



**CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS**  
**MAYOR'S OFFICE OF STRATEGIC PLANNING & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**  
**JOSEPH A. CURTATONE**  
**MAYOR**

MICHAEL F. GLAVIN  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

**PLANNING DIVISION STAFF**

GEORGE PROAKIS, *DIRECTOR OF PLANNING*  
SARAH LEWIS, *SENIOR PLANNER*  
SARAH WHITE, *PLANNER/PRESERVATION PLANNER*  
ALEX MELLO, *PLANNER*  
DAWN PEREIRA, *ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT*

**Case #:** ZBA 2017-46  
**Date:** June 30, 2017  
**Recommendation:** Denial

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**PLANNING STAFF REPORT**

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**Site:** 51 McGrath Highway

**Applicant Name:** Life Storage Limited Partnership  
**Applicant Address:** 6467 Main Street, Williamsville, NY 14221  
**Property Owner Name:** Sovran Acquisition Limited Partnership  
**Property Owner Address:** 6467 Main Street, Buffalo, NY 14221  
**Agent Name:** Richard G. DiGirolamo, Esq.  
**Agent Address:** 424 Broadway, Somerville, MA 02145  
**Alderman:** Maryanne Heuston

Legal Notice: Applicant, Life Storage Limited Partnership, and Owner, Sovran Acquisition Limited Partnership, seek a Special Permit with Design Review (SPSR) under Section 7.11.12.4.c and Section 5.2 of the Somerville Zoning Ordinance (SZO) to construct a self-storage facility of 28,880 gross square feet. The Applicant and Owner also seek a Variance under Article 12 of the SZO for signage. IA Zone. Ward 2.

Dates of Public Hearing: Zoning Board of Appeals – July 12, 2017

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**I. PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

1. Subject Property: The site is located in southeastern Somerville on a triangular piece of land formed by the intersection of McGrath Highway and the commuter rail tracks. The subject property is the combination of three lots with a combined area of 58,505 s.f. and is zoned Industrial A (IA). The existing structure on the site is a three-story (plus basement) brick masonry building with a heavy timber



structural frame. The existing building is 61,760 g.s.f with each level (including basement) providing 15,440 g.s.f. of floor area.

A large paved area containing some parking lies to the rear of the structure and is accessed via a two-way 13-foot-wide driveway along the south side of the building. This driveway, situated between the building and a cement supporting wall for McGrath Highway, is not part of the subject property and is accessed via a shared parking lot off the north side of McGrath Highway. Access/egress to the shared parking lot is provided at a curb cut approximately 180 feet east of the building. The median on McGrath Highway is open at the driveway to allow access from eastbound traffic.

The existing building was constructed circa 1920 and has been occupied by a variety of storage and light industrial tenants since that time. In January of 2008 the owner received approval to convert the use of the existing office/factory building into self-storage and construct a new 38,400 gross square feet building for self-storage. The proposed new structure was never constructed; however, the then existing office/factory building was converted into a self-storage facility. In June of 2008 the owner received approval to revise Special Permit ZBA 2007-48 to reconfigure the parking and circulation layout and add two canopies to the façade (ZBA 2007-48-R0508). Other miscellaneous zoning relief has been granted over the years for wireless communication antennas and signage on the existing building.

2. Proposal: The proposal is to construct a new self-storage facility of 28,880 gross square feet on the western portion of the lot that is currently undeveloped and used for parking spaces for the existing self-storage facility.

3. Green Building Practices: The application states that the proposal will not exceed the stretch energy code.

4. Comments:

*Wiring Inspection:* The Chief Wiring Inspector requested to see the location of a transformer and an electrical room. The applicant has provided updated plans that show the location of the transformer on the western edge of the locus and an electrical room on the ground floor.

*Ward Alderman:* Alderman Heuston has been informed of this proposal and has recommends denial as she is in agreement with Staff that the proposal does not meet the goals of SomerVision.

