



City of Somerville

PLANNING BOARD

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

TO: Planning Board
FROM: Planning, Preservation & Zoning (PPZ) Staff
SUBJECT: 15 McGrath Highway, P&Z 21-062
POSTED: January 28, 2022

RECOMMENDATION: Approve with Conditions (SPA)

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

This memo summarizes the development review application submitted for 15 McGrath Highway, identifies any additional discretionary or administrative development review that is required by the Somerville Zoning Ordinance, and provides related analysis or feedback as necessary. The application was deemed complete on September 30, 2021, and is scheduled for a public hearing on February 3, 2022. Any Staff recommended findings, conditions, and decisions in this memo are based on the information available to date prior to any public comment at the scheduled public hearing.

LEGAL NOTICE

15 McGrath Hwy Owner LLC proposes to construct a LEED Platinum Lab Building in the High Rise district, which requires Site Plan Approval.

SUMMARY OF PROPOSAL

15 McGrath Hwy Owner LLC is proposing to construct a 9-story LEED Platinum Lab Building. The proposed development will produce 242,000 square feet of commercial space, 268 motor vehicle parking spaces, 53 long-term bicycle parking spaces, 14 short-term bicycle parking spaces, and the proposed landscape will earn a Green Score of 0.24.

ADDITIONAL REVIEW NECESSARY

15 McGrath is located in the 0.5mi Transit Area in the High Rise (HR) zoning district in the Twin City neighborhood represented by Ward 2 Councilor JT Scott. Establishing a Lab Building in the HR 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 (non-variance) discretionary or administrative permits required for the HR zoning district.

The Zoning Board of Appeals granted Hardship Variances for the primary front setback, a driveway in a frontage area, a building not parallel to the front lot line, and forward

upper story projection in April 2021. The Director of Planning, Preservation, and Zoning has approved a lot merger for this property administratively in accordance with the Planning Board's Rules of Procedure.

NEIGHBORHOOD MEETINGS

The first neighborhood meeting was hosted by Ward 2 Councilor JT Scott and the applicant on October 14, 2020, using virtual meeting technology.

The second neighborhood meeting was hosted by Ward 2 Councilor JT Scott and the applicant on July 12, 2021, using virtual meeting technology.

DESIGN REVIEW

The proposal was reviewed by Somerville Urban Design Commission via the GoToWebinar meeting platform on June 8, 2021, and June 22, 2021. The Commission provided its official recommendation on August 6, 2021.

ANALYSIS

This is the first of several proposals for this stretch of McGrath Highway that Staff anticipates will be before the Board in the coming months. These proposals are capitalizing on public investments into transportation infrastructure in the area (including the extension of the Green Line and community path, and MassDOT's planned improvements for this section of McGrath Hwy) and will contribute to this section of McGrath Hwy growing in prominence as a commercial destination.

As there are multiple proposals for new buildings in this area moving through the process at the same time, some have coordinated with one another on changes that will have impacts beyond the limits of one property. For this reason, it is important for the Board to be aware of the proposal for a hotel at neighboring 1 McGrath Hwy as the Applicant has worked collaboratively with that property to propose changes to the surrounding area that, if both projects are approved, both will contribute to and benefit from. That said, the proposal at 1 McGrath Hwy is a separate project and will not be discussed in this memo except in reference to changes the Applicant has collaborated with that team on.

Transportation & Mobility Impacts

Independent of this project, MassDOT plans to resurface and restripe this portion of McGrath Highway/O'Brien Highway to introduce buffered or separated bicycle lanes in both directions, create "floating" bus stops on both the north and south sides of the street, and remove one travel lane in each direction. These changes are expected to make the area more friendly to pedestrians and bicyclists.

As required for an application of this scale, the Applicant conducted a Transportation Impact Study (TIS) to understand the expected impacts of this project on the surrounding roadway. The Mobility Division approved the scope for the TIS, including the use of a yearly growth rate of 0.39%, and has reviewed the final TIS. The changes by MassDOT described above were accounted for in the TIS as part of the future conditions.

