



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development
JOSEPH A. CURTATONE, MAYOR

MEMORANDUM

Office of the Executive Director

MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor Joseph A. Curtatone

FROM: Monica R. Lamboy, Executive Director

DATE: September 23, 2010

SUBJECT: An ordinance amending the Somerville Zoning Ordinance to modify Article 6 Establishment of Zoning Districts, Article 7 Permitted Uses, and Article 16 Planned Unit Development (PUD) to allow self-storage uses under certain conditions in the Assembly Square Mixed Use District (ASMD) and establish specific development standards for self-storage and similar uses along the interstate highway in the ASMD

On behalf of Alderman Roche, the Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development (OSPCD) respectfully requests that you forward the attached proposed ordinance amending the Somerville Zoning Ordinance (SZO) to the Board of Aldermen for their review and consideration. This ordinance would:

- Allow self storage uses in the Assembly Square Mixed Use District (ASMD) through a special permit process;
- Establish development standards for self- and wholesale storage uses in the ASMD, including the requirement that they only be located along I-93 and that they provide specific community benefits;
- Require all new development in the ASMD adjacent to I-93 establish that they will not create additional noise impacts on residential properties west of I-93; and,
- Remove the requirement for a ‘denial letter’ for PUD projects, a procedure that is no longer required for other special permit applications.

BACKGROUND

As the Board of Aldermen is aware, the forthcoming development in Assembly Square will bring approximately 2,100 units of housing in the near-term at Assembly on the Mystic, followed by the potential construction of more units as the remainder of the Assembly Square District is developed. Ultimately, the area will be contain a mix of uses, a focus on pedestrian- and transit-oriented development and streetscapes, and a high design quality.

However, for a portion of the Assembly Square area, immediately adjacent to I-93, there are significant barriers to development. Parcels are of unique shapes and sizes and they are challenged by the visual and noise impact of the adjacent highway. Some lots are located where future roadway and infrastructure improvements will be necessary to improve access to Assembly Square. Many are populated with existing uses that are incompatible with the proposed new development.

While the Assembly Square zoning was designed to encourage the development of a dynamic transit-oriented program, it is limited in its ability to provide viable uses, allow for reasonable mitigation, and encourage redevelopment of some of the uniquely shaped parcels adjacent to the highway.

The proposed ordinance seeks to address these issues by introducing self-storage as a use along the highway edge while establishing specific findings and development standards for such uses at the same time. Self-storage is a growing business type that serves a number of markets including people seeking storage while between residences, people with small residences who need additional storage space, and businesses that seek storage space beyond the office space that may be available to them. For future occupants of Assembly Square, self-storage can be a viable ancillary use that is worth having in close proximity.

Nonetheless, the development of any self-storage use along the highway will only be a benefit to the Assembly Square area if it meets the high design standard required for the Assembly Square District. Any development with highway frontage will sit between the core development at Assembly Square and the 150,000 vehicles that pass through Somerville on I-93 each day. Such development must be attractive on all sides, providing a pedestrian-friendly front on surface streets while appearing as an attractive gateway building from the highway side.

Noise Impacts

An additional issue to be addressed is noise impacts. For too long, residential properties in East Somerville (the 'states' streets) along the southwestern side of Interstate 93 have suffered from constant noise impacts from the highway. Development on the opposite side of the highway, while providing significant benefits for developers in that area, could have additional noise impact by reflecting noise back across the highway to the residences. OSPCD staff wants to ensure that development in Assembly Square have no additional noise impact on East Somerville.

The Self Storage Business

The self-storage industry has been one of the fastest-growing sectors of the US commercial real

estate industry over the past 35 years. There are now approximately 46,000 primary self storage facilities in the United States. Nearly 1 in 10 U.S. households currently rent a self-storage unit.¹ Self-storage has become more popular as people are seeking more urban living situations with less space in their living units, while there is still significant interest in keeping and storing more belongings. Therefore, the demand for self-storage in urban areas with transient populations, significant student populations and small residential units will continue to be strong.

PROPOSED ZONING AMENDMENT

Allowing for self-storage uses along the highway in the ASMD, as proposed, can provide increased flexibility to help ensure redevelopment occurs along the highway while ensuring that any project will provide benefit to the City and the Assembly Square area. The proposed zoning amendment will:

- **Establish Specific Findings Required for Storage Uses in the ASMD**

As proposed, self-storage use greater than 10,000 s.f. will be allowed through issuance of a Special Permit with Site Plan Review (SPSR-A) from the Planning Board under Section 7.11.12.4. The use will be subject to the new regulations of the new Section 6.15, as well as the other development standards and design guidelines within the ASMD zoning.

The Special Permit will only be granted if the Planning Board concludes that the project meets the required findings. Such uses would only be allowed on lots that are not easily conducive to a more desirable use, and are adjacent to the highway. Furthermore, the development of the lot must improve the site as well as public infrastructure and provide direct public benefits above and beyond those otherwise required by the ordinance.

- **Establish Development Standards & Design Guidelines for Storage Uses in the ASMD**

Specific development standards and design guidelines are recommended for the self-storage use and will be applied in addition to those that already apply throughout the district. Development standards will relate to the allowable FAR, location of loading and parking, pedestrian access, ground floor treatment, and façade design. In addition, storage buildings will be required to be designed to allow human occupancy in the future. A design guideline is recommended relating to allowable building materials.

- **Noise Impact Standards for all ASMD projects along the Interstate Highway**

To ensure that new construction does not have additional negative noise impacts on existing residential properties adjacent to the highway, the ordinance would require all ASMD development immediately adjacent to the highway to establish that there are no acoustical impacts of the development that would bounce highway noise back into the neighborhoods.

- **Administrative Adjustment to PUD Process**

¹ Data from the Self Storage Association (www.selfstorage.org)

It has been the City's policy not to require the issuance of a 'denial letter' before an application for a special permit in Assembly Square is submitted. This is a part of a permit streamlining effort that ensures that desired development need not have unnecessary delays, while reducing workload at ISD. Instead, completed applications can be submitted directly to the City Clerk and are reviewed by Planning Staff. For any project of significant size, a joint review by ISD and Planning Staff occurs before or just after submittal. At this time, the only reference in the SZO to the need for a 'denial letter' remains in the PUD ordinance in Section 16. This language only slows the review process for PUD projects in areas such as the ASMD, without any benefit to applicants, staff or the public. Therefore, this amendment would remove this language.

CONCLUSION

By adopting the proposed amendments, the Board of Aldermen would provide an incentive to introduce a financially viable use along the I-93 corridor within the ASMD district, and limit that use to projects that would require significant benefit to the City.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that the Board of Aldermen adopt the attached ordinance to amend Article 6 Establishment of Zoning Districts, Article 7 Permitted Uses, and Article 16 Planned Unit Development (PUD) to allow self-storage uses under certain conditions in the Assembly Square Mixed Use District (ASMD), and establish specific development standards for self-storage and similar uses along the interstate highway in the ASMD.