## **II. FINDINGS FOR SPECIAL PERMIT with SITE PLAN REVIEW (SZO §7.11.12.4.c and §5.2):**

In order to grant a special permit with site plan review, the SPGA must make certain findings and determinations as outlined in §5.2.5 of the SZO. This section of the report goes through §5.2.5 in detail.

1. Information Supplied:

The Staff finds that the information provided by the Applicant conforms to the requirements of §5.2.3 of the SZO and allows for a comprehensive analysis of the project.

2. Compliance with Standards: *The Applicant must comply “with such criteria or standards as may be set forth in this Ordinance which refer to the granting of the requested special permit with site plan review.”*

Section 7.11.12.4.c states that a self-storage facility of over 10,000 square feet of gross floor area in the IA district is permitted only if a Special Permit with Site Plan Review (SPSR) is granted by the Zoning Board of Appeals.

3. Purpose of District: *The Applicant has to ensure that the project "is consistent with the intent of the specific zoning district as specified in Article 6".*

The proposal is not consistent with the purpose of the IA district, which is, "to establish and preserve areas for industrial and related uses which are not incompatible with commercial uses; uses which are most appropriately located as neighbors of industrial uses including living and studio space for artists; and uses which are necessary to service the immediate needs of industrial establishments in those areas, and accessory uses to industrial uses such as day care centers, cafeterias, health facilities, and the like." Staff finds that the proposal to construct a second self-storage facility on this site is incompatible with commercial uses as is it not necessary to service the immediate needs of industrial establishments in the area or accessory uses as mentioned above.

4. Site and Area Compatibility: *The Applicant has to ensure that the project "(i)s designed in a manner that is compatible with the existing natural features of the site and is compatible with the characteristics of the surrounding area, and that the scale, massing and detailing of the buildings are compatible with those prevalent in the surrounding area".*

*Surrounding Neighborhood:* The surrounding neighborhood is small since it is isolated by McGrath Highway and the railroad tracks. The other buildings are industrial looking and have a variety of uses including a datacenter, reprographics, liquor store, and the site of a future hotel at 1 McGrath Hwy. The building faces Twin City Plaza but would only be accessible from the crosswalk at Rufo Road (the main entrance to Twin City Plaza).

*Impacts of Proposal (Design and Compatibility):*

Special Permits with Site Plan Review applications must meet the design guidelines under SZO §5.1.5/5.2.4. The design guidelines for business districts are as follows:

1. *Maintain a strong building presence along the primary street edge, continuing the established streetwall across the front of the site so as to retain the streetscape continuity; however, yards and setbacks as required by Article 8 shall be maintained.*

The street edge is an elevated portion of McGrath Highway. Access to the site is via a shared curb cut with the adjacent property (15 McGrath Highway) and across two other properties (35 McGrath Highway and a City of Somerville owned parcel MBL: 115-B-11). Pedestrians can access the site via a stairway that is off of McGrath Highway; however, given the nature of the proposed use pedestrian activity is not anticipated. The proposed building is at an offset angle that is inconsistent with the orientation of the adjacent self-storage facility and does not retain streetscape continuity. Staff finds that the proposal does not maintain nor continue a strong building presence along the primary street edge across the front of the site.

2. *Differentiate building entrances from the rest of the primary street elevation, preferably by recessing the entry from the plane of the streetwall or by some other articulation of the elevation at the entrance.*

The entrances are differentiated from the rest of the primary structure by using aluminum trimmed

sliding glass doors underneath canopies on the south, east, and west elevations.

3. *Make use of the typical bay widths, rhythms and dimensions prevalent in buildings adjacent to the site, especially in new construction or substantial redevelopment.*

There are no bays; however, the fenestration on the south elevation (facing McGrath Highway) follows a rhythm with square windows on the first and second floor and rounded windows on the top floor. The north (facing train tracks) and west elevations (facing Somerville) only contain windows on the ground floor. On all elevations there is a reveal that creates sections in the facade to create a rhythmic effect. The existing building on the site carries a rhythm of having windows on all floors on all sides of the building that are all aligned with one another. There are structures across train tracks that have a rhythmic pattern in its fenestration. Staff finds that the proposed building does not make use of rhythms on all the facades that are prevalent to adjacent buildings. Additionally, the fenestration on the proposed south elevation includes too few windows compared to the patterns in adjacent buildings.