The Mobility Division notes that the final TIS makes assumptions that bias the results towards motor vehicle use (including the use of a 0.6% growth rate rather than the 0.39% growth rate approved by Mobility Staff), but that Mobility Staff will continue to work with the Applicant to focus on promoting non-vehicular modes of transportation. The TIS shows this project as resulting in declines in the Level of Service (LOS) at a number of intersections nearby and in increases to transit ridership that exceed acceptable passenger crowding levels. Since the City is not undertaking projects to increase vehicle throughput on our streets, Mobility Staff regularly works with development teams to implement programs, services, and infrastructure improvements that are focused on mode shift and on making it easier and safer for people to take transit, walk, and bike in the vicinity of new development. The transportation demand management strategies identified in the approved Mobility Management Plan (MMP) and the infrastructure improvements identified in the TIS are both essential for shifting users towards non-vehicular modes and mitigating the expected impacts of this project on the surrounding transportation network. Some of these mitigation strategies are discussed below.

In addition to the changes planned by MassDOT, the Applicant has proposed additional improvements to McGrath Hwy to mitigate the transportation impacts expected from this project. These additional changes have been discussed with MassDOT, City Staff, and other relevant groups and will require continued coordination with those entities as this project moves forward. These changes include:

- signal equipment and timing improvements at the McGrath Hwy and Rufo Road intersection;
- the creation of a left turn lane along the eastbound side of McGrath Hwy in order to make turning into the property easier;
- rebuilding the sidewalk along McGrath Hwy;
- relocating curb to accommodate a sidewalk-level northbound protected bike facility;
- installing a bus shelter in accordance with MBTA's guidelines; and
- working with MassDOT to plan and design pavement markings and other elements at the intersection with Rufo Road to enhance bicycle and pedestrian connections in this area.

Staff have included recommended conditions at the end of this memo that require the Applicant to continue coordinating with the City on these items to ensure that the final designs are acceptable to all necessary parties.

Mobility Staff are also separately working with MassDOT and the MBTA on several projects to add transit service and to increase bus service frequency and reliability in the McGrath corridor. These changes will support the Applicant's to mitigate the impact of

the additional 812 daily transit passengers expected from this proposal. The Applicant's plans, as identified in the MMP, include the provision of subsidized transit passes for all new employees. The transit-supportive programs and infrastructure improvements proposed by the Applicant are critical to the City being able to accommodate projected new development, residents, and employees while also not experiencing more gridlock on our streets.

Implementing the transportation demand management strategies and the infrastructure changes identified in the MMP and the TIS are critical for mitigating the impact this project will have on the transportation network in the surrounding area. Staff have recommended conditions to ensure that all necessary parties are involved in future discussions about these efforts.

In addition to the changes proposed by the Applicant to mitigate this project's impact on the surrounding transportation network, the Applicant has also entered into a private agreement with the owners of 1 McGrath Hwy to implement additional improvements if both projects receive all necessary approvals.

The first change would be the creation of a ramp on the east side of 1 McGrath Hwy that would allow the MBTA to connect the newly built community path to McGrath Hwy. This ramp would be a joint endeavor by this Applicant and the owner of 1 McGrath, but multiple conditions must be satisfied for it to move forward: in addition to both 1 and 15 McGrath Hwy receiving all necessary approvals, the City of Cambridge or the State must build a "CPX Spur" connecting the ramp to the main portion of the community path. While Staff believes this is likely to happen due to the amount of public support for the ramp expressed by community groups and elected officials, construction of the ramp cannot be required as a condition of approval as the Applicant cannot force construction to occur on land they do not control.

The second change would be to the vehicular access plans for both 1 and 15 McGrath Hwy. While each project has proposed an independent plan for allowing motor vehicles to enter and exit their site, if both projects are approved the two teams have agreed to consolidate their exit plans to reduce the overall impact of their projects on McGrath Hwy. Specifically, the two projects would have one shared exit onto McGrath Hwy at the Rufo Road intersection which would allow for the simplification of signal timing at Rufo Road. The two properties, however, would maintain their separate entrances. The Applicant will have two entrances to their property – the eastern driveway will provide access to a 268-space underground parking garage, while the western driveway (at the "jug handle") will allow for on-site pick-up and drop-off in front of the building; both these driveways will also provide access to the loading zone at the rear of the building.

