



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
MAYOR'S OFFICE OF STRATEGIC PLANNING & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
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Case #: ZBA 2016-14

Date: March 16, 2016

Recommendation: Conditional Approval

PLANNING STAFF REPORT

Site: 363 Highland Avenue

Applicant Name: Altitude Properties LLC

Applicant Address: 5 Claremon St #1, Somerville MA, 02144

Owner Name: Altitude Properties LLC

Owner Address: 5 Claremon St #1, Somerville MA, 02144

Agent Name: NA

Agent Address: NA

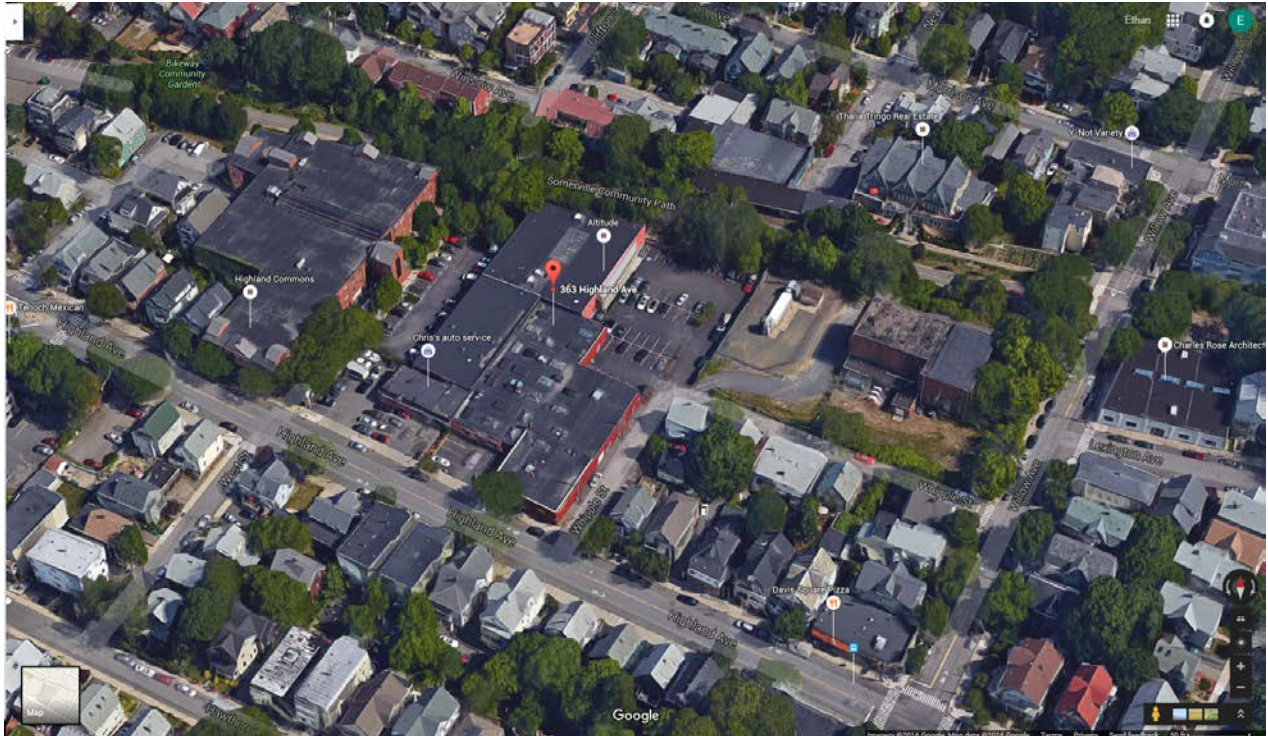
Alderman: Lance Davis

Legal Notice: Applicant & Owner Altitude Properties, LLC seek a Special Permit with Site Plan Review to expand floor area of office use over 10,000 sf within the same building footprint. CBD zone. Ward 6.

