



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
OFFICE OF STRATEGIC PLANNING & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
JOSEPH A. CURTATONE
MAYOR

PLANNING DIVISION

STAFF

GEORGE PROAKIS, *DIRECTOR OF PLANNING*

LORI MASSA, *SENIOR PLANNER*

ADAM DUCHESNEAU, *PLANNER*

DAWN PEREIRA, *ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT*

Case #: ZBA 2011-92

Date: December 22, 2011

Recommendation: Conditional Approval

PLANNING STAFF REPORT

Site: 230 & 236 Highland Ave (Somerville Hospital)

Applicant Name: David A. Farmer, AIA

Applicant Address: 1493 Cambridge St, Cambridge, MA 02139

Property Owner Name: Somerville Hospital

Property Owner Address: 230 Highland Ave, Somerville, MA

Agent Name: none

Alderman: Thomas Taylor

Legal Notice: Applicant, David A. Farmer, AIA, and Owner, Somerville Hospital, seek a Variance (SZO §5.5) from the sign regulations in Article 12 to install two signs and change the face of another sign.

Zoning District/Ward: RA / 3

Zoning Approval Sought: Variance (§5.5, 12.3.d, 12.4.1.b, 12.4.1.e)

Date of Application: Dec 6, 2011

Dates of Public Hearing: Zoning Board of Appeals Jan 4, 2012

I. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

1. Subject Property: The property, the Somerville Hospital, is a 2.29-acre site with four connected buildings of varying heights. The buildings are labeled south, center, north, and the medical arts building.

There is an existing free standing sign at the corner of Highland Avenue and Tower Street and a sign attached to the side of the elevator tower that faces Highland Avenue. There is also existing signage near the Main/Emergency entrance at Tower Street. Two signs were recently removed from the building during a renovation. These include a façade mounted sign on Highland Avenue and an awning sign at the entrance to the Medical Arts building that faced Crocker Street but was visible from Highland Avenue.



CITY HALL • 93 HIGHLAND AVENUE • SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS 02143
(617) 625-6600 EXT. 2500 • TTY: (617) 666-0001 • FAX: (617) 625-0722

www.somervillema.gov





Signage at Somerville Hospital from top to bottom: Existing sign on elevator tower facing Highland Ave is not proposed to change, Existing Sign at corner of Highland Ave and Tower St that will receive new face plate, Façade mounted sign on Highland Ave that was removed as part of the façade renovations, Awning sign facing Crocker St but visible from Highland Ave that was removed.



Prior Permits

There are no records of zoning approval for the initial construction of the hospital; however, there have been several special permits and a variance issued since 1989.

In 1989, the Somerville Hospital received a special permit for an expansion to allow for additional medical services. The permit included remodeling office space in the South Building, expanding physicians' office/examination space in the basement of the Medical Arts Building, and the addition of physicians' office space, a stair link and vestibule in the area adjacent to the Medical Arts Building. The expansion required a variance for eight parking spaces.

In 2002, the Hospital received a special permit to replace a cooling tower on the roof of the building and add screening around the tower.

In 2003, the Hospital received a special permit to add a new rooftop mechanical unit, an enclosed outdoor recreation area, a bicycle storage facility, an exterior canopy, and an additional window to the Hospital.



In 2010, the Hospital received a special permit to construct an approximately 3,500 sf addition to the Medical Arts Building, make façade alterations at the corner of Highland Avenue and Crocker Street, expand the office use within the existing building to approximately 45,000 sf, and modify of parking requirements for 6 parking spaces.

The building has also received special permits for wireless equipment on the roof.



2. Proposal: The proposal is to install three signs and change the face plate of an existing sign near Highland Avenue to add visibility to the Hospital entrances.

The proposed signs are as follows in locations as indicated on the site plan:

Location 1: A sign identifying the start of the CHA Somerville Hospital Campus will be façade mounted to the east side of the Highland Building at the corner of Tower Street and Highland Avenue. The sign will consist of individual metal channel letters with halo white illumination. The height of the sign will be approximately 22 feet above grade. The letters will be 11 to 16.5 inches tall and 1.1 to 1.25 inches wide.