4. *Clearly define these bay widths, rhythms and dimensions, making them understandable through material patterns, articulations and modulations of the facades, mullion design and treatment, etc.*

See #3 above.

5. *Provide roof types and slopes similar to those of existing buildings in the area.*

The building is a flat roof, which is similar to those surrounding it.

6. *Use materials and colors consistent with those dominant in the area or, in the case of a rehabilitation or addition, consistent with the architectural style and period of the existing building. Use of brick masonry is encouraged, but not considered mandatory.*

The material of the existing building on the site is brick masonry and the artists' lofts across the train tracks are made of concrete. The proposal is to use a red brick on the ground floor of the proposed building that is intended to match that of the existing structure. The second and third floor is proposed to be a light tan stucco EIFS (exterior insulation finish system). Planning Staff finds that the proposed stucco finish is not a high quality and durable building material nor is it a material that is common throughout New England, particularly for new construction.

7. *When parking lots are provided between buildings, abutting the primary street and breaking the streetwall, provide a strong design element to continue the streetwall definition across the site, such as a low brick wall, iron works or railing, trees, etc.*

See #1, the proposed building will not provide a continuation of the streetwall.

8. *Locate transformers, heating and cooling systems, antennae, and the like, so they are not visible from the street; this may be accomplished, for example, by placing them behind the building, within enclosures, behind screening, etc.*

The proposed transformer will be placed on the far west end of the site.

9. *Sites and buildings should comply with any guidelines set forth in Article 6 of this Ordinance for the specific base or overlay zoning district(s) the site is located within.*

See finding 2 above.

5. Functional Design: *The project must meet “accepted standards and criteria for the functional design of facilities, structures, and site construction.”*

Staff finds that the site is not very functional for a second self-storage facility especially given the narrow point of access into the site where large moving trucks are expected.

6. Impact on Public Systems: *The project will “not create adverse impacts on the public services and facilities serving the development, such as the sanitary sewer system, the storm drainage system, the public water supply, the recreational system, the street system for vehicular traffic, and the sidewalks and footpaths for pedestrian traffic.”*

The project is not anticipated to have adverse impacts on public systems or facilities.

7. Environmental Impacts: *“The proposed use, structure or activity will not constitute an adverse impact on the surrounding area resulting from: 1) excessive noise, level of illumination, glare, dust, smoke, or vibration which are higher than levels now experienced from uses permitted in the surrounding area; 2) emission of noxious or hazardous materials or substances; 3) pollution of water ways or ground water; or 4) transmission of signals that interfere with radio or television reception.”*

There are no anticipated environmental impacts associated with the proposal.

8. Consistency with Purposes: *“Is consistent with: 1) the purposes of this Ordinance, particularly those set forth in Article 1 and Article 5; and 2) the purposes, provisions, and specific objectives applicable to the requested special permit with site plan review which may be set forth elsewhere in this Ordinance, such as, but not limited to, those at the beginning of the various sections.”*

The proposal to construct a second self-storage facility on the site is inconsistent with the general purposes of the Ordinance as set forth under §1.2, which includes, but is not limited to promote the health, safety, and welfare of the inhabitants of the City of Somerville; to provide for and maintain the uniquely integrated structure of uses in the City; to lessen congestion in the streets; to protect health; to secure safety from fire, panic and other dangers; to conserve the value of land and buildings; to preserve the historical and architectural resources of the City; to adequately protect the natural environment; to encourage the most appropriate use of land throughout the City; and to preserve and increase the amenities of the municipality.