Dates of Public Hearing: March 16, 2016

I. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

1. **Subject Property:** The subject property is a 1.14 acre lot containing several adjoined structures. The structure in question is approximately 33,000 square feet and contains several local businesses including a consignment shop, Compass Contracting, Q division and Altitude.



Aerial view of property



Street view of property

2. Proposal: The applicant, Altitude, is proposing to expand its occupation to the portions of the building currently used by the Consignment shop, Compass Contracting, and Q Division. This expansion puts the total area of Altitude's offices at over 10,000 square feet, which requires a Special Permit with Site Plan Review in the CBD Zoning District.

3. Green Building Practices: None listed in application.

4. Comments:

Ward Alderman: Alderman has been contacted.

II. FINDINGS FOR SPECIAL PERMIT with SITE PLAN REVIEW (SZO §7.11):

In order to grant a special permit with site plan review, the SPGA must make certain findings and determinations as outlined in §5.2.5 of the SZO. This section of the report goes through §5.2.5 in detail.

1. Information Supplied:

The Staff 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 with site plan review.”*

The Applicant, Altitude LLC is proposing to expand the area of their current office to include more space within the same footprint of the structure they already occupy. The proposal demolishes several interior partitions to create an open floor plan that will have several central conference rooms. The total area of the new office space will be over 10,000 sf, and as such, will require a Special Permit with Site Plan Review (SPSR) per the Somerville Zoning Ordinance’s table of use, Section 7.11. No parking relief is necessary as the requirement for Office uses is less than Retail in CBD Zones, so the projects parking requirement is actually reduced under the proposed interior renovations.

6.1.5. CBD - Central Business Districts.

B. Specific District Standards and Guidelines. All developments within the CBD district that require a special permit with design review or special permit with site plan review should comply with the following guidelines to the highest degree practicable.

1. Across the primary street edge, the building should complete the streetwall.
The primary street edge along Highland Avenue is maintained with a masonry wall that is painted red.
2. At the street level, provide continuous storefronts or pedestrian arcade which shall house either retail occupancies, or service occupancies suitably designed for present or future retail use.
There is a front door and a small window in the wall. Unfortunately there is a fire equipment room that occupies over 50% of the front wall, so there is little opportunity to open the wall up with further fenestration.
3. Massing of the building should include articulation which will blend the building in with the surrounding district. At the fourth floor, a minimum five-foot deep setback is recommended.
This is an interior renovation; as such the massing of the building is not applicable.
4. Locate on-site, off-street parking either at the rear of the lot behind the building or below street level; parking should not abut the street edge of the parcel.
Off street parking is already located at the rear of the building.
5. Provide access to on-site, off-street parking from either a side street or alley. Where this is not possible, provide vehicular access through an opening in the street level facade of the building of a maximum twenty-five (25) feet in width.
Access to off street parking is accessed from Whipple Street which is on the side of the structure.

3. Purpose of 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 proposal is consistent with the purpose of the district, which is, CBD - Central Business Districts. Purpose: To preserve and enhance central business areas for retail, business services, housing, and office uses and to promote a strong pedestrian character and scale in those areas. A primary goal for the districts is to provide environments that are safe for and conducive to a high volume of pedestrian traffic, with a strong connection to retail and pedestrian accessible street level uses.

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".*

Surrounding Neighborhood: The surrounding neighborhood includes a variety of multi-family residential structures of various architectural styles, as well as several commercial buildings including an automobile service station and several restaurants. The property is located at the south eastern corner of Davis Square, and the rear of the property abuts the Somerville Community Path.

Impacts of Proposal (Design and Compatibility): The proposal will only impact the interior of the structure, and as such will not impact the compatibility of the structure with the neighborhood.

