



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

To: Planning Board

From: CDD Staff

Date: February 21, 2024

Re: Special Permit **PB-402, 815 Somerville Avenue**

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Community Development

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Overview

Submission Type: Special Permit Application

Applicant: Johanna Schneider representing KS Partners, LLC

Zoning District(s): Business C (BC)

Proposal Summary: Alter an existing building of more than 25,000 gross square feet to accommodate a new technical office for research and development use.

Special Permits Requested: Modification to Building and Site Plan Requirements (19.51.2)

Other City Permits Needed: None

Planning Board Action: Grant or deny requested special permits.

Memo Contents: CDD Zoning Report & Urban Design Report

Other Staff Reports: None

Zoning Section	Required Planning Board Findings <i>(Summary - see appendix for zoning text excerpts)</i>
Modification to Building & Site Plan Requirements (Section 19.50)	The Planning Board will grant a special permit upon finding that the project is consistent with the Urban Design Objectives set forth in Section 19.30.
General Special Permit Criteria (Section 10.43)	Special permits will be normally granted if the zoning requirements are met, unless it is found not to be in the public interest due to one of the criteria enumerated in Section 10.43: <ul style="list-style-type: none">(a) It appears that requirements of this Ordinance cannot or will not be met, or(b) traffic generated or patterns of access or egress would cause congestion, hazard, or substantial change in established neighborhood character, or(c) the continued operation of or the development of adjacent uses as permitted in the Zoning Ordinance would be adversely affected by the nature of the proposed use, or(d) nuisance or hazard would be created to the detriment of the health, safety and/or welfare of the occupant of the proposed use or the citizens of the City, or(e) for other reasons, the proposed use would impair the integrity of the district or adjoining district, or otherwise derogate from the intent and purpose of this Ordinance, and(f) the new use or building construction is inconsistent with the Urban Design Objectives set forth in Section 19.30.