Parking

This project complies with the parking minimum set by the Zoning Ordinance for lab/R&D uses located outside of a transit area in the High-Rise District with a parking ratio of 1.02 spaces/1,000 square feet. That said, Mobility Staff notes that similarly sized

(and larger) developments for lab/R&D uses are being reviewed in other parts of the City similarly situated to take advantage of future rapid transit and enhanced bus service nearby and have recently been approved with parking ratios of 0.6 spaces/1,000 square feet.

Recent research has documented the empirical relationship between parking supply and automobile mode share in new development. In other words, the amount of site-generated motor vehicle traffic is likely to be directly dependent on the number of off-street parking spaces created by a development. Given the incompatibility of adding more motor vehicle trips with the City's ability to reach our Climate Forward, SomerVision, and Vision Zero goals, Mobility Staff will continue working with this applicant to ensure that the proposed parking is managed as used as a shared resource available to the public, as required by the Zoning Ordinance.

The approved MMP includes several conditions regulating the operation of the Commercial Parking facility, including requiring that at least 15% of the parking spaces be equipped with Level 2 Chargers and that at least an additional 35% of the spaces be EV Ready spaces. While this is fewer spaces than 25% of spaces being equipped with chargers and 100% of the spaces being EV Ready that the Office of Sustainability and Environment (OSE) would prefer to see, it is an increase over the original proposal of 2-5% of spaces being equipped and 6% being EV Ready. The MMP also reiterates the Zoning Ordinance's requirement that any reserved parking spaces are subject to a 200% market rate price premium, and requires that no more than 5% of the total spaces may be reserved, including for use by neighboring property owners, tenants, or users.

Building & Site Design

The proposal helps establish a more consistent and urban street wall along McGrath Hwy which contributes to the area becoming more pedestrian friendly. The right side is meant to be welcoming to pedestrians, as the ground floor will be filled with retail or Arts & Creative Enterprise spaces, as well as a lobby for the upper story uses. While the retail space will be set back approximately 45' from McGrath Hwy, the area between the front lot line and the façade will contain approximately 15' of landscaping and sidewalk furnishings at the front edge of the property, a vehicular passenger loading and unloading area, and a covered arcade-like area at the edge of the building. The Applicant will also be moving the existing transformer from the expanded sidewalk area at the front of the property into an underground vault.

The left half of the building must be significantly set back from McGrath Hwy due to the "jug handle," and the Applicant has concentrated vehicular access and back-of-house needs on that side of the building. The concentration of vehicular-focused areas on the left half of the property is an improvement over the existing situation of the entire frontage area being dominated by motor vehicles.

Environmental Impacts

Since submitting their materials on green building design to OSE and receiving OSE's comments, the Applicant has made changes to their project including increasing the number of EV and EV Ready spaces (see above) and increasing the number of LEED points they plan to achieve from 80 points (the minimum needed to achieve LEED Platinum certifiability as required for this project) to 85 points. A letter from OSE (dated December 27, 2021) discussing the most recent changes to the project is attached to the end of this memo.

The Applicant has also submitted a shadow study, pedestrian wind study, and solar reflection study as required for a project of this scale. Neither the shadow study nor the solar reflect study show any impacts of concern that are not already being mitigated by this project. The shadow study shows that, except for a few hours during winter, shadows will primarily fall on MBTA land or on industrial or commercial buildings. Staff

The solar reflection study shows the project having a potential impact on users in the immediate area, particularly drivers at the intersection of Rufo Road and McGrath Hwy when directly facing the building, but Staff do not believe that these impacts rise to a level which requires mitigation.