Special Permits with Design Review and Special Permit with Site Plan Review applications must meet the design guidelines under SZO §5.1.5/5.2.4. The design guidelines for business districts are as follows:

1. *Maintain a strong building presence along the primary street edge, continuing the established streetwall across the front of the site so as to retain the streetscape continuity; however, yards and setbacks as required by Article 8 shall be maintained.*
A strong streetwall exists and will not be altered by the interior renovations.
2. *Differentiate building entrances from the rest of the primary street elevation, preferably by recessing the entry from the plane of the streetwall or by some other articulation of the elevation at the entrance.*
The recessed building entrance is already differentiated from the streetwall and will not be impacted by the interior renovations.
3. *Make use of the typical bay widths, rhythms and dimensions prevalent in buildings adjacent to the site, especially in new construction or substantial redevelopment.*
Not applicable for interior renovations.
4. *Clearly define these bay widths, rhythms and dimensions, making them understandable through material patterns, articulations and modulations of the facades, mullion design and treatment, etc.*
Not applicable for interior renovations.

5. *Provide roof types and slopes similar to those of existing buildings in the area.*

Not applicable for interior renovations.

6. *Use materials and colors consistent with those dominant in the area or, in the case of a rehabilitation or addition, consistent with the architectural style and period of the existing building. Use of brick masonry is encouraged, but not considered mandatory.*

Not applicable for interior renovations.

7. *When parking lots are provided between buildings, abutting the primary street and breaking the streetwall, provide a strong design element to continue the streetwall definition across the site, such as a low brick wall, iron works or railing, trees, etc.*

Not applicable for interior renovations.

8. *Locate transformers, heating and cooling systems, antennae, and the like, so they are not visible from the street; this may be accomplished, for example, by placing them behind the building, within enclosures, behind screening, etc.*

Not applicable for interior renovations.

9. *Sites and buildings should comply with any guidelines set forth in Article 6 of this Ordinance for the specific base or overlay zoning district(s) the site is located within.*

See finding 2 above.

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

The open layout of the interior renovations will be functional for Altitude’s expanded office space.

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.”*

No adverse impacts on public systems are anticipated as a result of the interior renovations.

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.”*

No adverse environmental impacts as a result of items 1-4 above are anticipated as a result of the proposed interior renovations.

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.”*

The proposal is consistent with the general purposes of the Ordinance as set forth under §1.2, which includes, but is not limited to The purposes of the Ordinance are to promote the health, safety, and welfare of the inhabitants of the City of Somerville; to provide for and maintain the uniquely integrated structure of uses in the City; to lessen congestion in the streets; to protect health; to secure safety from fire, panic and other dangers; to provide adequate light and air; to prevent the overcrowding of land; to avoid undue concentration of population; to facilitate the adequate provision of transportation, water, sewerage, schools, parks and other public requirements; to conserve the value of land and buildings; to preserve the historical and architectural resources of the City; to adequately protect the natural environment; to encourage the most appropriate use of land throughout the City; to protect and promote a housing stock that can accommodate the diverse household sizes and life stages of Somerville residents at all income levels, paying particular attention to providing housing affordable to individuals and families with low and moderate incomes; and to preserve and increase the amenities of the municipality.

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.”*

The existing site is not impacted by the proposed interior renovations.

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.”*

The relation of the buildings to the environment is not impacted by the proposed interior renovations.

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. Storm water shall be removed from all roofs, canopies, and powered area, and routed through a well-engineered system designed with appropriate storm water 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.”*

The surface drainage will not be impacted by the proposed interior renovations.

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.”*

Historic and or architectural significance will not be impacted by the interior renovations.

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 interior renovations will not impact the appearance of the city or its natural character.

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 interior renovations will not impact any exterior lighting.

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.”*

Emergency access to the building will not be impacted by the interior renovations.

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.”*

Location of access will not be impacted by the interior renovations and traffic will not be impacted.

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.”*

Utility service will not be impacted by the proposed interior renovations.

