



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
OFFICE OF STRATEGIC PLANNING & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
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PLANNING DIVISION

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Case #: 2010-47
Date: August 24, 2010
Recommendation: Conditional Approval

PLANNING BOARD RECOMMENDATION

Site: 162 HIGHLAND AVE

Applicant Name: Somerville Community Corporation
Applicant Address: 337 Somerville Ave, Somerville, MA 02143
Property Owner Name: CASPAR
Property Owner Address: 315 Highland Ave, Somerville, MA 02114
Alderman: Taylor

Legal Notice: Applicant, Somerville Community Corporation and Owner, CASPAR, seek a Special Permit under SZO §7.11.1.c to establish a six unit dwelling within an existing structure and a Special Permit under SZO §4.4.1 to make alterations to the façade in the required side yard.

Zoning District/Ward: Residence C

Zoning Approval Sought: Special Permit under SZO §7.11.1.c and §4.4.1

Date of Application: 6/1/2010

Date(s) of Public Meeting/Hearing: PB: 6/24/10 - ZBA 7/14/10

Dear ZBA members:

At its regular meeting on August 24, 2010 the Planning Board heard the above-referenced application. Based on materials submitted by the Applicant and the Staff recommendation, the Board voted (4-1 with Kevin Prior absent and James Kirylo voting against the recommendation), to recommend **conditional approval** of the requested **Special Permit**.

In conducting its analysis, the Planning Board found:



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I. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

1. Subject Property: The property is a 5,500 sf lot, on which is a 6,072 nsf (8,642 gsf), 3.5 story structure currently used by the Cambridge and Somerville Program for Alcoholism and Drug Rehabilitation (CASPAR) as a medical office for individuals with substance abuse disorders. The building is a circa 1900 Queen Anne style home built by the Glines family, which had prominence in Somerville, and is in need of restoration.

2. Proposal: The Applicant, Somerville Community Corporation (SCC), is proposing to create a permanent, affordable rental housing project that would provide six apartments for formerly homeless families. Five parking spaces would be provided on-site. The units would include:

- one, 2-bedroom unit in the ground floor/basement level;
- two, 2-bedroom units on the first floor;
- two, 2-bedroom units on the second floor;
- one, 4-bedroom unit on the third floor.

The SCC would provide permanent housing for residents, while its partner, the Somerville Homeless Coalition (SHC), would provide supportive services for the residents. SCC would employ Winn Management to professionally oversee the daily operations of the property as they do with the other approximately 120 SCC units throughout the city.

Exterior work would include the addition of four windows, the enlargement of two basement windows and the infill of two windows on the right façade. In addition, the stained glass on the right façade would be relocated to the left side façade. On the rear elevation two windows would be removed and the rear entry door would be lowered for HC access. The porch on the left side would be lowered as well.

3. Nature of Application:

The Applicant seeks approval to establish a six unit residential building, which would require a special permit under SZO§7.11.1.c to establish the use.

The applicant also seeks to alter the existing building façade within the non-conforming right side-yard setback, which would require a special permit under SZO§4.4.1.

4. Surrounding Neighborhood: The surrounding neighborhood on Highland Avenue is generally composed of larger residential buildings. Several of these buildings are multi-family structures and some have commercial or retail uses. Approximately 100 ft away is a large commercial structure where the Dunkin Donuts, a catering hall and some smaller retail stores are located. A parking lot for these uses is available directly across Highland Avenue. Available public transportation includes the 90 and 88 bus lines on Highland Avenue that lead to Davis Square, Sullivan Square or Lechmere rapid transit lines.

5. Parking: The residential portion of the buildings would include five two-bedroom units and one four-bedroom unit. Under the SZO§9.5.1 this would require eleven parking spaces including one visitor space per six units required by the SZO. Under the SZO§9.5.7.b, a medical office requires one parking space per 400 nsf, which would require 15 parking spaces for a 6,072 nsf building. Five parking spaces exist on the property.

Under SZO§9.4, since the existing parking is nonconforming and the new use requires less parking, no new parking is required.

7. Landscaping/Screening: The existing landscaping covers 60% of the property and the applicant will maintain that level of landscaping coverage and make improvements to the appearance of the property.

8. Green Building Practices: Construction will follow the State of Mass DHCD guidelines, which require energy star rated appliances and furnaces, low flow fixtures, and healthy materials. Reuse of as much existing materials will be a priority, including refinishing floors instead of laying down new carpet.

9. Comments:

Fire Prevention Bureau: William Lee has reviewed the proposal and has not yet commented.

Aldermen: Alderman O'Donovan has reviewed the same proposal when it was presented to the Planning Board in June, and stated: "Please note my opposition to the proposal, it is far to dense, will enhance a serious existing traffic & parking problem which currently persists in that area already. Many abutters are opposed to the 6 unit proposal. The house was a one family before Caspar took it over is my understanding. I would support 3 unit maximum."

Alderman Desmond has reviewed the June proposal and stated: "Please note that I am in complete agreement with Alderman O'Donovan. For the sake of the neighborhood and as a neighbor myself I believe the number of units should be limited to three."

