



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
MAYOR'S OFFICE OF STRATEGIC PLANNING & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
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Case #: ZBA 2017-101
Date: October 18, 2017
Recommendation: Approval

PLANNING STAFF REPORT

Site: 81 Highland Avenue

Applicant / Owner Name: City of Somerville
Applicant / Owner Address: 93 Highland Avenue, Somerville
Alderman: Robert McWatters

Legal Notice: Applicant and Owner, the City of Somerville, seek Special Permits per 4.4.1 to alter the existing, non-conforming structure (Somerville High School), and a Variance for parking under Article 9. RC zone. Ward 3.

Dates of Public Hearing: Zoning Board of Appeals – October 18, 2017



Above: Aerial view of the central campus complex with the rough outlines of the parcel borders. Somerville High School is identified in the center of the photo.

I. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

1. **Subject Property:** The subject building, the Somerville High School (SHS), is part of the civic campus fronting on Highland Avenue that also contains Somerville City Hall, the Central Library, parking areas and memorials. This entire area is one parcel owned by the City of Somerville. The parcel totals 568,454 square feet.

The Somerville High School (SHS) building dominates the majority of the civic campus. At roughly 360,000 square feet, SHS is also the largest building on the site. SHS currently consists of the original 1895 high school building, 1920s-era wings and connectors, the former gymnasium (which now houses, among other services, the school library), the field house, and another addition from the 1980s. The high school is a legally non-conforming structure in the RC zone. The educational use is a “protected” use under the state Zoning Act.

2. **Proposal:** The SHS project will be a multi-phase demolition, addition and renovation process. The two 1920s-era wings and connectors will be demolished (see Comment section below). The original 1895 high school building will not be used as part of the new high school complex but will be retained for City use at some point in the future. The original gymnasium and the Field House will be retained, renovated, and incorporated into the new high school building. The remaining sections of the current high school building will be demolished.

The renovations and newly-constructed components of the school will include a 6-story area that replaces the existing 3-story shop facilities. The new addition will include dining areas, the media center, classroom/vocational spaces, PE support and supplementary programs. The new construction will largely be located in the eastern half of the project site.

The proposal includes improved ADA accessibility throughout the site including, but not limited to ADA-compliant entrances, handicapped door operators, accessible workstations in the science rooms accessible classroom doors, drinking fountains, and lavatories.

The entirety of the SHS-specific site will be full re-landscaped and a synthetic turf athletic field will be constructed.

3. **Green Building Practices:** The project shall meet energy code and includes design concepts such as sunshades along the southern façade of the new building and the fenestration used within the building envelope will be installed mitigate energy use. The city is committed to extensive energy

efficiency programs. The design team spent extensive time with the community and the high school project committee to find the most effective ways for implementing green elements. The city continues to work towards a site plan for the entirety of Central Hill that is as close as possible to “net zero”.

4. Comments:

Ward Alderman: Alderman McWatters has been involved with this project throughout.

Historic Preservation Commission: The SHS building team first met with the Historic Preservation Commission (HPC), Preservation Staff, and Planning Staff in early 2016 in order to comply with state-mandated reviews from the Massachusetts Historical Commission (MHC). A second goal of the SHS building team was to engage with the HPC early in the project process in order to understand the HPC’s demolition review process. Because the building team met early on with the HPC and Staff, all parties were able to enter into a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) that satisfied the HPC’s desire to have key historic components of the 1920s wings and connectors saved and restored and subsequently re-used in the new high school building or other City building project. This MOA was also sent to the Massachusetts Historical Commission for their review and the MHC is in agreement with the items identified to be saved, restored and re-used. The early engagement of the HPC and state agencies has helped to keep this important project moving ahead on-schedule.

