

# DRAFT

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January 3, 2008

Zoning Board of Appeals  
City Hall, 93 Highland Avenue  
Somerville, MA 02143

Re: **51 McGrath Highway:** (Applicant: The Marcus Organization; Owner: Quantum Properties, L.L.C.; Agent: Richard DiGirolamo) The Applicant seeks Special Permit with Site Plan Review approval to construct a three-story 28,800 n.s.f. building for a self-storage facility and convert an existing 49,408 n.s.f. building of factory and office use to a self-storage facility under SZO §7.11.12.4.c. Industrial A Zone (IA). Ward 2.

Dear ZBA Members:

~~At its regular meeting on January 3, 2008 the Planning Board heard the above referenced application. Based on materials submitted by the applicant and the Staff recommendation, the Board voted XXXXX, to recommend XXXX of the requested **Special Permits and Variances**.~~

In conducting its analysis, the Planning Staff found:

## I. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

1. **Subject Property:** The site is located in southeastern Somerville on a triangular piece of land formed by the intersection of McGrath Highway and the commuter rail tracks. The subject property is the combination of three lots with a combined area of 58,505 s.f. and is zoned Industrial A (IA). The existing structure on the site is a three-story (plus basement) brick masonry building with a heavy timber structural frame. The existing building is 61,760 g.s.f with each level (including basement) providing 15,440 g.s.f. of floor area.

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

The building was constructed circa 1920 and has been occupied by a variety of storage and light industrial tenants since that time. The Charles Webb Company was a furniture manufacturing company that last occupied the building in 2005.

2. Proposal: The Marcus Organization proposes to convert the existing 61,760 g.s.f. office/factory use into a self-storage facility that will provide 49,408 n.s.f. of usable storage space, and to construct a 38,400 g.s.f. three-story (plus basement) building that will provide 28,800 n.s.f. of additional usable self-storage space.
3. Nature of Application: Since the proposed storage facilities are larger than 10,000 s.f. the applicant is required to apply for a Special Permit with Site Plan Review (SPSR) under §7.11.12.4.c of the Somerville Zoning Ordinance (SZO). In addition, the applicant is required to obtain a Special Permit (SP) for the alteration of a pre-existing non-conforming structure under §4.4.1 of the Somerville Zoning Ordinance (SZO).
4. Description of Proposal: The Marcus Organization proposes to develop a total of 78,208 n.s.f. (100,160 g.s.f.) of full service self-storage space in the two buildings. The operation is intended to provide storage for business and residential needs in 900 storage units of varying sizes. The facility will also feature an on-site business center, storage pick up and delivery, acceptance of packages and customer service relationship managers. The business is expected to provide ten full and part time jobs.



*Existing Structure –Northwestern Facade*

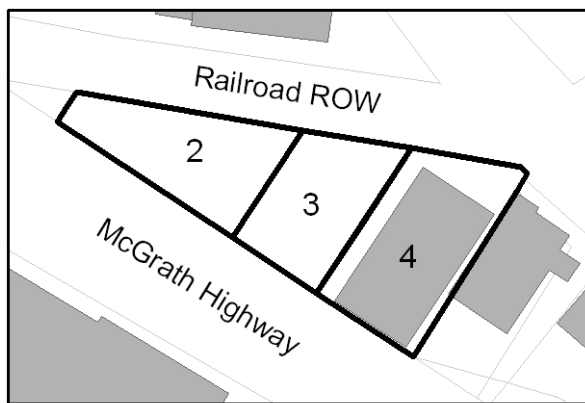
The proposed structure would be at minimum 60' away from the existing structure. The parking lot in the rear of the building and the 13' wide driveway to the rear parking lot will be improved with bituminous pavement, traffic islands and trees. The existing access from McGrath Highway, which is a shared driveway, will be retained. Both structures would feature complete sprinkler systems.

5. Landscaping: The Applicant has indicated the location of Honey Locust Trees and English Ivy plantings, crushed stone islands, and a wood trellis in the plans. There is a 10% landscaping requirement set forth for an IA zoning district requiring 5850 s.f. of the lot to be landscaped area. The proposal provides for 6690 s.f. of landscaping which will exceed this requirement. The SZO also

requires one tree for each 1,000 s.f. of required landscaped area and the applicant is proposing to plant six trees, satisfying this requirement.

6. Parking: Under §9.5.12 of the SZO a minimum of 26 off-street parking spaces are required. The Applicant is proposing to provide 47 off-street parking spaces.

**Existing Structure:** The existing structure is located on lot 4 of the merged property; a structure on lot 3 burned in the 1970s and was never rebuilt. Therefore the apparent unstriped parking area on lots 2 and 3 is actually a former building site, whereas the Charles Webb building (the existing building) remains nonconforming with respect to parking requirements. Because the new use requires the same amount of parking as the previous use (1 per 1,500 g.s.f of building area) and there has been no expansion, no additional parking is required for the existing structure under §9.4.1 of the SZO.