Zoning & Development Staff Report

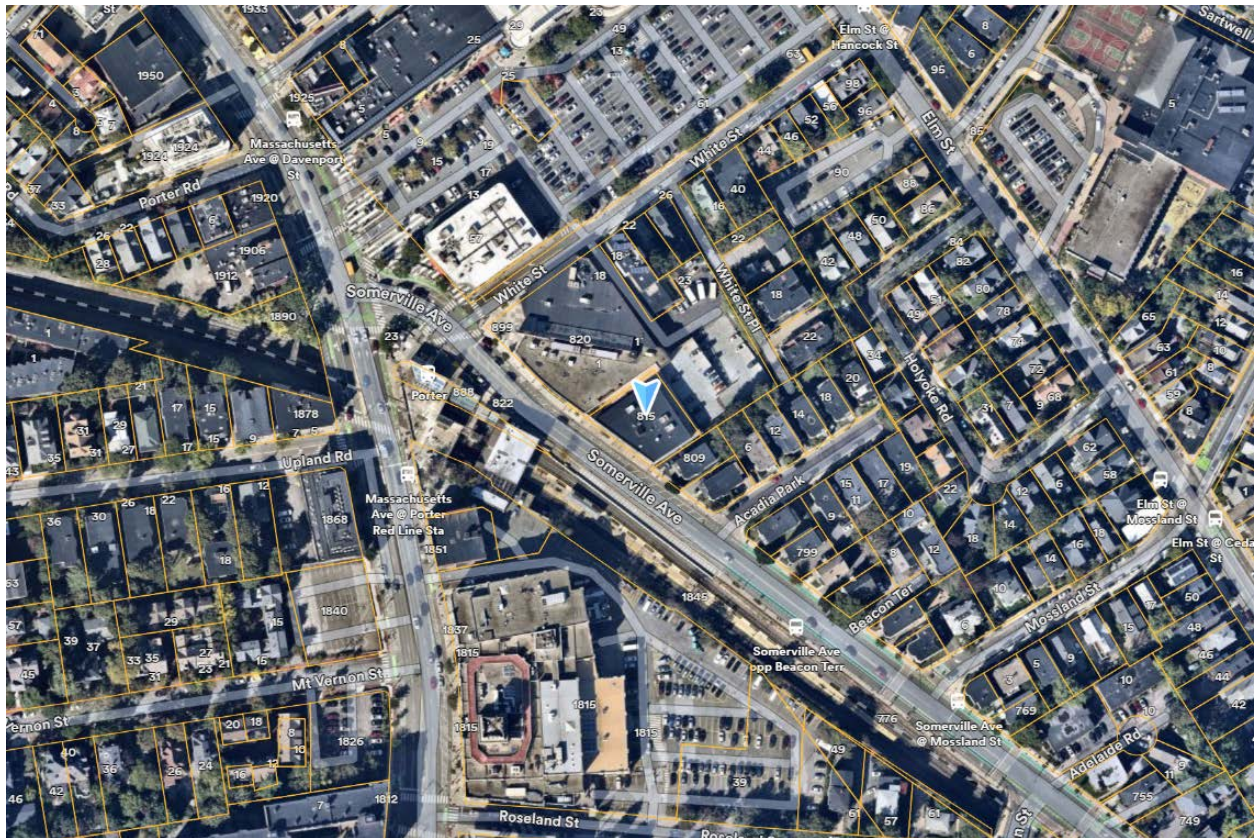
Area Planning and Zoning

Site Context

Neighborhood/Area: Porter Square

Development Patterns: Somerville Avenue is a mixed-use corridor. Existing development is mostly three-story residential buildings to the east and lower-density commercial and retail uses to the west.

Nearby Features: The Porter Square Shopping Center and Porter Square MBTA station are west of the site. Lesley University campus buildings are to the south. The Somerville municipal boundary is immediately to the east.