Location 5: A new double faced freestanding sign will be at the entrance of the Highland Building parking lot that provides direction to the Highland Building and the Main/Emergency entrance for the Hospital. In this location there was previously a booth for a parking attendant that was recently removed. The sign will be 4.8 feet tall on a 2 foot tall base for a total height of 6.8 feet tall. The area around the sign will be landscaped with bushes and flowers. The faces of the sign will be aluminum with translucent white vinyl letters. The sign will be internally illuminated. It will have a similar appearance to the existing freestanding sign along Highland Avenue.

Location 2: A sign will be attached to the metal canopy of the Highland Building identifying the clinics inside of the building. The sign will face Crocker Street but will be visible from Highland Avenue. The sign will consist of individual metal channel letters with halo white illumination. The letters will fit on the 18 inch tall canopy and the letters will occupy a length of 18.8 feet.

Location 4: The existing freestanding sign at the corner of Tower and Highland Ave will be revised. The east face of the sign will emphasize directions to the Main/Emergency entrance and the Highland Building. The west face will provide direction to the Main/Emergency Department entrance. The faces of the sign will be aluminum with translucent white vinyl letters. The sign will be internally illuminated. It will have a similar appearance to the existing sign and will be the same size as the existing sign (6.6 feet by 6.9 feet).

In addition to the proposed signage, the proposal includes making landscaping improvements around the Highland Building parking lot with improvements on the Crocker Street and Highland Avenue sides of the lot. The parking lot will be repaved in the future but since the funding is not yet secured, the paving is not part of this application.

3. Nature of Application: Variances are required from the following dimensional requirements for signage in Article 12.

Section 12.3.d limits the depth of a sign in conjunction with a permitted nonresidential building or use to be not nearer to a street lot line than half the depth of the required yard in a Residential district. The front yard setback requirement is 15 feet from the street creating a sign setback requirement of 7.5 feet. The existing free standing sign is 4.5 feet from the Highland Avenue property line and the proposed free standing sign will be 3 feet from the Highland Avenue property line.

Section 12.4.1.b limits the height of a sign attached parallel to a building to the top of the sills of the first level of windows above the first story or 25 feet above grade, whichever is lowest. The façade mounted sign on the eastern side of the Medical Arts building will be located approximately 22 feet above grade but will be above the second story windows, requiring a variance.

Section 12.4.1.e limits the number of free standing signs to one when there is one use on the premises. The number of freestanding signs will be two.

The total size of the signs is conforming. Signs accessory to a principal non-residential use may be equal to the length of the building along a public way where the sign will be highly visible. The sizes and total along Highland Avenue and Tower Street are as follows:

Tower Street

Existing sign at Main/Emergency entrance:	21 sf
Proposed sign mounted on face of building at corner of Highland Ave	<u>28 sf</u>
Total	49 sf
Total allowed	513 sf

Highland Avenue

Existing sign at the corner of Highland and Tower	36.25 sf per face – free standing signs excluded from the total allowable area
Proposed sign at the entrance to the Highland Ave parking lot	24.17 sf per face – free standing signs excluded from the total allowable area
Existing sign on elevator tower	48.5 sf
Proposed sign mounted on canopy of Highland Building	<u>28.2 sf</u>
Total	76.7 sf
Total Allowed	166 sf

4. Surrounding Neighborhood: The surrounding area is mostly comprised of two- and three-family houses. There are some commercial uses along Highland Ave.

5. Impacts of Proposal: Overall the signs address the Hospital's need to make the building more visible and improve the directional signage. They currently receive complaints that people cannot find the building and the appropriate entrances. The free standing signs provide important directional information. These signs will be internally illuminated and the letters will glow white with emergency letters in red. The signs are located along Highland Avenue which has commercial uses on the opposite side and should not spill light onto the residential properties. The design of the metal channel letters with halo lighting is complimentary to the design of the new façade work done to the building and is tasteful for a hospital in this residential district.

The impacts of having a sign that is closer to the front lot line than is otherwise allowed for the purpose of providing direction at the entrance to a hospital parking lot is not anticipated to be negatively impactful. If the sign was located farther from the front lot line, then it would eliminate parking spaces and not be as visible. The sign will sit on a base and be surrounded by landscaping, which will be more compatible with the residential neighborhood than a tall sign on poles that is often seen in a suburban strip development. The second free standing sign is desired to mark the Highland entrance and related parking and to give people a warning about the emergency and main entrance on Tower Street as the existing free standing sign is partially blocked by the bus stop shelter.