**Proposed Structure:** The new structure is proposed to contain 38,400 g.s.f. Under SZO §9.5.12 a warehouse or distribution use must provide one parking space for every 1,500 g.s.f. of building area. This requires 26 parking spaces for the proposed structure.

7. Surrounding Neighborhood: The area surrounding the site is zoned for both industrial and business uses. The elevated, four-lane McGrath Highway acts as a major barrier to the built environment to the south of the property. A series of railroad tracks line the northern property

boundary, separating this site from the Brickbottom residential lofts and industrial uses further to the north. A neglected commercial and office space with a parking field lie to the east and provide the means of access/egress to the subject site.



*Commercial/Office Space - east*



*Brickbottom Residential Lofts – north*

8. Linkage: Under SZO §15.2, certain projects must pay linkage to the Somerville Housing Trust Fund.

The new construction component of this proposal will create 38,400 g.s.f. of space, therefore requiring a Project Mitigation Contribution.

Because the existing 61,760 g.s.f. structure is not proposed to be "substantially rehabilitated" as defined in the SZO, linkage would not be required for this work.

## **II. Comments from City Departments**

Since McGrath Highway is under the jurisdiction of the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), they are responsible for review of the traffic analysis for the site drive onto McGrath Highway. Ken Kirwin (DCR) and Terence Smith of the Somerville Department of Traffic and Parking reviewed the Traffic Impact and Access Study prepared by Traffic Solutions, LLC.

Comments of Traffic and Parking: "Site specific comments concern the one lane access travel path from the front parking area to the rear parking area. The vehicle detection system proposed along this bi-directional one lane access approach should be so configured so that vehicles exiting the rear parking area are required to stop and allow vehicles approaching the rear parking area to proceed. This would prevent vehicles from queuing up in the front parking area and possibly obstruct the site access curb cut at McGrath Highway."

Comments from Department of Conservation and Recreation: Comments were requested by staff but have not been received.

Comments from Historic Preservation: Preservation Planner Kristi Chase reviewed this application and had no concerns with the project.

Comments from Conservation Commission: The proposal is required to have two bike parking spaces. This can be satisfied with one U-type bicycle rack.

Comments of City Engineer: Charlie O'Brien has reviewed this application and drainage report and has no concerns with the project.

Comments from Fire Prevention Bureau: A code compliant fire alarm and suppression system will be required. Fire Prevention permits will be required before work begins. If this property is to be built on the site of the former Daley Foam, this site address would be 61 McGrath Highway.

Comments from Aldermen: Ward Alderman Heuston has been contacted and has not yet provided comments.

## **III. Findings and Determinations for Special Permit with Site Plan Review**

In considering the requested special permits with site plan review the Staff must consider and make findings and determinations as outlined in §5.2.5 of the SZO. This section of the report goes through §5.2.5 in more detail.

1. Information Supplied: The Applicant must comply "with the information requirements in Section §5.2.3;" The information provided by the Applicant allows for a comprehensive review of the proposed development and is in general compliance with the requirements set forth under §5.2.3 of the SZO. Additional information regarding drainage systems will be necessary before any building permits are issued.

2. Compliance with Standards: The Applicant must comply "with such criteria or standards as may be set forth in this Ordinance which refer to the granting of the requested special permit with site plan review". As conditioned, the proposal will 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 within an IA district. The IA district seeks to "establish and preserve areas for industrial and related uses which are not incompatible with commercial uses; uses which are most appropriately located as neighbors of industrial use including living and studio space for artists; and uses which are necessary to service the immediate needs of industrial establishments in those areas, and accessory uses to industrial uses such as day care centers, cafeterias, health facilities, and the like."

The project is consistent the purpose of the IA zoning district. This storage facility is a light industrial use that would be compatible with the commercial and residential uses in the area , including being a low-impact use on a less-accessible site.

4. Site and Area Compatibility: The Applicant has to ensure that the project "Is 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 buildings are compatible with those prevalent in the surrounding area."

Since the lot has previously been developed prior natural features have been significantly altered. The appearance of the historic building on the site will not be significantly altered, while the new structure will be generally in character with the industrial and commercial buildings in the vicinity.

The Applicant has designed a site that is compatible with the surrounding neighborhood in terms of the proposed uses, with the building also compatible in terms of height, scale, massing and detailing. Additional landscaping facing the Brickbottom condominiums will further contribute to this effect.