9. Preservation of Landform and Open Space: *The Applicant has to ensure that “the existing land form is preserved in its natural state, insofar as practicable, by minimizing grading and the erosion or stripping of steep slopes, and by maintaining man-made features that enhance the land form, such as stone walls, with minimal alteration or disruption. In addition, all open spaces should be designed and planted to enhance the attractiveness of the neighborhood. Whenever possible, the development parcel should be laid out so that some of the landscaped areas are visible to the neighborhood.”*

The site is relatively flat and will not be regraded all that much from its current state. The site does include a sloped area on the southwestern portion of the site near the elevated McGrath Highway with a concrete block retaining wall that will be maintained and protected. Minimal grading work will occur to divert stormwater into new catch basins. The site currently has some open space on the land, although it would not be considered high quality open space as it gravel, sand, dirt, and overgrowth, it does provide

an impervious surface on the site. Staff finds that the loss of open space on the site would not enhance the attractiveness of the site, especially on a prominent location as a major gateway into the City.

10. Relation of Buildings to Environment: *The Applicant must ensure that “buildings are: 1) located harmoniously with the land form, vegetation and other natural features of the site; 2) compatible in scale, design and use with those buildings and designs which are visually related to the development site; 3) effectively located for solar and wind orientation for energy conservation; and 4) advantageously located for views from the building while minimizing the intrusion on views from other buildings.”*

Staff finds that the proposed building is not compatible in design and use with other buildings and designs that are visually related to the development site.

11. Stormwater Drainage: *The Applicant must demonstrate that “special attention has been given to proper site surface drainage so that removal of surface waters will not adversely affect neighboring properties or the public storm drainage system. Storm water shall be removed from all roofs, canopies, and paved area, and routed through a well-engineered system designed with appropriate storm water management techniques. Skimming devices, oil, and grease traps, and similar facilities at the collection or discharge points for paved surface runoff should be used, to retain oils, greases, and particles. Surface water on all paved areas shall be collected and/or routed so that it will not obstruct the flow of vehicular or pedestrian traffic and will not create puddles in the paved area. In larger developments, where practical, the routing of runoff through sheet flow, swales or other means increasing filtration and percolation is strongly encouraged, as is use of retention or detention ponds. In instances of below grade parking (such as garages) or low lying areas prone to flooding, installation of pumps or other devices to prevent backflow through drains or catch basins may be required.”*

The proposal includes a stormwater drainage system that is designed to direct stormwater into new catch basins and then into infiltration chambers.

12. Historic or Architectural Significance: *The project must be designed “with respect to Somerville’s heritage, any action detrimental to historic structures and their architectural elements shall be discouraged insofar as is practicable, whether those structures exist on the development parcel or on adjacent properties. If there is any removal, substantial alteration or other action detrimental to buildings of historic or architectural significance, these should be minimized and new uses or the erection of new buildings should be compatible with the buildings or places of historic or architectural significance on the development parcel or on adjacent properties.”*

The design of the proposed building is not compatible with the existing building on 51 McGrath Highway. Although the existing building is not on the national register or within a local historic district, it does have a historic character with an all brick façade, numerous tall window openings, a detailed cornice, and granite sills. The proposed building would use brick on the ground level and a stucco finish for the second and third stories. Staff finds that the proposed design will not complement the original materials of the existing building.

13. Enhancement of Appearance: *The Applicant must demonstrate that “the natural character and appearance of the City is enhanced. Awareness of the existence of a development, particularly a non residential development or a higher density residential development, should be minimized by screening views of the development from nearby streets, residential neighborhoods of City property by the effective use of existing land forms, or alteration thereto, such as berms, and by existing vegetation or supplemental planting.”*

The site is located along a major gateway of the city that has been identified an area to enhance in SomerVision. Staff does not find that the proposed building would enhance the appearance of the gateway.

14. Lighting: *With respect to lighting, the Applicant must ensure that “all exterior spaces and interior public and semi-public spaces shall be adequately lit and designed as much as possible to allow for surveillance by neighbors and passersby.”*

Information with respect to lighting has not been provided.

15. Emergency Access: *The Applicant must ensure that “there is easy access to buildings, and the grounds adjoining them, for operations by fire, police, medical and other emergency personnel and equipment.”*

Planning Staff would not characterize access to the building as being easy. The site is landlocked between an elevated McGrath Highway, railroad tracks, and another building. Access to the site is via a 13 foot wide driveway that is accessed by crossing over other properties. Staff finds that emergency personnel could have a difficult time accessing the proposed building in the event of an emergency given the narrow access point of entry.