The height of the sign on the east face of the building on Tower Street is thought to be less impactful to the residential neighbors than if the sign was below the second story window sills. The sign will be above the direct line of sight from the residential neighbors' first and second story windows. If it was located below the second story windows, the sign would be located directly across from the neighboring

windows. At this height the signs will be most effective for catching drivers' attention as they go west on Highland Avenue.

6. Green Building Practices: The signs will use energy saving lamps.

7. Comments:

Ward Alderman: Has been contacted but has not yet provided comments.

Abutter Comments:

A neighbor has submitted written testimony stating that the signage will be excessive and the façade mounted sign at the corner of Highland Avenue and Tower Street is unnecessary. The neighbor is supportive of the proposed landscaping and asked about replacing street trees along Highland Avenue. This location has been added to the City's list of tree replacement for the spring time planting. Finally the neighbor is skeptical of the future work on the building because he believes that the recent exterior renovations were poorly designed and thoughtlessly done.

The visible rivets on the panels on the Highland Avenue and Tower Street corner of the building and lack of a "cap" on the end of the metal canopy are two items that were not detailed on the approved plans. Staff have talked with the Applicants to try to address solutions to the visible impact of these details. The conclusion was that the rivets will remain as is because there is not a good solution to hiding them and a cap will be placed on the end of the metal canopy to hide a beam that projects below the canopy.



II. FINDINGS FOR VARIANCE (SZO Section 5.5 & Article 12):

In order to grant a variance the Board must make certain findings and determinations as outlined in §5.5.3 of the SZO.

1. There are "special circumstances relating to soil conditions, shape or topography of land or structures which especially affect such land or structures but not affecting generally the zoning district in which it is located, causing substantial hardship, financial or otherwise."

The Applicant stated, "Somerville Hospital is an existing healthcare facility providing emergency care, outpatient clinical care and other services for the community. Although having an address on Highland Avenue, the emergency and main entrances are located on Tower Street up the hill from Highland Avenue and difficult to find and see. Currently, the Hospital has a single sign on Tower Street and Highland Avenue and a sign at the drive for the main/emergency entrance which is not visible from Highland Ave and is difficult to see due to be adjacent to a bus stop, traffic and trees. Also, the Hospital is set back from Highland Avenue making it difficult to find. Due to the setback from Highland Avenue, a sign on the hospital elevator tower is not visible from the street.

The Hospital is proposing additional signage along Highland Avenue to provide necessary direction to the Hospital services and parking for public safety and patient care. The proposed signage placement is directed to those arriving by ambulance, car, public transportation, walking, etc. from the east or west

along Highland Avenue and will direct them to the main/emergency entrance or the Highland Building and related parking. In the proposal, the faces of the existing free standing sign at the corner of Highland and Tower will be changed providing direction to the main/emergency entrance/parking and the Highland Building/parking. The change in color to a darker blue will make this sign more visible during the day. A second sign is being proposed at the entrance to the Highland Building parking lot on Highland Ave providing direction to the main/emergency entrance and parking. The proposed sign on the Highland Building was placed near the top to be more visible to those arriving from the east due to the traffic, trees, bus stop and to minimize impact on the neighbors and neighborhood versus if the sign were lower as permitted by zoning. This sign will use halo letters providing a softer indirect light minimizing the impact on the neighborhood. While the area is residential, there are several businesses located on the other side of Highland Avenue from the hospital and traveling east or west to/from the hospital on both sides of Highland Avenue. Given this existing condition, the proposed signage is not out of character in this area of Highland Avenue. Also, the area of the proposed signage along Highland Avenue and Tower Street is less than allowed by zoning.

In addition, the Hospital is proposing landscaping improvements along the parking lot on Highland Avenue with new landscaping on Crocker Street and Highland Avenue to provide additional screening and buffer from the Street and neighbors. The landscaping will include new trees along the Crocker side of the parking lot with smaller lower plants along Crocker and Tower Streets.”