The Applicant is advised that the site plan for this development may be complicated by the MBTA Green Line extension plan. The proposed location of the new structure is in close proximity to the existing railroad tracks and could potentially be situated in the existing Railroad right-of-way (ROW). MBTA consultant, Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, Inc., is currently undertaking a survey to locate the exact location of the ROW boundary. If the survey indicates that portions of the site are within the ROW, or if the MBTA proposes eminent domain to obtain additional ROW, the new building could be impacted. Therefore, staff would be supportive of future site plan adjustments to relocate the proposed structure away from the ROW towards McGrath Highway. This would have the added benefit of creating greater presence along McGrath Highway, should changes to that roadway make the site more visible.

In addition, Planning Staff supports changes in building design to make the structure easily convertible into a more intensive and transit-oriented use such as offices. This property sits strategically at the junction of the two commuter rail lines and two potential Green Line branches, an ideal location for more intensive land use, or even a Green Line Station.

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

Based upon the comments received from the various City Departments, the project meets accepted standards and criteria for the functional design of facilities, structures, and site construction. Any necessary mitigation or minor design changes have been incorporated into the recommended conditions section of this report.

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

Additional review is still required for the proposed drainage systems. However, this can be completed subsequent to the zoning review, with a condition of approval requiring provision of a drainage plan satisfactory to the City Engineer prior to the issuance of any permits. The approval of the SPSR shall be contingent upon the City Engineer's determination that no adverse impacts on public systems will result from the development.

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

Because of the nature of the proposed uses and the area in which it is projected to be built no adverse environmental impacts are anticipated. The area surrounding the proposed facility includes a four lane highway and active railroad tracks which together produce pollution in the form of noxious fumes, vibration, noise and illumination (from car headlights, streetlights and commercial signage). This storage facility will not produce a level of emissions that would be higher than are now experienced in the area. By nature, a storage facility will not produce an emission of noxious or hazardous materials or substances pollute water or transmit communications interference. During construction efforts will be made to mitigate dust and control air quality, and to minimize noise. The contractor will implement a waste recycling program to achieve 75% recycled material from the removed debris.

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

As the required findings of Article 5 have been made, and the proposal satisfies the purposes of Article 1, including Purpose, Interpretation and Scope, and of Article 6, as already described, staff find the proposal to be consistent with the purposes of the SZO.

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

Because of the previous uses and structures on the lot, the landform has been significantly altered and is no longer in a natural state. The Applicant's development plans incorporate the landscaping requirements of the SZO for an industrial site.

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

As previously mentioned, the natural landform has been altered. The Applicant has made efforts to ensure that the scale and massing are compatible with surrounding buildings in the neighborhood. The proposed building is a modern warehouse design with limited use of windows to maximize interior storage space. This is compatible with other buildings in the vicinity.

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

While additional review is required of drainage plans, any approval of the SPSR should be conditional upon the City Engineer's approval of such plans and determination that no adverse impact will result to the drainage system from the project's design.

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

The existing structure was constructed circa 1920 and has been occupied by several light industrial tenants since that time. The current proposal would restore the building and contribute to its preservation, while complementing it with the addition of a neighboring structure and additional landscaping.

13. Enhancement of Appearance: The Applicant must demonstrate that "the natural character and appearance of the City is enhanced. Awareness of the existence of a development, particularly a non

residential development or a higher density residential development, should be minimized by screening views of the development from nearby streets, residential neighborhoods of City property by the effective use of existing land forms, or alteration thereto, such as berms, and by existing vegetation or supplemental planting;"

The proposed location for the new construction is in an area that will be visible from both McGrath Highway to the south and Linwood Street, situated across the railroad tracks to the north. McGrath Highway is elevated where it passes the subject site, which will minimize the view of the new structure. The applicant has proposed a wood trellis with English Ivy along the northern side of the proposed structure to screen views of the development from Linwood Street and residential structures across the railroad tracks.

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

The applicant is proposing to install fluorescent lights with local occupancy sensors for the majority of the interior lighting in this facility. Lighting controls will be integrated into a building management system for additional control and energy savings. The applicant has included an exterior site lighting plan that demonstrates sufficient lighting for public surveillance. These exterior fixtures will be controlled by a programmable time-clock with photocell override to allow the lights to activate if the outdoor conditions require light for safety. The exterior lighting intensity will have little to no effect on the properties surrounding the facility.

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

Both the City's Traffic and Parking Department and the Fire Prevention Bureau have commented on the plans. No outstanding concerns have been communicated to the Planning Staff.

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

The existing condition of the site is that it has no direct access to a public street, relying on a narrow ingress/egress drive that is part of a neighboring parcel. The proposal would not alter that condition; however Traffic and Parking recommends requiring a vehicle detection system to improve the present situation.

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

The Applicant is proposing to tie into the existing City services for electric, telephone and cable. Any new lines would be placed underground in accordance with the SZO and the policies of the Superintendent of Lights and Lines.