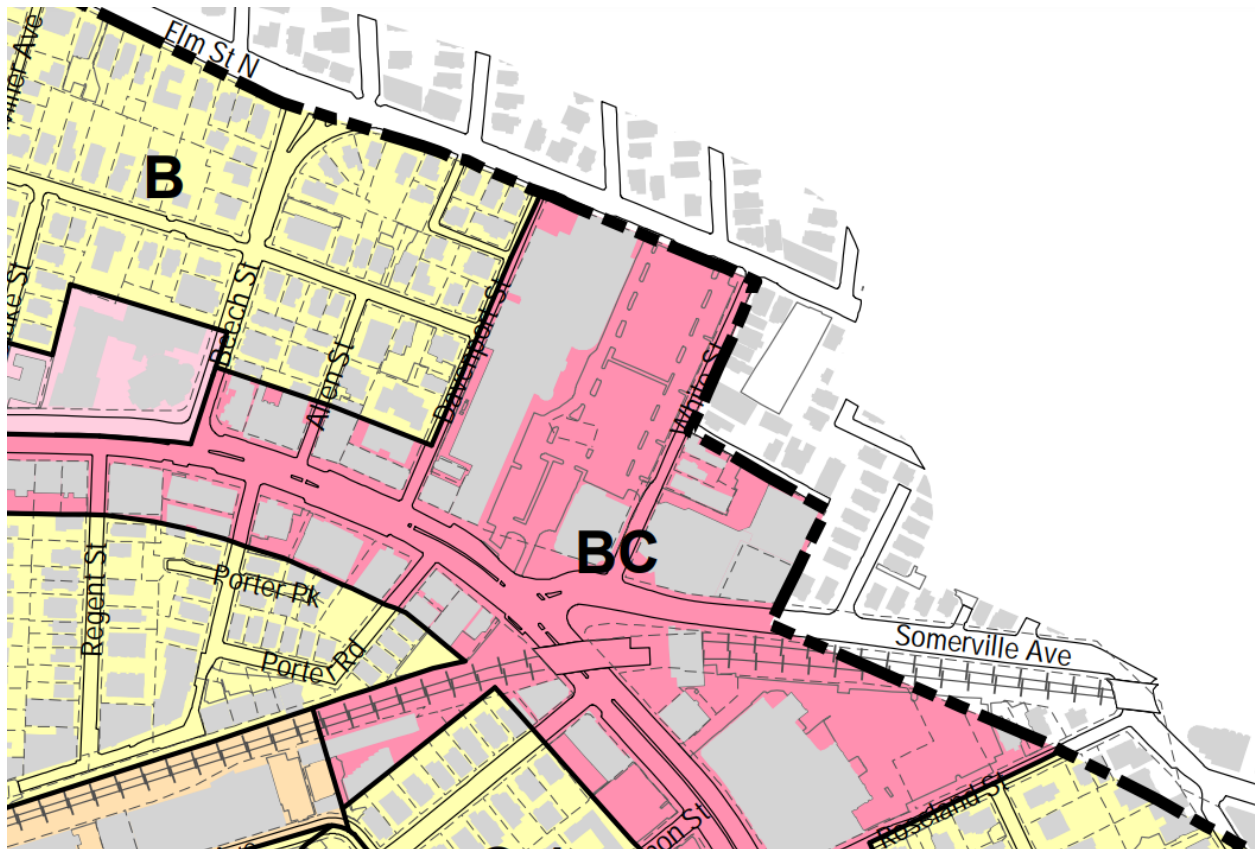


815 Somerville Ave site context map. Source: Nearmap, 2024.

Site Zoning

General description: Base zoning permits moderate density development of a wide range of residential, institutional, and commercial uses up to 55’ in height.

	Base District	Overlay District(s)
District(s):	BC	Massachusetts Avenue (MAOD)
Allowed Uses:	Residential, institutional, office/lab, retail and consumer service uses.	Same as base zoning
Max. Building Height	55’	Same as base zoning
Max. FAR/GFA	1.25 non-residential; 2.0 residential	Same as base zoning
Required Setbacks	None	Same as base zoning
Required Open Space	None	Same as base zoning
Other District Standards or Requirements	N/A	Building façade design standards apply to buildings abutting Mass Ave



Zoning Context Map. Source: City of Cambridge, 2024.

Development Plans and Guidelines

Massachusetts Avenue Overlay District

The intent of the Mass Ave Overlay District is:

- to create a more harmonious and consistent image for the development of Mass. Avenue, adjacent areas, and abutting neighborhoods;
- to encourage good building design and site development, which enhances the pedestrian amenities;
- to ensure that changes along the Avenue are compatible with the scale and character of abutting neighborhoods;
- to encourage the retention of existing buildings of historic value and uses which serve the abutting neighborhoods; and
- to discourage new development inappropriate in both scale and design.

Current Proposal

Overview

The site currently contains a three-story, approximately 27,000 square-foot office building with parking inside the ground story, previously occupied by Lesley University. The building was built ca. 1973 and has no historic status.

The proposed project is to renovate the existing building for office/lab uses with no changes to the existing building footprint or height. Parking will be reduced from 18 spaces to 5 spaces, including a new handicap-accessible parking space. A new transformer is planned inside the ground floor at the western end of the building, and the rooftop will be retrofitted for new mechanical equipment.

Building & Site Plan Special Permit Requirements

The Building and Site Plan requirements (Section 19.50) apply to development of at least 25,000 square feet but less than 50,000 square feet, which would automatically require a Project Review Special Permit (Section 19.20) from the Planning Board.

The requirements include standards for height and setbacks, location of uses, historic resources, landscaping, pedestrian environment, parking, mechanical equipment, and open space. The goal is to promote the Citywide Urban Design Objectives (19.30) through an administrative review process for smaller projects, instead of Planning Board approval. However, if a project does not meet all of the standards, the Planning Board can grant a special permit if the project is found to be consistent with the Urban Design Objectives as a whole.

Section 19.50 only applies to rehab projects if they are made to accommodate a new use, if changes are made to the exterior of the building, and if those changes further violate the Building and Site Plan Requirements than the existing conditions.

Many existing conditions of the site do not meet the Building and Site Plan Requirements, but the following requirements are further violated by the proposed rehab:

19.56 Pedestrian Environment

Section 19.56 requires ground floors to be oriented towards the street they face. Specifically, ground stories must have active uses (including residential, office/lab, retail, or other populated spaces, but explicitly not parking) at least 20 feet into the facade, have at least 50% transparency when retail and/or office uses are present, and have entrances that open directly to the street.