Staff find that the shape of the building being setback from the main road, Highland Ave, with an Emergency room entrance on a residential street causes a hardship for patrons being able to navigate the campus. Another site limitation in terms of visibility is that there is a bus stop shelter located near the corner of Highland Avenue and Tower Street that partially blocks the existing sign. There is a public safety risk if people are not able to find the Emergency entrance quickly. These are items that affect this property as an existing large hospital building in a residential district but do not affect the zoning district generally. The location of the second free standing sign is close to the entrance to the parking lot. The height of the sign on the building along Tower Street will improve the visibility and direction around the existing structure.

2. “The variance requested is the minimum variance that will grant reasonable relief to the owner, and is necessary for a reasonable use of the building or land.”

The Applicant stated, “Somerville Hospital is located in a residential area with the main hospital building set back from Highland Avenue. It is important that the public can easily identify the building as a hospital with a 24-hour Emergency Department and quickly identify the appropriate entrance for their need. The Emergency and Main entrance is open 24-hours and is located on Tower Street. The Highland Building entrance provides access to ambulatory care services and is open during regular business hours.

Currently, there is one sign at the corner of Highland Avenue and Tower Street identifying the Hospital and providing direction to the Main and Emergency entrance. When driving west on Highland Ave, it is difficult to see this street-level sign due to parked cars, buses, trees and traffic. When driving east on Highland, this sign is blocked by a bus stop shelter posing a public safety risk. A second sign with the name of the hospital is located on the elevator tower, but this part of the hospital is difficult to see while traveling on Highland Avenue due to the height and setback from Highland Ave. A third sign is located up the hill on Tower Street, identifying the Main and Emergency entrance, but it can’t be seen by traffic on Highland Ave making it difficult for patients to find the entrance to the Emergency Department.

This proposal will add much needed signage to provide direction to the Somerville Hospital Main 24-hour entrance, Emergency Department, Highland Building and parking areas if arriving by ambulance, car,

public transportation or walking for clinical or emergency care. Three additional signs are proposed which will be visible from Highland Avenue in addition to the existing sign at the corner of Tower and Highland... The focus [of the signs] is on the entrances and parking decisions the public needs to be aware of, with much less of a focus on the hospital name.”

Staff find that the three proposed variances are the minimum necessary to grant reasonable relief to the owner and are necessary for the reasonable use of the land. The hospital had a façade mounted sign at a nonconforming height that was recently removed and although the proposed sign will be higher on the building than the previous sign, it will be slightly above the line of sight from the neighboring residential property windows. This is a reasonable place because at a conforming height, it would be directly across from residential windows and not as visible to people traveling west on Highland Avenue. The second free standing sign replaces a parking attendant booth that previously signaled the entrance to the parking lot. The proposed sign will be more attractive than the booth and provide additional direction to the entrances to the building. Another reason why this second free standing sign is providing reasonable relief is that the first free standing sign is partially blocked by a bus stop shelter. Finally, the location of this sign three feet from the front lot line is providing reasonable relief because otherwise it would be set into the parking lot, which would remove parking spaces and cause it to not be as visible or effective to provide direction to entrances to the building or parking.

3. “The granting of the variance would be in harmony with the general purpose and intent of this Ordinance and would not be injurious to the neighborhood or otherwise detrimental to the public welfare.”

The Applicant stated, “The proposed signage scale is consistent with the building use, neighborhood and provides the necessary direction to the main/emergency entrances when approaching the hospital from east and west on Highland Avenue for those visiting the hospital or for public safety reasons. The area of the signs are significantly less than what is allowed for the frontage on Tower Street and Highland Avenue but still provides the necessary wayfinding. The free standing signs along Highland Ave are consistent with the business use across the street and will have minimal impact on the residential uses above street level. These signs will be internally illuminated with each sign being the same background color and white lettering except for the Emergency lettering which will be red. The proposed signage on the Tower Street facade and Highland Building Canopy will be with halo white illumination providing an indirect and softer lighting source having less impact on the abutters. In addition to the proposed signage, CHA is proposing to make landscaping improvements on the Highland Building parking lot with improvements on the Crocker Street and Highland Avenue sides of the lot.”

Staff find that the proposed signs would not be detrimental to the neighborhood. The design of the metal channel letters with halo lighting is complimentary to the design of the new façade work done to the building and is tasteful for a hospital in this residential district. The freestanding signs will be internally illuminated and the letters will glow white with emergency letters in red. The signs are located along Highland Avenue which has commercial uses on the opposite side and should not spill light onto the residential properties. The two free standing signs will be similar in appearance to create a consistent appearance along the street.

