



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
MAYOR'S OFFICE OF STRATEGIC PLANNING & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
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Case #: PB 2015-09

Date: July 13, 2015

Recommendation: Conditional Approval

PLANNING STAFF REPORT

Site: 31-33 Union Square

Applicant Name: J.J. Vaccaro, Inc.

Applicant Address: 38 Union Square, Somerville, MA 02143

Owner Name: Tribeca Management

Owner Address: 35 Sacramento Street, Cambridge, MA 02138

Alderman: Maryann Heuston

Legal Notice: Applicant, J.J. Vaccaro, Inc., & Owner, Tribeca Management, seek a Special Permit under SZO 6.1.22.D.5.a. to alter the façade and stall signage. CCD55 zone. Ward 2.

Dates of Public Hearing: July 15, 2015

I. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

1. Subject Property: The subject property is a three-story commercial building in the heart of Union Square. The Form B for this building, which details the historic information about the structure, contains the following information.

The c. 1884 Eberle Building at 31-34 Union Square is a very ornate and well-preserved three-story brick commercial building on the west side of Union Square. The building has a brick and granite foundation, dark red brick walls, and a flat roof. Queen Anne-style ornamentation is concentrated only on the façade (north) elevation. The elaborate brick cornice is corbelled with an arch and cross pattern. Projecting double-height brick pilasters articulate each of the five window bays on the upper stories, provide structural support for the large window openings, and emphasize the building's verticality. Sawtooth brick banding adorns the wall surface between the second- and third-floor windows, and a brownstone string course projects above the brick dentilled storefront cornice at the ground-floor level.



The wood and glass storefronts on the Eberle Building are completely intact and well-maintained. They consist of multi-paned transom windows over larger divided plate-glass windows. The surrounds have paneled bases and half-round piers with flared capitals and beaded turnings. Three asymmetrically positioned entrances with multi-paned transoms are recessed between the windows.



2. Proposal: The proposal is to replace the storefront system and install signage on the building. The Applicants desire a more energy efficient window, which is heavier glass than the existing single pane and requires a stronger frame. The storefront size will be same size as the system that exists today and the door locations will not change as a result of this application. Of the options provided, option 1 in the plan set is preferred as it most closely matches the existing window pattern. The conditions of approval below further move the design of the storefront to reflect its existing character.

The signage for the two storefronts includes a sign band, two blade signs, and windows signs. The existing sign band will be replaced and the new band will be in the same location and will be the same size as what exists today at two feet in height and the length of the storefront. The letter height will be 12 inches maximum. The sign band will be externally lit. The band will be divided into sections to provide space for two commercial tenants and two locations for building signage. The design of one of the blade signs has been determined and the other will be designed when a tenant is found. The blade sign will be 3 feet wide by 1.5 feet and letter height will be a maximum of 6 inches tall. The sign will be backlit for the text only. Two window signs will be up against or affixed to the glazing. The letter height will be 1 foot 2 inches on these signs. The signs will not block more than 30 percent of the window area to which they are attached.

3. Green Building Practices: None.

4. Comments:

Ward Alderman: Alderman Heuston is aware of the proposal.

II. FINDINGS FOR SPECIAL PERMIT (SZO §5.1 & 6.1.22.D.5):

In order to grant a special permit, 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 Staff finds that the information provided by the Applicant conforms to the requirements of §5.1.2 of the SZO and allows for a comprehensive analysis of the project with respect to the required Special Permits.

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."*

In the CCD, the SZO §6.1.22.D.5 states that any change in signage, other than a one-for-one replacement of an existing sign, and alterations to facades shall require a Special Permit.

The design of the storefront will continue to be engaging to pedestrians. The large size of the windows will be retained that provide views into the interior space. The individual doors along the street to access two distinct tenant spaces and a door to the upper stories will remain in the same locations continuing the tenant layout that allows for a mix of small scale commercial uses.

The signage complies with the design guidelines for signage in the CCD (§6.1.22.G):

- The signs respect the building's context in terms of scale and design. The signs are subordinate to the overall building in size and appearance and do not conceal important façade details such as the dentils on the storefront cornice. The sign band will be replaced in the same location where it currently is today and where it typically is located. The blade signs will provide pedestrians with a view of the tenants' names and be located on the brick between storefronts which is a logical location for them. The blade sign that is not yet designed will be limited to 3 feet by 2 feet so both blade signs are of a similar scale.
- The materials are not called out on the plans and a condition of approval will be that planning staff reviews the materials before a building permit is issued for each sign. The condition specifies that vinyl, plastic and internally illuminated, face lit signs will not be allowed so that the signs comply with the list of recommended materials and sign technologies. The blade sign that has been design with some color and a creative shape making it vibrant without being excessively loud.
- The signs will legible with the letter heights specified on the plans and the signs shall not be wordy so that they meet the design guideline for clear readability.