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.”*

No detrimental impacts to the premises or general neighborhood are anticipated as a result of the interior renovations with respect to items 1-2 above.

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.”*

The interior renovations do not include any signage.

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.”*

Screening of service facilities will not be impacted by the proposed interior renovations.

21. Screening of Parking:

Screening of parking will not be impacted by the proposed interior renovations.

21. Housing Impact: *Will not create adverse impacts on the stock of existing affordable housing.*

22. SomerVision Plan: *Complies with the applicable goals, policies and actions of the SomerVision plan, including the following, as appropriate: Preserve and enhance the character of Somerville’s neighborhoods, transform key opportunity areas, preserve and expand an integrated, balanced mix of safe, affordable and environmentally sound rental and homeownership units for households of all sizes and types from diverse social and economic groups; and, make Somerville a regional employment center with a mix of diverse and high-quality jobs. The areas in the SomerVision map that are designated as enhance and transform should most significantly contribute towards the SomerVision goals that are outlined in the table below. The areas marked as conserve are not expected to greatly increase the figures in the table since these areas are not intended for large scale change.*

23. Impact on Affordable Housing: *In conjunction with its decision to grant or deny a special permit for a structure of four or more units of housing, the SPGA shall make a finding and determination as to how implementation of the project would increase, decrease, or leave unchanged the number of units of rental and home ownership housing that are affordable to households with low or moderate incomes, as defined by HUD, for different sized households and units.*

No impact on affordable housing is anticipated.

III. RECOMMENDATION

Special Permit with Site Plan Review under §7.11

Based on the materials submitted by the Applicant, the above findings and subject to the following conditions, the Planning Staff recommends **CONDITIONAL APPROVAL** of the requested **SPECIAL PERMIT with SITE PLAN REVIEW**.

The recommendation is based upon a technical analysis by Planning Staff of the application material based upon the required findings of the Somerville Zoning Ordinance, and is based only upon information submitted prior to the public hearing. This report may be revised or updated with new recommendations,

findings and/or conditions based upon additional information provided to the Planning Staff during the public hearing process.

#	Condition	Timeframe for Compliance	Verified (initial)	Notes						
1	Approval is for the_____. This approval is based upon the following application materials and the plans submitted by the Applicant:	CO / BP	ISD/Plng.							
	<table><tr><th>Date (Stamp Date)</th><th>Submission</th></tr><tr><td>February 11, 2016</td><td>Initial application submitted to the City Clerk's Office</td></tr><tr><td>February 11, 2016</td><td>Plans submitted to OSPCD (1-8)</td></tr></table>				Date (Stamp Date)	Submission	February 11, 2016	Initial application submitted to the City Clerk's Office	February 11, 2016	Plans submitted to OSPCD (1-8)
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	February 11, 2016				Plans submitted to OSPCD (1-8)					
Any changes to the approved site plan or elevations/use that are not <i>de minimis</i> must receive SPGA approval.										
Construction Impacts										
2	The applicant shall post the name and phone number of the general contractor at the site entrance where it is visible to people passing by.	During Construction	Plng.							
3	Approval is subject to the Applicant's and/or successor's right, title and interest in the property.	Cont.	Plng.	Deed submitted & application formed signed						
4	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 DPW standard.	CO	DPW							
5	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							
Signange										
6	Any additional signage, or replacement of existing signage on the exterior of the building must be reviewed by the Planning Department to ensure compliance with the Ordinance.	CO	Plng.							
Public Safety										
7	The Applicant or Owner shall meet the Fire Prevention Bureau's requirements.	CO	FP							
8	Any transformers should be located as not to impact the historic building or landscaped area, and shall be fully screened.	Electrical permits &CO								

Final Sign-Off				
9	The Applicant shall contact Planning Staff at least five working days in advance of a request for a final inspection by Inspectional Services to ensure the proposal was constructed in accordance with the plans and information submitted and the conditions attached to this approval.	Final sign off	Plng.	