The original wind study (dated August 6, 2021) showed that under "Full Build" conditions, the proposal would create "uncomfortable" wind conditions at eight (8) points around the building, including three (3) along the community path. Staff expressed concerns about this impact, especially on the community path, and asked the Applicant to work with RWDI (the Applicant's wind consultant) to propose mitigation strategies to lessen or eliminate these impacts. In response, the Applicant has submitted an updated wind study (January 11, 2022). This updated wind study fully addresses Staff's concerns with the original wind study.

In particular, the updated wind study shows that under "Full Build" conditions all portions of the new community path will be comfortable for walking (mean wind speed of <19mph) and all but two points on the community path will be comfortable for standing (mean wind speed of <15mph) or more sedentary activities. There are two (2) points around the building which have mean wind speeds of 20mph during the winter months but have mean wind speeds of <19mph during the other three seasons (and have annual mean wind speeds of <19mph). Staff do not believe that these impacts are impactful enough to require mitigation beyond what the Applicant has already identified in the update wind study.

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.

Information relative to the required considerations is provided below:

Site Plan Approval

- 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 plan, including the following:

- Build a sustainable future through climate leadership [and] balanced transportation [...].
- 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.
- 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.*

Staff believes that this project supports the intent of the HR zoning district which is, in part, "[t]o accommodate the development of areas appropriate for an intense mix of multi-story multi-unit, mixed-use, and commercial buildings; neighborhood-, community-, and region-serving uses; and a wide variety of employment opportunities."

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 realm (yards and building interiors).

- 3. Mitigation proposed to alleviate any impacts attributable to the proposed development.*

Staff believes that, as conditioned, the proposal does not create any impacts which require mitigation. The approved Mobility Management Plan and the improvements to the public realm proposed as part of this project are essential to alleviating negative impacts caused by this project on the surrounding transportation network. The Applicant's continued coordination with City Staff is necessary to successfully finalize and implement these mitigation strategies.

PERMIT CONDITIONS

Should the Board approve the required *Site Plan Approval for a 9-story LEED Platinum lab building*, PPZ Staff recommends the following conditions:

Commercial Parking Facility

- The commercial parking facility must have a parking access and revenue control system to manage vehicular access and collect parking revenues from patrons.
- 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.
- 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.
- The underground structured parking must be operated as a Commercial Parking facility principal use.
- 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.
- 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.

Construction Documents

- Construction documents must be substantially equivalent to the approved plans and other materials submitted for development review.
- 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.
- An outdoor lighting plan and supplier cut sheet specifications of chosen lighting fixtures must be submitted to confirm compliance with Section 10.7 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.

Legal Agreements

- Development must comply with the Development Covenant by and between the City of Somerville and 15 McGrath Hwy Owner, LLC dated Month XX, 2022, as amended.
- 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.
- A covenant or other deed restriction agreeing to pay the housing linkage fee must be executed and recorded with the Middlesex South Registry of Deeds.
- A covenant or other deed restriction agreeing to pay the jobs linkage fee must be executed and recorded with the Middlesex South Registry of Deeds.

Maintenance

- 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.

Mobility Management

- The property owner and applicable future tenants shall comply with the Mobility Management Plan submitted June 23, 2021, as approved and conditioned by the Director of Mobility.

Permit Validity

- This Decision must be recorded with the Middlesex South Registry of Deeds.
- Alterations to the design or location of the transformer vault is a major amendment to the approved plans, and is permitted only as a Plan Revision in accordance with Article 15 of the Somerville Zoning Ordinance.
- 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.
- This Decision is not valid unless a land plat to consolidate MBL 115-B-6 and 115-B-7 into one lot is approved and recorded with the Middlesex South Registry of Deeds.

Public Record

- One (1) physical copy of the original application materials and one (1) digital and (1) physical copy 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.
- A 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.

Site & Building Design

- Frontage area provided for a widened sidewalk along McGrath Hwy must be designed and paved to properly correspond with any sidewalk improvements approved within the public right-of-way.
- Utility meters are not permitted on any facade or within the frontage area of the lot.

Sustainability

- All Stage 2 documentation required by the Office of Sustainability & Environment's LEED Certifiability Requirements.
- All Stage 3 documentation required by the Office of Sustainability & Environment's LEED Certifiability Requirements.