16. Location of Access: *The Applicant must ensure that “the location of intersections of access drives with the City arterial or collector streets minimizes traffic congestion.”*

The proposed use as a self-storage facility would generate lots of large trucks to the site. It’s location on a divided highway could cause potential traffic maneuvers that could create conflicts. The narrow access into the site itself would also be very difficult for large moving trucks.

17. Utility Service: *The Applicant must ensure that “electric, telephone, cable TV and other such lines and equipment are placed underground from the source or connection, or are effectively screened from public view.”*

The location of electric, telephone, cable TV, and other such lines and equipment have not been depicted on the site plans.

18. Prevention of Adverse Impacts: *The Applicant must demonstrate that “provisions have been made to prevent or minimize any detrimental effect on adjoining premises, and the general neighborhood, including, (1) minimizing any adverse impact from new hard surface ground cover, or machinery which emits heat, vapor, light or fumes; and (2) preventing adverse impacts to light, air and noise, wind and temperature levels in the immediate vicinity of the proposed development.”*

The proposal is not anticipated to generate any of the aforementioned adverse impacts.

19. Signage: *The Applicant must ensure that “the size, location, design, color, texture, lighting and materials of all permanent signs and outdoor advertising structures or features shall reflect the scale and character of the proposed buildings.”*

The proposed signage for the new building will be in the form of wall signs on the top of the building’s south and east facades above the third story windows. Signage on the existing building on the site is above the second story windows. Staff finds that the height and size of the proposed signage is appropriate for the size of the building and consistent with other tall signage in the area.

20. Screening of Service Facilities: *The Applicant must ensure that “exposed transformers and other machinery, storage, service and truck loading areas, dumpsters, utility buildings, and similar structures shall be effectively screened by plantings or other screening methods so that they are not directly visible from either the proposed development or the surrounding properties.”*

The proposed transformer will be placed on the far west end of the site.

21. Housing Impact: Will not create adverse impacts on the stock of existing affordable housing.

22. SomerVision Plan: The project must “*comply with the applicable goals, policies and actions of the SomerVision plan, including the following, as appropriate: Preserve and enhance the character of Somerville’s neighborhoods, transform key opportunity areas, preserve and expand an integrated, balanced mix of safe, affordable and environmentally sound rental and homeownership units for households of all sizes and types from diverse social and economic groups; and, make Somerville a regional employment center with a mix of diverse and high-quality jobs.*”

The proposal does not include the creation of any employment opportunities as the proposal is to have the current 1 full-time and 1 part-time employee manage both self-storage facilities. A commercial building of this size should create a significant amount of jobs. As previously mentioned, the project will not preserve nor enhance the character of the neighborhood. The proposed building design and use would not enhance the aesthetics of the site, which is a major gateway into the city. The gateway into Somerville should be attractive and its buildings should make a great impression as people entering and exiting Somerville. The proposed building materials, site design, orientation, and use are not compatible with the following SomerVision goals:

- make Somerville a regional employment center with a mix of diverse and high-quality jobs.
- facilitate thoughtfully-designed, pedestrian-oriented mixed-use development, and reuse opportunities in commercial corridors, squares, and around transit stations that are sensitive to neighborhood context, and serve existing and future residents and businesses.
- link our corridors, squares, and growth districts to support future development and economic activity.

To conclude, Staff finds that an additional self-storage facility on this site does not meet the goals and policies outlined by community members in SomerVision.