The impacts of having a sign that is closer to the front lot line than is otherwise allowed for the purpose of providing direction at the entrance to a hospital parking lot is not anticipated to be negatively impactful. If the sign was located farther from the front lot line, then it would eliminate parking spaces and not be as visible. The sign will sit on a base and be surrounded by landscaping, which will be more compatible with the residential neighborhood than a tall sign on poles that is often seen in a suburban strip development.

The proposed landscaping at the edge of the parking lot on Crocker Street and along Highland Avenue will improve its appearance.

The issue regarding the lack of a “cap” on the end of the metal canopy that was approved as part of a 2010 special permit application should be addressed. A sign is proposed on the parking lot side of this canopy. A cap should be placed on the end of the metal canopy to hide a beam that projects below it so that the canopy appears as was portrayed in the approved drawings.

III. RECOMMENDATION

Variance under §5.5 & §9.5

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 **VARIANCE**.

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 replacement of the faces of an existing freestanding sign, installation of a second freestanding sign that is approx 3 feet from the front property line, and installation of a façade mounted sign on Tower Street that is approx 22 feet above grade. This approval is based upon the following application materials and the plans submitted by the Applicant:	BP/CO	ISD/PIng.																					
	<table><tr><th>Date (Stamp Date)</th><th>Submission</th></tr><tr><td>Dec 6, 2011</td><td>Initial application submitted to the City Clerk’s Office</td></tr><tr><td>Dec 5, 2011 (Dec 22, 2011)</td><td>Plans submitted to OSPCD (Planting Design)</td></tr><tr><td>(Dec 22, 2011)</td><td>Plans submitted to OSPCD (Sign Location)</td></tr><tr><td>Jan 3, 2011 (Dec 22, 2011)</td><td>Plans submitted to OSPCD (location 2 elevation)</td></tr><tr><td>Apr 22, 2011 (Dec 22, 2011)</td><td>Plans submitted to OSPCD (location 4 elevation)</td></tr><tr><td>May 3, 2011 (Dec 22, 2011)</td><td>Plans submitted to OSPCD (location 2 night view)</td></tr><tr><td>Jun 20, 2011 (Dec 22, 2011)</td><td>Plans submitted to OSPCD (location 1 & 4 rendering)</td></tr><tr><td>Nov 29, 2011 (Dec 22, 2011)</td><td>Plans submitted to OSPCD (location 1 elevation & night view)</td></tr><tr><td>Dec 20, 2011 (Dec 22, 2011)</td><td>Plans submitted to OSPCD (location 5 elevation)</td></tr></table>				Date (Stamp Date)	Submission	Dec 6, 2011	Initial application submitted to the City Clerk’s Office	Dec 5, 2011 (Dec 22, 2011)	Plans submitted to OSPCD (Planting Design)	(Dec 22, 2011)	Plans submitted to OSPCD (Sign Location)	Jan 3, 2011 (Dec 22, 2011)	Plans submitted to OSPCD (location 2 elevation)	Apr 22, 2011 (Dec 22, 2011)	Plans submitted to OSPCD (location 4 elevation)	May 3, 2011 (Dec 22, 2011)	Plans submitted to OSPCD (location 2 night view)	Jun 20, 2011 (Dec 22, 2011)	Plans submitted to OSPCD (location 1 & 4 rendering)	Nov 29, 2011 (Dec 22, 2011)	Plans submitted to OSPCD (location 1 elevation & night view)	Dec 20, 2011 (Dec 22, 2011)	Plans submitted to OSPCD (location 5 elevation)
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Any changes to the approved plans that are not <i>de minimis</i> must receive SPGA approval.																								
2	A cap shall be constructed on the end of the metal canopy to hide the projecting metal beam so that the canopy appears as was portrayed in the approved drawings. A drawing of the cap shall be submitted to Planning Staff for review and approval.	Prior to Installation of Sign	PIng.																					

3	Landscaping should be installed and maintained in compliance with the American Nurserymen's Association Standards.	Perpetual	Plng. / ISD	
4	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.	