18. Prevention of Adverse Impacts: The Applicant must demonstrate that "provisions have been made to prevent or minimize any detrimental effect on adjoining premises, and the general neighborhood,



including, (1) minimizing any adverse impact from new hard surface ground cover, or machinery which emits heat, vapor, light or fumes; and (2) preventing adverse impacts to light, air and noise, wind and temperature levels in the immediate vicinity of the proposed development;"

As previously mentioned, no negative impacts are anticipated as a result of the proposed uses.

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

Signage will be limited in size and location to that shown in the elevation diagrams. Lighted signs visible from Brickbottom shall be turned down or off after 10 p.m.

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

The Applicant indicated in the plans that the dumpsters would be located in the rear corner of the lot. This location screens the dumpster with the side of the existing structure, the rear of an adjacent windowless warehouse and the railroad tracks. Approval conditions regarding dumpster screening have been included in this report. Any transformers should be located as not to impact the historic building or landscaped area, and so as to allow for full screening.

21. Screening of Parking: The layout of the parking in relation to the buildings and streets and the placement of trees will screen some of the parking.

#### **IV. RECOMMENDATION**

##### **Special Permit with Site Plan Review (SPSR) SZO §7.11.12.4.c.**

Based on the above findings, the Planning Staff recommends **CONDITIONAL APPROVAL** of the requested **SPECIAL PERMIT with SITE PLAN REVIEW**.

The Applicant has been responsive to the requests of the various City Departments and the project has been designed to meet the requirements of those City Departments. Overall, the Staff finds that the project has been designed in a manner that is in character to surrounding properties in terms of height, scale and massing, sufficient landscaping, and appropriate setbacks.

**Although the Planning Staff is recommending approval of the requested special permit with site plan review, the following conditions should be added to the permits:**

#	Condition	Timeframe for Compliance	Verified (initial)	Notes								
1	Approval is for a 49,408 n.s.f. building at 51 McGrath Hwy. and a 28,800 n.s.f. building at 61 McGrath Hwy., both for use as self-storage facilities. This approval is based upon the following application materials and the plans submitted by the Applicant and/or agent:	BP/CO	ISD/Plng.									
	<table><tr><th>Date</th><th>Submission</th></tr><tr><td>August 3, 2007</td><td>Informational report and description of proposal</td></tr><tr><td>September 6, 2007</td><td>Initial application and plans submitted to the City Clerk's Office</td></tr><tr><td>November 7, 2007</td><td>Traffic Impact and Access Study</td></tr></table>				Date	Submission	August 3, 2007	Informational report and description of proposal	September 6, 2007	Initial application and plans submitted to the City Clerk's Office	November 7, 2007	Traffic Impact and Access Study
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November 7, 2007	Traffic Impact and Access Study											
	Any changes to the approved use, site plan or elevations must receive ZBA approval;											
2	A code compliant fire alarm and suppression system will be required. Fire Prevention permits will be required before any work begins;	BP/CO	FP									
3	A vehicle detection system shall be provided along the bi-directional one lane access approach and configured so that vehicles exiting the rear parking area are required to stop and allow vehicles approaching the rear parking area to proceed;	CO	T&P									
4	Applicant will screen the dumpster with fencing that blocks any view of the dumpster itself	CO	Plng.									
5	Any transformers should be located as not to impact the historic building or landscaped area, and shall be fully screened.	Electrical permits & CO	Plng.									
6	Applicant will supply two bicycle parking spaces, which can be satisfied with one U-type bicycle rack.	CO	Plng.									
7	Signage will be limited in size and location to that shown in the elevation diagrams and lighting after 10p.m. facing residential property will be turned down or off.	CO/Cont.	Plng.									
8	Landscaping and ivy will be grown on side of	Cont.	Plng.									

	building facing Brickbottom Condominiums.			
9	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 stormwater systems, ensuring they are clean, well kept and in good and safe working order;	Cont.	ISD	
10	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 of concrete;	CO	DPW	
11	To the extent possible, all exterior lighting must be confined to the subject property and must not intrude, interfere or spill onto neighboring properties.	CO/Cont.	ISD	
12	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	
13	To the maximum extent feasible applicant will adhere to statements made in the application report to utilize strategies during construction to mitigate dust and control air quality, to minimize noise and to implement a waste recycling program to recycle 75% of the material from the removed debris.	During Construction	OSE/ISD	
14	Linkage payments will be required to be paid to the Somerville Housing Trust Fund before a CO is issued.	CO	Housing	
15	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.	

Date: January 3, 2008  
Appeal #: ZBA 2007-48  
Address: 51 McGrath Highway

Sincerely,



Kevin Prior  
Chair

Cc: Quantum Properties, Owner  
Richard G. DiGirolamo, Esq., Agent  
The Marcus Organization, Applicant

## Map of 51 McGrath Highway