Alderman Taylor reviewed the June proposal and stated: "I testified at the Planning Board concerning the density here (number of units) and tandem parking that could lead to public safety concerns backing unto Highland Ave... We have had a neighborhood meeting with Ward 3 and Ward 5 residents and my impression is that a number of neighbors have these same concerns... I am not against the need and concept of this project. It is an opportunity to address the problem of homelessness in a very real way. The real issue is overcrowding and safety here. Perhaps reducing the number of units to four or five would be preferable."

Historic: Kristi Chase stated that the project was reviewed pursuant to section 106 of the National Preservation Act of 1966 and has concluded that the project will have no adverse effect upon historic properties based on the scope of work indicated on the 5/14/2010 A2 and 5/19/2010 A3 plans.

II. FINDINGS FOR SPECIAL PERMIT (SZO §7.11.1.C AND §4.4.1):

In order to grant a special permit with site plan review, 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 Board 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.” As conditioned, the proposal would comply with these standards.

3. Purpose of the 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 project site is located in both an RC district. The purpose of the RC district 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." The Board finds this proposal, as a multi-family residential use is consistent with the intent of the district and is of a use that is less of an impact on the neighborhood than the existing medical office. SCC typically keeps their buildings well maintained and in keeping with the character of the neighborhoods where they are located.

Also, the existing structure contains over 6,000 nsf (8,000 gsf), which is exceedingly large for a lesser number of units. With an average size above 2,000 nsf for a by-right three unit development a building of this size would be difficult to make work financially. The probability would be for a different developer to dramatically alter the existing structure and include a variety of retail and commercial uses in conjunction with the three by-right residential units. Any combination of uses allowed in the RC could be established by right that require 15 parking spaces or less, including nursing homes, beauty salons, barber shops, laundry or dry cleaning facilities, real estate office, bank, etc. The Board finds that this proposal ensures that the building would remain as it appeared historically on the site with the residential use that it was constructed to serve.

This building is in need of rehabilitation and the SCC has committed to efforts to maintain and restore the historic nature of the building, including preservation and restoration of as much of the original detailing as possible, and restoration of the stained glass windows and front porch. A historic consultant that works with Historic New England has volunteered to help select an appropriate historic paint scheme. This building is not currently within a local historic district but would be restored to the high standards typically required by Historic Preservation.

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”.

The Board finds that the proposed development is consistent with the character of the surrounding area. Exterior changes will be limited to the installation, removal and relocation of several windows and small changes to doorways. Other exterior work will focus on restoration of the building to the historical standards of the area. Any potential privacy issues as a result of the additional windows would be negligible.

A six unit building is compatible with other structures in the area that have similar or exceeding numbers of units.

Though no additional parking is required, the site will provide less than one parking space per unit. The Board finds that this area is well served by public transportation and many retail and commercial services are available within walking distance, which reduces the necessity to own a vehicle. SCC and SHC has also analyzed automobile ownership data for formerly homeless families in Somerville. With a sample size of over 50 families, it was found that car ownership is approximately .45 cars per family. Obviously, household finances of formerly homeless families are limited, which keeps car ownership

levels low. Using this figure, only three cars would be owned by the residents of this building, which are provided for on-site. The Board finds that any changes to the on-street parking supply in this area would be negligible. The alternative by-right option of luxury condominiums with retail/office space would produce more demand for parking.

The Board finds that the proposed use has less impact on the neighborhood than many potential by-right projects could have and that the restoration of the building would be the best outcome for maintaining the character of the neighborhood and the quality historic structures in the city.