The existing building does not meet this standard by having mostly parking at the ground story. The proposal will convert some of this space to office/lab use. However, the existing transparency at the ground story (36%) will be reduced to 25% because part of the ground story is being used for the transformer.

19.58 Mechanical Equipment, Refuse Storage and Loading Areas

Section 19.58 does not allow mechanical equipment within a required setback, or within 10 feet from the property line if no setback is required. When mechanical equipment is above the roof, it must be permanently screened from view by a screen that is at least 50% opaque.

The Application proposes new mechanical equipment on the rooftop that will be covered by a fully opaque screen wall. However, some mechanical equipment and ductwork planned for the lower roof area towards the rear of the property will be located closer than 10 feet to the property line.

Sustainability Requirements

Because it is subject to Section 19.50, the Project is subject to the City's Green Building Requirements (Section 22.20) which now also triggers the Flood Resilience (22.80) and Green Factor (22.90) standards. The Project is targeting LEED Gold v4 BD+C Core and Shell certifiability with 61 credit points, though the Applicant has not confirmed that they will seek formal LEED certification with USGBC. In order to achieve these credit points, the Applicant is proposing a 13% baseline greenhouse gas emissions reduction and a 20% indoor water use reduction. The Project will be reviewed and certified again at the building permit and occupancy stages of development.

Compliance with the Flood Resilience Standards must be certified by DPW. CDD certified compliance with the Green Factor Standard at the special permit stage. No changes are proposed outside the existing footprint and the Cool Score is not decreased (both the existing and proposed Cool Score are zero). Also, no reconstruction of the roof is proposed that would trigger the need for a white/cool roof, though staff recommended that the Applicant consider a high-SRI roof surface if possible.

Transportation Demand Management

The Project is not required to comply with the City's Parking and Transportation Demand (PTDM) ordinance because the overall number of existing off-street parking spaces will be reduced by the proposal. However, the Applicant has voluntarily agreed to provide the following TDM measures in order to promote building occupants to utilize walking, bicycling and public transit:

- Charge market rates for parking, separate from building area lease costs.
- Require that tenants charge employees directly for parking at market rate.
- Require that employees be charged by the day rather than by the month to promote flexibility in mode choice.
- To share sustainable transportation information with site users, provide a centrally located bulletin board with sustainable transportation information including transit routes and schedules, pedestrian routes, and bicycle parking locations and routes.
- Require that tenants provide a 100 percent subsidy towards an MBTA pass up to the federal fringe benefit limit via a pre-tax deduction program. The pass will cover bus, subway, and commuter rail services.
- Require tenants provide a Gold-Level Bluebikes membership to employees to encourage commuting by bicycle. Employees can use any of the Bluebikes stations located nearby, such as the Porter Square Station, the Lesley University Station, or the Wilson Square Station.

- Require tenants provide flexible work schedules to encourage employees to access the site during off-peak times and work from home when possible.
- Require tenants provide up-to-date information explaining all commute options and sustainable transportation benefits to new employees as part of their orientation.

Community Engagement

The Application notes that two pre-application community engagement meetings were held in April 2023; an in-person meeting at the site and a remote meeting via Zoom. The Application also notes that the Project was presented to the Baldwin Neighborhood Council and the Porter Square Neighbors Association around the same time. The Application did not include a summary of the meetings or how the design was informed by the feedback from the community.

Special Permit Conditions

If the Board decides to grant the special permit, the following list summarizes the general categories of conditions recommended for this development based on the requested special permits:

1. **Approved Development:** Authorized development would need to conform with the submitted application materials. An Approved Dimensional Form would be attached as an Appendix.
2. **Design Review:** CDD staff would review and approve design details at the construction documents phase, prior to issuance of a building permit, to certify that the plans conform to the Planning Board’s approval. Board members may cite specific areas of focus for detailed review, based on the Urban Design Report and Board discussion.
3. **Transportation and Infrastructure:** Work being done on City property would be subject to review and approval by appropriate City departments, including DPW, TP+T and CDD.
4. **Sustainability:** Development will be subject to the Green Building Requirements in Section 22.20, Flood Resilience Standards in Section 22.80, and Green Factor Standard in Section 22.90, which will be recertified by CDD and DPW staff at the building permit and certificate of occupancy stages.
5. **Construction Management Program:** Per Section 18.20, staff would recommend a Construction Management Program be provided and approved by TP+T, DPW, and other applicable City departments before issuance of a building permit. This program would also include a community outreach program designating a point of contact to provide information to the public during the construction process and notification panels posted on the site with project information.