3. Consistency with Purposes: *The Applicant has to ensure that the project "is consistent with (1) the general purposes of this Ordinance as set forth in Article 1, and (2) the purposes, provisions, and specific objectives applicable to the requested special permit which may be set forth elsewhere in this Ordinance, such as, but not limited to, those purposes at the beginning of the various Articles."*

The proposal is consistent with the general purposes of the Ordinance as set forth under §1.2, which includes but is not limited to providing for and maintaining the uniquely integrated structure of uses in the City. The proposal is also consistent with the purpose of the CCD by encouraging an active mix of uses and contributing to a pedestrian-friendly street.

4. Site and Area Compatibility: *The Applicant has to ensure that the project "(i)s designed in a manner that is compatible with the characteristics of the built and unbuilt surrounding area, including land uses."*

The signage and storefront will be compatible with the building's design as is explained in finding two. The signs will also be compatible with the surrounding area as they are not overly bright and do not compete with nearby signage.

Ideally, the existing storefront will be preserved by replacing the large plate glass, weatherizing around the window, repairing sections of the wood that have deteriorated, and painting. Since the plated glass is so large, the weight of a thicker, more energy efficient glass would be too heavy for the current frame that exists. A new system mimicking the design of the original will be made either of wood or of cast aluminum to support the heavier glass. Existing doors will be retained. There are several cost-effective, environmentally-friendly, and historically-sensitive methods available to achieve a successful outcome under this retention/preservation scenario.

Should the window systems all be replaced, in order to retain elements of the character and quality of the storefront, conditions are required. The conditions require true divided lites for the transoms and paned glass over the storefront with the same number, size and patterning of the lites. Muntin patterns will replicate the existing in scale and design. The decorative wood panels overhead at the entryways will be replicated (or the original retained if in suitable condition). The decorative columnar cladding visible across all of the display windows is another key element of the storefront's historic architecture. If the existing decorative columnar cladding is to be replaced, it will be replicated in overall design, detail, material and dimensions. Existing doors will be retained.

In either the retention or the replacement scenario, complete plans will be provided that will reflect exactly (including in number, scale, dimensions, materials, etc.) the window systems and accompanying decorative elements.

Conditions of approval are proposed to try to avoid problems that can result when doing work on an old structure. The conditions relate to care taken as to not damage brick or disrupt the building's ability to breath.

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

The proposal does not involve housing.

8. 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.*

The proposed signage and needed care that will be given to the first floor of the building will add to the vibrancy of this area of the City that is called out as being enhanced in SomerVision.

III. RECOMMENDATION

Special Permit under §5.1 & §6.1.22.D

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**.

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 proposed signage and storefront system. This approval is based upon the following application materials and the plans submitted by the Applicant:	BP/CO	ISD/Plng.							
	<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Date (Stamp Date)</th> <th>Submission</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>June 30, 2015</td> <td>Initial application submitted to the City Clerk’s Office</td> </tr> <tr> <td>(July 30, 2015)</td> <td>Modified plans submitted to OSPCD (Proposed Improvements – Option 1, Elevation, Details, Signage)</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>				Date (Stamp Date)	Submission	June 30, 2015	Initial application submitted to the City Clerk’s Office	(July 30, 2015)	Modified plans submitted to OSPCD (Proposed Improvements – Option 1, Elevation, Details, Signage)
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Any changes to the approved elevations that are not <i>de minimis</i> must receive SPGA approval.										
Design										
2	The lites of paned glass over the plated storefront glass and the transoms shall match the historic original in number, size, patterning and muntin dimension. The lites shall be true divided lites that are made of wood or painted aluminum. Specifications noted on details sheet of BP set shall reflect how this detail will be achieved.	BP	Plng.							
3	Applicant shall provide final material samples for signage, and the storefront system to Planning Staff for review and approval prior to construction. Materials of vinyl and plastic and internally illuminated, face lit signs will not be allowed.	BP	Plng.							
4	If necessary, overhead entryway panel shall be replaced with molding that mimics the original in material, style, dimension and pattern.	BP	Plng.							
5	Decorative columnar cladding shall be replaced with cladding that replicates exactly the style (including capital fanning) and dimensions of the existing cladding.	BP	Plng.							
6	The blade signs shall not be larger than 3’ by 2’.									

7	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 working order.	Cont.	ISD	
8	To the extent possible, all exterior lighting must be confined to the subject property, cast light downward and must not intrude, interfere or spill onto neighboring properties.	CO	Plng.	
9	These openings should provide views into the building and should not be blocked by interior storage, non-artistic displays, or greater than thirty (30) percent internally mounted signage.			
10	Brick shall not be power washed or sand-blasted. When cleaning out joints, circular blades may be used but under no circumstances shall joint cleaning result in the grinding away of any brick.			
11	Brick façade shall not be seal coated or painted in any way.			
12	In the event that the window systems and accompanying decorative elements are replaced, all such elements as desired by the City will be provided to the City of Somerville for historical documentation and appropriate disposition. Prior to any removal of such architectural features, Planning Staff will first be contacted to identify and tag said elements. Staff will then arrange with the applicant for the physical transfer of said elements to a City site.			
Final Sign-Off				
12	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.	