<b><i>SomerVision Summary</i></b>	<b><i>Existing</i></b>	<b><i>Proposed</i></b>
<i>Dwelling Units:</i>	0	0
<i>Affordable Units:</i>	0	0
<i>Commercial Sq. Ft.:</i>	61,760 g.s.f	90,560 g.s.f
<i>Estimated Employment:</i>	1 FT / 1 PT	1 FT / 1 PT (no change)
<i>Parking Spaces:</i>	25	48
<i>Publicly Accessible Open Space:</i>	0	0

**III. FINDINGS FOR VARIANCE**

Section 12 requires “a wall sign attached parallel to a building which projects no more than fifteen (15) inches from the building surface, provided that the top of such sign is no higher than whichever of the following is lowest

- 1) Twenty-five (25) feet above grade;
- 2) The top of the sills of the first level of windows above the first story;
- 3) The lowest point of the roof surface except in the case of a one-story building with a continuous horizontal parapet, the top of said parapet.



The lowest point is the top of the sills of the first level of windows above the first story. However, the proposal indicates the signs to be just below the parapet above the third story, which is 36'-4" high. New signs that exceed the allowed height limit require a Variance under Section 5.5

In order to grant a variance the Board must make certain findings and determinations as outlined in §5.5.3 of the SZO.

1. *There are "special circumstances relating to soil conditions, shape or topography of land or structures which especially affect such land or structures but not affecting generally the zoning district in which it is located, causing substantial hardship, financial or otherwise."*

*Applicant's response:* The odd shape of the property are such that special circumstances exist that would warrant the granting of a variance to the applicant for signage. The proposal is on a site which is unique in shape and the placement/size of signage is limited. To have a feasible project on this site which would service many of the new residences in the abutting area for the small sized dwelling units a storage facility would be a great asset to this neighborhood.

*Staff's response:* The shape of the locus is triangular; however unique lot shapes affect other parcels in the IA zoning district. There is a triangular shaped parcel across the abutting rail road tracks as well as other triangular shaped parcels in the IA district. Staff does not find that the triangular shape of the land is a special circumstance that creates a substantial hardship, financial or otherwise, as it relates to signage.

2. *"The variance requested is the minimum variance that will grant reasonable relief to the owner, and is necessary for a reasonable use of the building or land."*

*Applicant's response:* The proposal will allow for a state of the art self- storage facility which would service many of the immediate residents with minimal living space and storage space in their homes. Signage will be an extremely important aspect of the storage facility.

*Staff's response:* Staff finds that the minimum Variance for signage that could be requested would be the second lowest height of the following since the lowest would be permitted as of right:

- 1) Twenty-five (25) feet above grade;
- 2) The top of the sills of the first level of windows above the first story;
- 3) The lowest point of the roof surface except in the case of a one-story building with a continuous horizontal parapet, the top of said parapet.

The Applicant is proposing signage just below the parapet above the third story, which is 36'-4" high. Staff does not find that the Variance requested is the minimum that will grant reasonable relief to the owner.

3. *"The granting of the variance would be in harmony with the general purpose and intent of this Ordinance and would not be injurious to the neighborhood or otherwise detrimental to the public welfare."*

*Applicant's response:* The proposal is for over 38,000 sq. ft. of additional self- storage space. This proposal is harmonious with the neighborhood as this is an IA zoning district which now has many new residential dwelling units that are of small size. The additional self -storage facility will allow many of the area residents with smaller residential units a close by storage facility that they could walk to store or obtain belongings from the facility, which signage would be an integral role for the self -storage facility.

*Staff's response:* Staff finds that the proposed 28,000 gross square foot self-storage facility would not be in harmony with the general purpose and intent of this Ordinance for the reasons stated in Section II of this report.

#### **IV. RECOMMENDATION**

##### **Special Permit with Site Plan Review under §7.11.12.4.c and §5.2 Variance under §5.5 and §12**

Based on the materials submitted by the Applicant, the above findings and subject to the following conditions, the Planning Staff recommends **DENIAL** of the requested **SPECIAL PERMIT with SITE PLAN REVIEW and VARIANCE**.

The recommendation is based upon a technical analysis by Planning Staff of the application material based upon the required findings of the Somerville Zoning Ordinance, and is based only upon information submitted prior to the public hearing. This report may be revised or updated with new recommendations, findings and/or conditions based upon additional information provided to the Planning Staff during the public hearing process.