Transportation Mitigation

- To mitigate transportation impacts, a new crosswalk must be installed on the east side of the Rufo Road/McGrath Hwy intersection, across McGrath Hwy. Final design must be approved by relevant City Departments and MA State Departments & Agencies.
- To mitigate transportation impacts, a dedicated left-turn only lane into the eastern driveway must be created on the eastbound side of McGrath. Final design must be approved by relevant City Departments and MA State Departments & Agencies.
- To mitigate transportation impacts, a bus shelter with a bench, electric heater, and next-bus arrival e-sign must be installed along McGrath Hwy frontage. Final design must be approved by relevant City Departments and MA State Departments & Agencies.
- To mitigate transportation impacts, a pedestrian island must be added to the existing crosswalk on the west side of the Rufo Road/McGrath Hwy intersection, across McGrath Hwy. Final design must be approved by relevant City Departments and MA State Departments & Agencies.
- To mitigate transportation impacts, a traffic signal warrant analysis for the intersection of McGrath Hwy and the left-side driveway access must be submitted to the Mobility Division. If the Director of Mobility or MA State Departments & Agencies determines that a traffic signal is warranted, the intersection must be improved with the necessary signal infrastructure. Final design must be approved by relevant City Departments and MA State Departments & Agencies.



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RE: 15 McGrath (PZ#21-062) OSE Comparison of original submission and updated fall submission

December 27, 2021

Thank you for taking the time to respond to comments from the Office of Sustainability and Environment regarding the development project located at 15 McGrath Highway, Somerville. I have reviewed the recently submitted memorandum and pilot low load energy calculator.

In the recent memo, it is noted that the "Project's Mobility Master Plan Certification letter the Proponent has committed to the following: At least 15% of the garage vehicle parking spaces, rounded to the nearest whole number (41 spaces) must be equipped with Level 2 Chargers when the garage opens for occupancy. At least an additional 35% of the garage vehicle parking spaces, rounded to the nearest whole number (an additional 94 spaces) must be EV Ready spaces." This is an encouraging improvement from the 2-5%. It still falls short of what OSE generally recommends, which is 25% installed charging capacity with the remainder of the spaces being electric vehicle ready, subject to the OSPCD-Mobility Division's comments.

In response to OSE's prior comment that "question 3.2 in the questionnaire regarding the transition to carbon neutrality offers insufficient detail, which is compounded by the absence of information on electrification in the response to 3.1," the team recently replied, "The Project's transition to carbon neutrality includes the following components:

- "The Project will transition to electric heating system by replacing condensing hot water boilers with electric heat pumps and electric resistance boilers. Heat pumps will be sized



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to provide 50-60% of full load capacity and 90% of total heat energy for the building. Electric resistance boilers will provide the balance of heat. This strategy is targeted by 2040 or when the hot water boilers reach the end of their useful life.

- “The Proponent will commit to procuring off-site renewable energy that is Green-e Energy certified or equivalent for at least 100% of the building’s total site energy use. This strategy is targeted by 2040.
- “The Proponent will work with tenants to commit to eliminating natural gas consumption. This will require a better understanding of the future tenant lab activities, research, and experiments, and developing a plan that may phase out activities that may require natural gas consumption. This strategy is targeted by 2050.”

It is great to see that the team is planning for the transition to all-electric early in its design. It is also great to see the developer will procure off-site renewable energy. It is not clear if a third party will monitor progress towards these goals or if there is a formal commitment in place to undertake this approach. The wording in the third bullet point, to have a strategy in place to phase out combustion of gas by 2050, seems to miss the Somerville Climate Forward carbon neutral deadline of 2050. The pilot low load building energy calculator results suggest that the proposed project does not fully align with Somerville’s carbon neutral goal.

To continue the sentiment expressed by preceding comments from the Department, it is difficult to evaluate the submitted materials when several aspects of the project are under consideration or lack detail. I look forward to reviewing more details in Stage 2 materials.

Sincerely,

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