

3. The landscape areas at the southern corner of the plans are missing site amenities, including seating adjacent to planting beds and trash receptacles. The site amenities shown along Middlesex Avenue should be continued throughout the Cumming Streetscape to provide a consistent treatment.

Sustainability

The applicant states the Project has been designed to comply with the requirements of the SZO and the conditions set forth by the MPSP, including demonstration of LEED Platinum certifiability to support potential future transitions to net zero capability.

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

Engineering

All projects must be in compliance with Engineering Site Construction Rules and Regulations. The engineering department has found the submission to be in compliance with their requirements. After a building permit is filed, final design elements for Middlesex Ave and Cummings Street streetscape improvements will be reviewed under subsequent Streetscape Construction Permit submission. Streetscape Construction Permit is a sub-type of Engineering permit called Engineering Site Construction Permit (ESC).

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.

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.
4. Consistency with the ASQ Plan.
5. Conformance with an approved Master Plan Special Permit and any other Special Permits applicable to the subject lot.

Information relative to the required considerations is provided below:

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:

- Invest in the growth of a resilient economic base that is centered around transit, generates a wide variety of job opportunities, creates an active daytime population, supports independent local businesses, and secures fiscal self-sufficiency.
- Promote a dynamic urban streetscape that embraces public transportation, reduces car dependence, and is accessible, inviting and safe for all pedestrians, bicyclists and transit riders.
- Build a sustainable future through climate leadership, balanced transportation, engaging civic spaces, exceptional educational opportunities, improved health, varied and affordable housing options, and the responsible use of our natural resources.
- Affirm our responsibility to current and future generations through continued innovation in business, technology, education, arts and government
- Minimize the overall land use in Somerville dedicated to personal vehicles while encouraging alternative modes

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

The intent of the ASMD zoning district is, in part: "To redevelop underutilized areas within close walking distance to the Assembly Square T-station with mixed-use, mid-rise and high-rise, transit-oriented development that will support the transformation of Assembly Square into an urban commerce center."

Staff also believes that this project supports the intent of the wider zoning ordinance, including the following:

- To increase commercial tax base in support of the fiscal health of the City.
- 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.
- To preserve and enhance the design of Somerville's public realm.
- To encourage the use of public transportation, bicycling, and walking in lieu of motor vehicle use when a choice of travel mode exists.
- To require a strong connection and gradual transition between the public realm (sidewalks, thoroughfares, and civic spaces and private real (yards and building interiors).

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.

4. Consistency with the Assembly Square Neighborhood Plan.

Staff believes that this project supports the goals laid out in the Assembly Square Neighborhood Plan, including the following:

- Expanding the City's non-residential tax base
- Enhancing the site's current strengths
- Encouraging Life Sciences

5. Conformance with an approved Master Plan Special Permit and any other Special Permits applicable to the subject lot.

Once the lot merger is complete and the outstanding landscape plans compliance concerns are addressed, the project will be compliant with the Master Plan.

PERMIT CONDITIONS

Should the Board approve the required Site Plan Approval for the 19-story Lab building, Planning, Preservation & Zoning Staff recommends 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.
3. Subject lots at 120 & 132 Middlesex Ave. must be formally merged prior to building permit issuance.

Public Record

4. 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.
5. 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.

Construction Documents

6. Construction documents must be substantially equivalent to the approved plans and other materials submitted for development review.
7. 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.

8. 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

9. The applicant or their successor shall coordinate with the Mobility Division on the final streetscape design, prior to issuance of Building Permit.
10. The applicant or their successor will continue to work with the Mobility Division on the refinement of project elements proposed in the public ROW. Prior to the issuance of a building permit, the final design for Middlesex Ave and Cummings Street streetscape improvements will be reviewed and approved by the relevant departments under a Streetscape Construction Permit submission

Economic Development

11. Employment linkage payments in alignment with the standards of SZO 12.2.3. must be made. Per SZO 12.2.3.c.iii.a, the employment linkage payments may be made in two installments and the first must be made prior to issuance of first building permit and the second payment must be made prior to issuance of Certificate of Occupancy for the project.

Housing

12. Affordable housing linkage payments must be made in compliance with SZO 12.2.2. If made in two installments, the first must be made prior to issuance of first building permit and the second payment must be made prior to issuance of Certificate of Occupancy.

Parking

13. The underground parking garage must be operated as a Commercial Parking facility principle use.
14. If proposed as a commercial parking facility, then the commercial parking facility must have a parking access and revenue control system to manage vehicular access and collect parking revenues from patrons.
15. An annual report, including documentation of any changes to the layout plan or operations plan of the parking facility, must be submitted to the Mobility Division to validate continued compliance with the Somerville Zoning Ordinance, this Decision, and the Director of Mobility's standards for monitoring and annual reporting.
16. A sign must be provided near the vehicular entrance to the parking structure or lot that identifies, at minimum, the number of spaces available in real time

17. A layout plan identifying all parking access and revenue control features for the parking facility must be submitted to the Director of Mobility for approval prior to applying for a Building Permit.
18. The initial operations plan for the Commercial Parking facility identifying, at least, the type and pricing of various passes, rates, and fees must be submitted to the Director of Mobility.

Engineering

19. 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.
20. 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.
21. The applicant or their successor must comply with city Inflow and Infiltration standards.
22. 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.
23. The project must be in compliance with Engineering Site Construction Rules and Regulations and implement stormwater management BMPs to meet runoff requirements as necessary. Any piped, direct connection to the City sewer and drainage system will automatically classify this project as a Large Project Review per the regulations.
24. The final design must 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.
25. The applicant must provide records of proper abandonment of any underground storage tanks prior to issuance of main Building Permit.

Maintenance

26. 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

27. 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

28. The applicant or their successor will coordinate with the department of Public Space and Urban Forestry to obtain a compliant landscape plan that addresses the following items prior to the issuance of a Building Permit:
 - Providing at least 1,000 cubic feet of soil volume for each street tree,
 - Creating a continuous allée of street trees or providing sufficient shade in an area susceptible to the urban heat island effect,
 - The required continuance of the site amenities shown along Middlesex Avenue throughout the Cumming Streetscape to provide a consistent treatment.
29. Any landscaping required by the Zoning 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.
30. All vegetation must be maintained in healthy, growing condition at all times by the property owner(s) or their designated agent(s).
31. The applicant or their successor shall take all necessary precautions to avoid damaging any tree to remain, including trees on abutting properties. This includes the tree structural roots (roots 2 inches in diameter or greater). Tree roots extend to at least the dripline of the tree, and damage to the root system may result in tree instability and/or death. To preserve the structural integrity and health of any trees to remain (including trees on abutting properties), any subsurface work to occur within the dripline of each tree to be preserved must be done carefully and by hand, so as not to damage structural roots. The dripline is the outside edge of the tree branch tips. Subsurface work completed within the dripline of the tree should be overseen a Massachusetts Certified Arborist (MCA) or International Society of Arboriculture (ISA) Certified Arborist or equivalent.
32. The Applicant or their successor will work with PSUF department during the Engineering Site Permit to review and approve landscape materials including hardscapes, furniture, lighting, plantings, and other landscape elements.
33. The Applicant or their successor will work with PSUF to determine tree species within the public right of way during the Engineering Site Permit.
34. Pursuant to the ZBA Decision dated April 2, 2024, the applicant shall be responsible for making a Civic Space In-Lieu payment calculated at a rate of 25% of the total lot square footage. The required in-lieu payment must be received by the City prior to the issuance of a Certificate of Occupancy (CO).