Staff Notes: The SHS project has been thoroughly vetted through the public process and through the review of other boards and committees over the last few years. The SHS building project was also put to referendum during the 2016 elections, in a request for a debt exclusion to cover the city’s portion of the project cost. 72% of voters who turned out voted in favor of the SHS building project. The review bodies and public forums through which this project has passed in order to come to the ZBA are as follows:

- Somerville High School Building Committee
 - Educational Planning Working Group
 - Exterior Building & Site Design Working Group
 - Sustainability Working Group
 - MEP Systems Working Group
 - Interior Design Working Group
 - Safety and Security Working Group
- Educational Visioning & Planning with High School Staff, Teachers, and Community
- Somerville High School Staff – over 100 programming meetings
- Somerville High School Students
- Somerville School Committee
- Somerville School Department staff
- Somerville Board of Aldermen
- City of Somerville Residents – Public Forums
- Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA)
- Department of Elementary & Secondary Education (DESE) for Special Education and Career Technical Education
- Somerville Historic Preservation Commission
- Massachusetts Historic Commission
- Somerville Fire Department
- Somerville Police Department
- Somerville Department of Public Works
- Somerville Water & Sewer Department

- Somerville Inspectional Services Department
- Somerville Information Technology Department
- Somerville City Cable
- Somerville Child Care Center
- Somerville Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development
- Somerville Office of Sustainability and Environment

The proposed school project is a creative architectural and site planning solution to a challenging site and program. The program is established by the City in to meet the standards of the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) and provide a superior educational experience for the City's high school students. The proposal also seeks to make an important connection to future public transportation by providing direct access through the middle of the civic site to the MBTA station and Gilman Square. Additionally, the project seeks to provide on-site athletic opportunities by providing an outdoor field similar to (although smaller than) those typically found at our local high schools.

Based upon this set of circumstances, the development team created a strong site plan for the hill, an attractive building that will serve student needs and provide a substantial open field for athletic use. In addition, the site plan reserves the historic 1895 school building for other future City use, permits better access across and through the site, and connects the school to Gilman Square and the forthcoming Green Line station. The plan anticipates further review and design work for portions of the green area fronting Highland Avenue and the associated monuments. The City contemplates future work on Central Hill to update City Hall, expand and/or update the Library and reuse the 1895 high school structure.

II. FINDINGS FOR SPECIAL PERMITS (SZO §4.4.1 & SZO Article 9):

In order to grant a special permit, the SPGA must make certain findings and determinations as outlined in §5.1.4 of the SZO. This section of the report goes through §5.1.4 in detail.

1. Information Supplied:

The Staff finds that the information provided by the Applicant conforms to the requirements of §5.1.4 of the SZO and allows for a comprehensive analysis of the project with respect to the required Special Permits.

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."*

The structure is currently non-conforming with regard to use, rear yard setback, building height and parking. The proposal is to continue the non-conforming use as a school in a residential zone which the Applicant can do by-right. The triggers for Special Permits are: rear yard setback and building height.

The required rear yard setback in the RC zone is 20 feet. The current rear yard setback is 16.3 feet. The Applicant proposes reducing this rear setback to 6.6 feet.

The maximum building height allowed in the RC zone is 3 stories or 40 feet. As the highest point of the existing high school is 106.75 feet. The Applicant proposes increasing the height by just shy of 24 feet for a total proposed height of 130.5 feet.

These alterations to a non-conforming structure require the Applicant to obtain special permits under §4.4.1 of the Somerville Zoning Ordinance (SZO).

Section 4.4.1 states that “[l]awfully existing one-and two-family dwellings which are only used as residences, which are nonconforming with respect to dimensional requirements, may be enlarged, extended, renovated or altered by special permit granted by the SPGA in accordance with the procedures of Article 5.”

In considering a special permit under §4.4 of the SZO, Staff finds that the alterations proposed would not be substantially more detrimental to the neighborhood than those of the existing structure. Staff finds that the proposed design of the high school allows for the following:

- retention of historic building components that are of cultural value to the City;
- building design that combines existing building components with 21st-century aesthetics;
- building envelope and interior that serve to mitigate energy usage;
- improved circulation routes across the civic campus;
- improved handicapped access throughout the site as well as within the high school structure itself;
- upgraded landscaping;
- new open space allowing for on-site athletic fields.