Appendix - Zoning Text Excerpts

Special Permit for Building and Site Plan Requirements (Section 19.50)

19.51.2.3 Applicable Construction.

- (3) Any alteration to the elements of a building of twenty-five thousand (25,000) gross square feet or more, or any alteration of its site, that is regulated by this Section 19.50, where the change is undertaken to accommodate a new use or uses or where the change is to a building constructed pursuant to a building permit certified to be in compliance with this Section 19.50 and where (a) the alterations to accommodate the new use are proposed to the exterior of the building, or on the lot outside the building and (b) those alterations would increase the extent to which the building or lot's physical configuration would violate the requirements set forth in Section 19.50 to a greater extent than the existing configuration.

Where applicable zoning district regulations differ from the requirements of this Section 19.50, the stricter provisions shall apply.

A project that does not comply with the requirements of this Section 19.50 shall not receive a building permit until a Special Permit is granted by the Planning Board. The Planning Board shall grant such special permit only upon finding that the project is consistent with the Urban Design Objectives set forth in Section 19.30. Nothing in this Section 19.50 shall prevent an applicant, not wishing to conform to the requirements of this Section 19.50, from directly seeking a special permit from the Planning Board subject to consistency with Section 19.30.

General Criteria for Issuance of a Special Permit

10.43 *Criteria.* Special permits will normally be granted where specific provisions of this Ordinance are met, except when particulars of the location or use, not generally true of the district or of the uses permitted in it, would cause granting of such permit to be to the detriment of the public interest because:

- (a) It appears that requirements of this Ordinance cannot or will not be met, or
- (b) traffic generated or patterns of access or egress would cause congestion, hazard, or substantial change in established neighborhood character, or
- (c) the continued operation of or the development of adjacent uses as permitted in the Zoning Ordinance would be adversely affected by the nature of the proposed use, or
- (d) nuisance or hazard would be created to the detriment of the health, safety and/or welfare of the occupant of the proposed use or the citizens of the City, or
- (g) for other reasons, the proposed use would impair the integrity of the district or adjoining district, or otherwise derogate from the intent and purpose of this Ordinance, and
- (h) the new use or building construction is inconsistent with the Urban Design Objectives set forth in Section 19.30.

19.30 Citywide Urban Design Objectives [SUMMARIZED]

Objective	Indicators
New projects should be responsive to the existing or anticipated pattern of development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transition to lower-scale neighborhoods • Consistency with established streetscape • Compatibility with adjacent uses • Consideration of nearby historic buildings
Development should be pedestrian and bicycle-friendly, with a positive relationship to its surroundings.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inhabited ground floor spaces • Discouraged ground-floor parking • Windows on ground floor • Orienting entries to pedestrian pathways • Safe and convenient bicycle and pedestrian access
The building and site design should mitigate adverse environmental impacts of a development upon its neighbors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Location/impact of mechanical equipment • Location/impact of loading and trash handling • Stormwater management • Shadow impacts • Retaining walls, if provided • Building scale and wall treatment • Outdoor lighting • Tree protection (requires plan approved by City Arborist)
Projects should not overburden the City infrastructure services, including neighborhood roads, city water supply system, and sewer system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water-conserving plumbing, stormwater management • Capacity/condition of water and wastewater service • Efficient design (LEED standards)
New construction should reinforce and enhance the complex urban aspects of Cambridge as it has developed historically.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutional use focused on existing campuses • Mixed-use development (including retail) encouraged where allowed • Preservation of historic structures and environment • Provision of space for start-up companies, manufacturing activities
Expansion of the inventory of housing in the city is encouraged.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing as a component of large, multi-building development • Affordable units exceeding zoning requirements, targeting units for middle-income families
Enhancement and expansion of open space amenities in the city should be incorporated into new development in the city.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publicly beneficial open space provided in large-parcel commercial development • Enhance/expand existing open space, complement existing pedestrian/bicycle networks • Provide wider range of activities