RECOMMENDATION

Special Permit under §7.11.1.c and Special Permit under §4.4.1

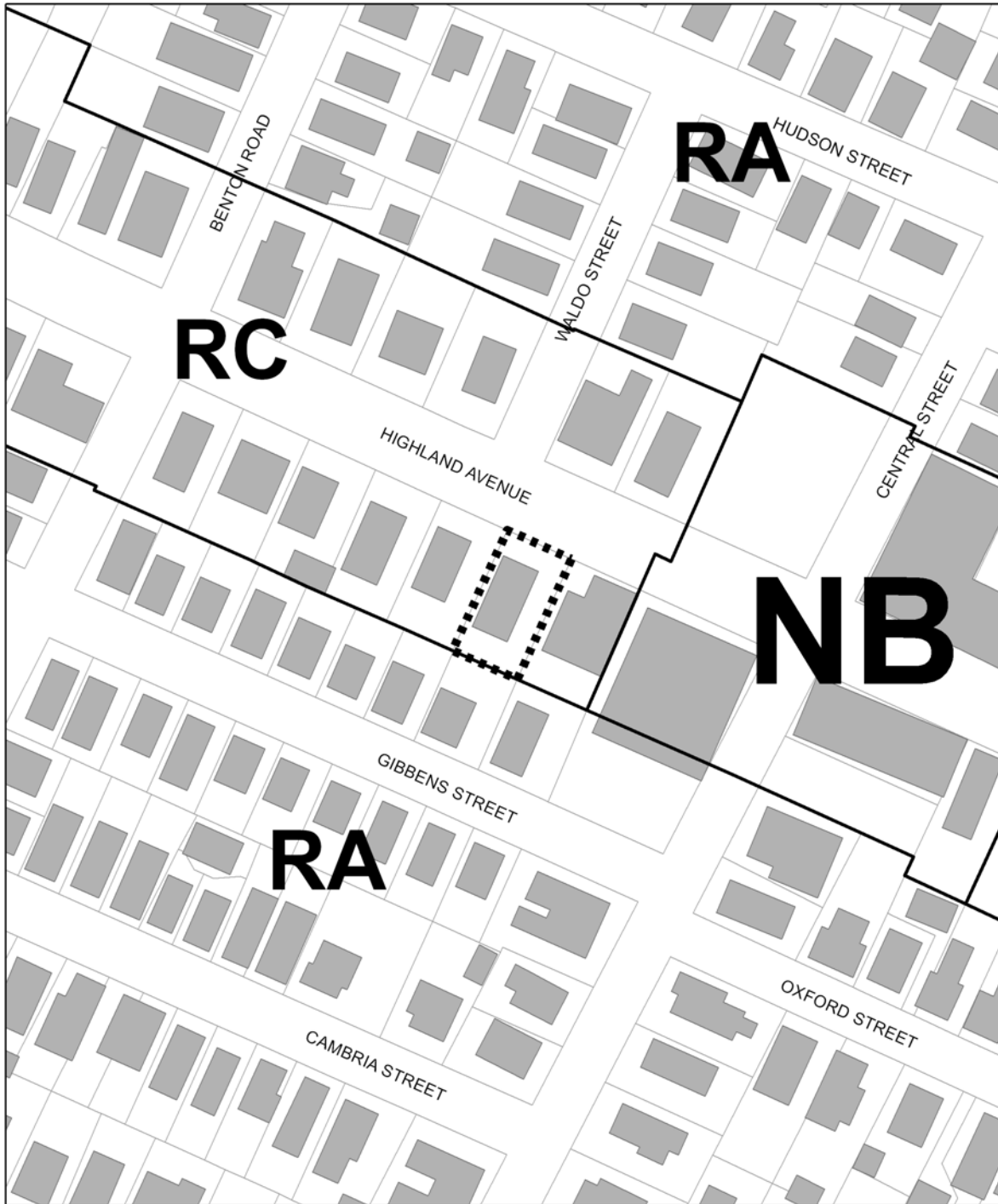
Based on the above findings, the Planning Board recommends **CONDITIONAL APPROVAL** of the requested **SPECIAL PERMITS** with the following conditions:

#	Condition	Timefram e for Complianc e	Verified (initial)	Notes						
1	Approval is for the construction of a six unit residential development and the alteration of the right side yard facade. This approval is based upon the following application materials and the plans submitted by the Applicant and/or its agent:		Plng.							
	<table><tr><th>Date (Stamp date)</th><th>Submission</th></tr><tr><td>(6/1/2010)</td><td>Initial application submitted to the City Clerk's Office</td></tr><tr><td>5/19/2010 (6/18/2010)</td><td>Plans and elevations submitted to OSPCD (renderings and A1, A2, A3)</td></tr></table>				Date (Stamp date)	Submission	(6/1/2010)	Initial application submitted to the City Clerk's Office	5/19/2010 (6/18/2010)	Plans and elevations submitted to OSPCD (renderings and A1, A2, A3)
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Any changes to the approved plans or elevations that are not de minimis, or any changes to the use, must receive ZBA approval.										
2	Any transformers should be located as not to impact the landscaped area and shall be fully screened.	CO	Plng.							
3	Any fencing installed shall be wood and approved by Historic Preservation Staff.	CO	Plng/Hist							
4	Where windows are removed all trim shall be removed as well and matching siding shall be installed.	CO	Plng.							
5	The Applicant, its successors and/or assigns, shall be responsible for maintenance of both the building and all on-site amenities, including landscaping, fencing, lighting, parking areas and storm water systems, ensuring they are clean, well kept and in good and safe	Cont.	ISD							

	working order.			
6	The Applicant shall at his expense replace any existing equipment (including, but not limited to street sign poles, signs, traffic signal poles, traffic signal equipment, wheel chair ramps, granite curbing, etc) and the entire sidewalk immediately abutting the subject property if damaged as a result of construction activity. All new sidewalks and driveways must be constructed to meet DPW standards.	CO	DPW	
7	All construction materials and equipment must be stored onsite. If occupancy of the street layout is required, such occupancy must be in conformance with the requirements of the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices and the prior approval of the Traffic and Parking Department must be obtained.	During Construction	T&P	
8	Any future façade alterations, other than normal maintenance judged by ISD to be cosmetic in nature, shall require a Special Permit approval.	Continuous	ISD	
9	The Applicant shall contact Planning Staff at least five working days in advance of a request for a final sign-off on the building permit to ensure the proposal was constructed in accordance with the plans and information submitted and the conditions attached to this approval.	CO	Plng.	

Sincerely,


Elizabeth Moroney
Acting ChairCc: Applicant: Somerville Community Corporation
Owner: CASPAR



162 HIGHLAND AV