3. Consistency with Purposes: *The Applicant has to ensure that the project "is consistent with (1) the general purposes of this Ordinance as set forth in Article 1, and (2) the purposes, provisions, and specific objectives applicable to the requested special permit which may be set forth elsewhere in this Ordinance, such as, but not limited to, those purposes at the beginning of the various Articles."*

The proposal is consistent with the general purposes of the Ordinance as set forth under §1.2, which includes, but is not limited to promote[ing] 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 protect health; to secure safety from fire, panic and other dangers; to provide adequate light and air; to prevent the overcrowding of land; to avoid undue concentration of population; to conserve the value of land and buildings; to encourage the most appropriate use of land throughout the City; and to preserve and increase the amenities of the municipality.

The proposal is consistent with the purpose of the RC district, which is, “...to establish and preserve a district for multi-family residential and other compatible uses which are of particular use and convenience to the residents of the district.” Staff finds that the existing, legal, non-conforming school/institutional use on this portion of the site serves as a convenience to the residents of the surrounding RC district. Further, given its prominent, central location the structure is convenient to the general Somerville community. Moreover, Staff finds that the proposed project will provide additional open space to RC district residents which will also be accessible to the whole of the Somerville community. Lastly, Staff finds that the project, as proposed, will cause minimal disruption to the surrounding neighborhoods and government facilities, yet, in the end will provide the City with a well-designed and engineered modern high school that meets the educational needs of our community’s high school youth.

4. Site and Area Compatibility: *The Applicant has to ensure that the project "(i)s designed in a manner that is compatible with the characteristics of the built and unbuilt surrounding area, including land uses."*

Surrounding Neighborhood: The civic campus located on Highland Avenue is an anomaly in the neighborhood. 81 Highland Avenue is surrounded by two-, three-, and multi-family residential properties with light commercial properties mixed therein. At least one portion of the current high school building

has been present on this site since 1895. Therefore, the presence of an educational institution has been part of this neighborhood fabric for well over 100 years.

Impacts of Proposal (Design and Compatibility): Staff finds that the combination of retaining some of the existing sections of the building and the incorporation of new additions does a good job of blending both the modern and the historic. While the proposed structure will be, in some areas, about 24 feet higher than the existing school, Staff finds that, given the topography of the civic campus, this added height will be minimally impactful to the surrounding neighborhoods. Moreover, the project has been designed in such a way that the site line from City Hall through to the Central Library will be maintained. Given the distance of the new structure from surrounding residential buildings, Staff finds that any shadowing of adjacent properties will be minimal to non-existent. Lastly, Staff finds that the proposed project significantly increases the amount of usable open space both on this campus and within the City as a whole. The proposed athletic field, new landscaping, and eventual upgrade to the passive recreation space fronting the current parking concourse will all contribute to improving accessible open space in the City.

7. **Housing Impact:** This project does not add to the City's stock of affordable housing units.

8. **SomerVision Plan:** This project meets SomerVision goals in the following manners:

- Creates new, publicly-accessible open space;
- Preserves and enhances the character of this civic campus neighborhood;
- Strengthens existing education programs;
- Addresses environmental sustainability:
 - ❖ Through energy-efficiency-minded design and materials in the new portions of the school;
 - ❖ Reduces the amount of landfill waste through the retention and re-use of portions of the existing school building;
- Considers storm water management by installing a system that will capture and treat runoff before discharge.

III. FINDINGS FOR VARIANCE

A Variance (§5.5) is sought to for parking relief under Article 9 of the SZO.

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

The only variance required of this project is for parking. The site constraints at the high school site are significant. The site was selected from a city-wide search that considered moving the high school to a number of other locations in Somerville. At the end of this process, the high school committee and the design architects collectively determined that the current site was the only viable site, and also that it had significant advantages due to its central location.

The program of a modern school, including classrooms, labs, vocational school programs, and technical training programs, along with music, art and athletic programs are all very challenging to fit on a tight site. The City determined that maintaining a view to the bottom of Central Hill, along with opening up the site for more recreational opportunity, similar to what is provided on-site at other high schools, would all be a priority. Upon coordinating this site plan, the design team determined that an on-site field for athletic practice would be a significant benefit to the school. The field fits behind the building in areas currently occupied by the wing of the current 1920s era building and adjacent parking.