Urban Design Staff Report

Urban Design Comments

Introduction

The project consists of the adaptation of the existing three-floor brick building at 815 Somerville Avenue from office to laboratory use. The building dates from 1973 according to the application, and from 1998 according to the Cambridge Historical Commission. It is outside the jurisdiction of the CHC.

The building faces Somerville Avenue, opposite the Porter Square MBTA subway stop and close to the Porter Square Shopping Center. It forms part of the southern face of a block comprised of residential and commercial buildings.

The municipal boundary between Cambridge and Somerville runs through the block and coincides with the parcel's east side lot line. The building is adjoined by a two-floor-tall commercial building (Target) on its west side, a triple decker residential building across the municipal boundary on its east side, and a low parking garage to the north. The building is visible not only from Somerville Avenue, but also (to varying degrees) from the residential buildings to the north of the site, and from the streets and driveways within the block that serve those buildings.

The proposed changes to the exterior of the existing structure are minimal: alterations to the first floor of the Somerville Avenue façade and the addition of rooftop mechanical. Visual/acoustical screening for rooftop mechanical is provided at a height sufficient to conceal the lower pieces of equipment. The project's six new tall exhaust vent stacks will be visible above the screening.

The building's first floor is currently dominated by parking, building service, and office space. The proposal reduces the amount of parking, creates lab space in its stead, and adds a new transformer vault.

The North Massachusetts Avenue Urban Design Guidelines Handbook (1986) applies to the site. To enhance the pedestrian experience and to complement the character of Mass Ave's existing buildings, it encourages the careful consideration of façade scale, architectural features (including the design and layout of windows), and signage; the provision of street trees and active ground floor uses; and the concealment of parking.

Design Comments

Site

The existing building fills the site; the public sidewalk on Somerville Avenue is the only opportunity for landscape improvements. The applicant will replace and upgrade the two planters at the building

entrance. East of the site, Somerville Avenue has curbside street trees, including in front of the triple-decker residential building that adjoins the site.

- The possibility of extending the trees through the site's frontage should be carefully investigated.
- The submission includes two site plans that differ slightly in where they show underground utilities. According to the Civil Engineering Site plan, there appears to be sufficient width for street trees between the curb and the existing underground electric line west of the streetlight pole in the middle of the project's frontage. In addition, it may be possible to locate a tree east of the light pole: between the pole and the curb cut for the building's parking and delivery entries.
- Staff recommends that the location of the electric line be verified, and that, in coordination with city staff, curbside street trees be planted if possible.

Facades

The façade facing Somerville Avenue will be cleaned and repaired. The design of the second and third floor facades will remain as they are. The first floor Somerville Avenue facade and the roofscape will be revised:

- The wide existing ground-level opening in the western part of the façade and the existing window to the west of it will be reconfigured into two new windows and a new opening with an overhead grill for the new transformer vault. These changes will reduce the window-to-wall ratio of the first floor from 36% to 25%. Given the simplicity of the existing façade and the regularity of the window layout, this ratio seems adequate.
- The existing overhead doors for the parking garage and loading dock entrances will be replaced.
- New louvers will replace the solid panels over the parking garage entrance.
- Screening will be added for rooftop mechanical.

Cambridge's design guidelines recommend that the first floor facades of commercial buildings incorporate transparent openings to enhance the pedestrian experience. Most of the building's first floor windows facing Somerville Avenue are currently blocked by interior shades.

- It would be preferable to offer views into the interior. If excessive solar gain is affecting the interior spaces, awnings should be considered.

The westernmost portion of the first and second floor facades is set back about 4" behind the building's predominant façade plane. The proposed new opening for the transformer vault extends across the joint between these two façade planes. As a result, the new brick jack arch over the transformer vault doorway projects forward of the plane of the westernmost portion of the façade, as does the proposed narrow brick face at the opening's western jamb.

- To improve the proportions of the façade, and to create a visually satisfying sense of support for the horizontal thrust of the western end of the jack arch, consideration should be given to increasing the breadth of the projecting jamb's south face.

The human sized egress opening at the extreme western end of the façade is open to a small outdoor nook within the volume of the building.

- To conceal this dark and potentially unsightly space from the sidewalk, consideration should be given to providing an egress door in the plane of the façade.

The overhead grills at the first floor openings for the transformer vault, the garage entry, and the service entry are labeled as “Open Slat Metal Doors” and “Overhead Rolling Grills”. They are described in the narrative as: “open style overhead security grille, consisting of vertical links and rods”.

- The rod and link type are often irregular in appearance. They are mostly open and will afford views into the service spaces. More substantial and opaque types of overhead doors or louvers would be preferable.

The gas meter is proposed to be located just to the east of the building’s main entrance, in a nook created by moving the fenestration back from the façade plane.

- Greater clarity should be provided on the design of this area.

The renderings show the building’s east elevation as painted in bright white.

- The existing beige/cream color on the upper portion of the wall seems preferable: it is more compatible with the brick façade facing Somerville Avenue, and provides a more subdued setting for the neighboring residential building.

The north façade faces numerous residential buildings.

- Consideration should be given to controlling light trespass from interior spaces.

Rooftop Mechanical:

A 10-foot-tall visual/acoustical screen is provided around the mechanical equipment on the high roof over the building’s third floor spaces.

- Given the prominence of the building’s six 22-foot-tall exhaust vents above this screen, it would be preferable if the pair of vents proposed at the building’s northeastern corner were relocated to the northwestern corner, aligned with the other two pairs of vents on column line 2. This would create a more orderly roofscape and also locate them at a greater distance from the residential buildings to the east and northeast of the project.
- The acoustical report indicates that at 10 feet high, a sound absorptive face would not provide a benefit, and suggests a 15-foot-tall screen around three sides of the exhaust vent at the building’s northeast corner. If sufficient noise mitigation cannot be achieved by relocating the exhaust vent at this corner to the western side of the roof, or if this cannot be done, the visual and acoustical pros and cons of increasing the height of the screen should be evaluated.

Additional mechanical equipment is proposed on low roof (the roof over the second-floor spaces) on the building’s west and north sides. This equipment is provided with a 10-foot-tall visual/acoustical screen on the north side of the low roof. On the west side of the low roof, the mechanical equipment is only

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partially screened by the slightly taller adjoining commercial building (Target) and a partial visual screen. The south end of this mechanical area is open to Somerville Avenue.

- The screen should be extended to fully enclose the mechanical equipment.

Numerous residential units are close to the proposed project.

- Given the nearby residencies, it would be preferable to exceed minimum noise mitigation standards.

Green Building

As noted in the Zoning & Development report, a white or cool roof is not required.

- To improve the building's energy performance and to reduce the urban heat island effect, a high SRI roof or cool roof is recommended. Where not precluded by mechanical equipment or required walkways, the possibility of a green roof should be investigated.

Bicycle Parking

No bicycle parking is proposed. Since the building fills the site, there is no space for short-term bicycle parking. Long-term bicycle parking is not required by zoning.

- Consideration should be given to providing long-term bicycle parking inside the building.

Continuing Review

The following are additional recommendations for ongoing design review by staff if the Board decides to grant the special permit:

- Brick and mortar selection for changes to the Somerville Avenue façade
- Design of the revised masonry and first floor fenestration
- Design of the recessed area for the gas meters
- Design of louvers in the first floor façade
- Design of overhead grills or doors
- Tenant improvements that would be visible to the public, including window treatments and additional mechanical equipment
- Height, layout, color, material, and acoustical properties of mechanical screening
- Potential bicycle parking
- Signage (if any)
- Exterior lighting (if any)
- Control of light trespass from interior spaces
- Repairs and improvements to the sidewalk
- Potential curbside street trees