The design team reviewed the feasibility of incorporating one or two parking layers below the proposed athletic field. However, adding these layers would have been physically challenging and prohibitively expensive. Therefore, the team determined that it would pursue the design presented that would include fewer overall off-street spaces than currently exist.. Therefore, the application includes a request for a zoning variance from parking requirements.

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: A campus approach was used to analyze existing and proposed parking as the high school project will also impact City Hall and Library parking. The project will increase the total net floor area of the high school, therefore is subject to meet off-street parking requirements for the increase in net floor area as outlined in Section 9.4.2. It is assumed that the field use is an accessory use and does not impose additional parking requirements. It is also assumed that at the conclusion of the high school project, the 1895 building will be vacant and will require no additional parking.

Parking requirements for institutional, education and arts uses are outlined in §9.5.5.a and are 1.0 spaces per employee. There is a projected increase of 8 faculty/staff positions in the new high school; therefore the project is required to provide 8 additional parking spaces beyond the existing quantity of spaces on the site [f]or a proposed total of 253 parking spaces.

Staff’s response: Staff concurs with the Applicant’s assessment of the existing and proposed parking situation. Part of the goal of this high school project was to prioritize pedestrian traffic to, about, and from this site. To that end, a total of 85 parking spaces will be provided on-site. In addition to pedestrian traffic, the high school project also anticipates significant travel to and from the high school from the Green Line Extension. The civic campus is also readily accessible from public buses. Significant traffic/parking studies have been performed by the City which show that the adjoining side streets surrounding the civic campus are able to accommodate off-street parking during school hours.

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 that was presented was developed to address both facility needs and educational needs of the district. Goals for the site design emerged from planning sessions held with City staff, master planning consultants, and members of the Green Line Extension (GLX) project and included:

- Developing the civic campus to create a cohesive site design including materials and circulation;
- Maximizing view corridors to existing and future developments, including the Green Line Extension project and Gilman Station;
- Prioritizing pedestrian circulation and limiting vehicular access.

Staff’s response: Staff finds that, in order to meet the educational programming needs of Somerville High School, as well as meet the demands of the public with regard to publicly-accessible open space, the requested reduction in on-site parking spaces is a reasonable request of the Applicant given the multitude of other needs that this project fulfills for the City. The project site itself, though large in acreage, presents numerous topographical challenges due to its hilltop location and the steep slope found at the rear of this odd, bow-shaped lot.

Of further hindrance is the existence of two other large civic buildings that are part of this central campus area and which will continue to serve their current functions going forward. Staff finds that the Applicant's proposal provides a solution that successfully balances many competing high-priority "wants" and "needs" expressed by the greater Somerville community.

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: Student, faculty, and staff transportation to and from the high school is primarily a multi-modal event, involving pedestrians, MBTA buses, personal, parent and student vehicles, school buses, or bicycles. The MBTA serves the high school via the 88 and 90 routes which stop on Highland Avenue. The 80 route also serves the civic campus and stops on Medford Street.

Staff's response: Staff finds that the educational and open space goals of Somerville that this project meets far outweigh any negative impact created by an up-tick in on-street parking that may occur. Given that this site is well-served by current public transportation and the increase in service that will occur with the completion of the Green Line Extension at Gilman Square immediately behind the high school, Staff finds that the reduction in on-site parking will be mitigated in the short-term with the increase in public transportation service to this immediate area.

IV. RECOMMENDATION

Special Permits under §4.4.1 and Variance under Article 9 of the SZO

Based on the materials submitted by the Applicant, the above findings and subject to the following conditions, the Planning Staff recommends **APPROVAL** of the requested **SPECIAL PERMITS & VARIANCE**.

Approval is for increasing the non-conforming height of the high school, increasing the non-conforming rear yard setback, and parking relief. Approval is based on submitted plans dated August 31, 2017. Changes to the approved project must first be submitted to Planning Staff for their review and approval **PRIOR TO** the implementation of these changes in-the-field.

The standard conditions required of private projects are not necessary here, as the required coordination with city departments (such as engineering for stormwater, city arborist for open spaces, etc.) are already embedded in the city's internal school construction review process.

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.