

7 Allen Street  
Somerville, MA 02143

28 November 2016

Dear Alderman,

On 10 November, I took advantage of the opportunity to make verbal comments at the special hearing that took place at City Hall to consider a public appeal for delaying your vote on the zoning amendment proposal now before you until a memorandum of understanding regarding an agreement-in-principle for a community benefits agreement (CBA) has been achieved. However, I would like to now offer further comments in written form to clarify and expand upon what I said at the hearing.

Having contributed to the ongoing discussions among members of the place management (PMO) LOCUS working group, I am familiar with what led to the proposal made by David Gibbs at the next-to-last LOCUS meeting on 13 October for the creation of what is being called the Union Square Neighborhood Council, the membership of which would be open to all residents, business operators and employees in the Union Square area. One primary purpose of that entity, would be to serve as an instrument by which a citizen delegation representing those who have a direct and immediate interest in what takes place as the result of development could be formed to be party to a set of conversations to bring into being a legally-binding CBA.

As I tried to articulate in my spoken remarks, one of my own priorities which I hope can and will be advanced by citizen delegates to community benefits agreement discussions is that of benefits to what I consider to be a more meaningful sort of “community” than what is often meant by those who use the term. As I said at the October hearing, much of my own thinking about development derives from a book entitled The Uses of Disorder (1970), written by sociologist Richard Sennett, who taught until recently at MIT and is now teaching at NYU and the London School of Economics, and who has a special interest in urban planning. Prof Sennett writes in Chapter Two (*The Myth of Purified Community*) [paragraphs non-sequential, emphasis mine]:

*“Community” is a deceptive social term. People speak of a “community” of interest—for instance, men who do the same kind of labor or depend on each other to make money. There are also “communities” of affection, like churches or ethnic groups whose members feel emotional ties to one another. Yet, even in everyday language, **the idea of a community is not interchangeable with the idea of a social group; a community is a particular kind of social group in which men believe they share something together.** The feeling of community is fraternal, it involves something more than the recognition that men need each other materially. The bond of community is one of sensing common identity, a pleasure in recognizing “us” and “who we are...”*

*...A community is not simply a social group or an unrelated collection of individuals living in the same place. It is a group in which people belong to each other, share something in common...*

Most of the discussion of “community benefits” that I have witnessed and in which I have taken part during the year and a half I have been engaged in thinking about Union Square redevelopment matters has been about material objectives various “stake-holders” might have. However, there has been in my experience an absence until recently of explicit consideration of what efforts are most likely to produce a nurturing and strengthening of what actual community already exists in Union Square and what specific material infrastructure might be required to ensure a fertile ground for the formation of new communities which can through their existence and their interactions with one another produce a richer and more vibrant social fabric for all of us.

I was quite pleased to hear the words both of Father Richard Curran and of Bill Shelton regarding this subject at the 13 October hearing at City Hall. As you might recall, Father Curran referred in his remarks to what is described in the introduction of The Outliers (2008), where the author, Malcolm Gladwell, talks about how people living with a strong sense of having real community among themselves live longer and happier lives, despite having even greater risk factors than members of the general population:

*What Wolf began to realize was that the secret of Roseto wasn't diet or exercise or genes or location. It had to be Roseto itself. As Bruhn and Wolf walked around the town, they figured out why. They looked at how the Rosetans visited one another, stopping to chat in Italian on the street, say, or cooking for one another in their backyards. They learned about the extended family clans that underlay the town's social structure. They saw how many homes had three generations living under one roof, and how much respect grandparents commanded. They went to mass at Our Lady of Mount Carmel and saw the unifying and calming effect of the church. They counted twenty-two separate civic organizations in a town of just under two thousand people. They picked up on the particular egalitarian ethos of the community, which discouraged the wealthy from flaunting their success and helped the unsuccessful obscure their failures.*

*In transplanting the "paesani" culture of southern Italy to the hills of eastern Pennsylvania, the Rosetans had created a powerful, protective social structure capable of insulating them from the pressures of the modern world. The Rosetans were healthy because of where they were from, because of the world they had created for themselves in their tiny little town in the hills.*

I recognize, as I'm sure does Father Curran, that there may have been special factors at play in this situation, such as the fact that the people who formed the Roseto community had all immigrated from the same town in Italy and had known one another in their former home, which gave them a special affection for and affinity with one another. However, I think the main point here is that, however what I'm calling "genuine community" is established, the feeling of being connected with one another relative to meaningful activities is not only very important to how people feel about themselves and their lives, it can produce real, tangible effects, like longevity, that I feel we are justified in thinking to be every bit as important as the other interests that might be advanced in thinking about what we've been calling "community benefits."

As I said at the hearing, though I am, along with my colleagues in Union United, concerned with the matter of maintaining sufficient affordable housing, I also feel extremely anxious, as do my fellow members of Green & Open Somerville that new development properly address the need for open space, with as much as possible of that space being truly "green," and that there be serious thought given to these matters in planning as embodied in zoning regulations now before you (which I feel should be stronger in this regard as to the percentage of open space required), and in CBAs to which a citizen delegation will, we hope, become party. I am also especially concerned that we end up having physical places both where people can congregate informally without disrupting vehicular traffic on an as-needed basis and where office workers and others can sit in a pleasant environment to enjoy their lunch in one another's company or by themselves if they so choose.

Lastly, as I stated early in my remarks at City Hall, I am personally very committed to doing everything possible to ensure that there be designed and constructed a new public library / "info-hub" / meeting space / performing arts theatre / new home for SCATV facility in the main Union Square area, preferably on the site of what is now the public safety facility where, according to Brad Rossum, it has been intended to be sited, if the funding and other necessary requirements can be achieved and satisfied, respectively. Having such a facility would, I feel, be the single biggest element of physical infrastructure needed to promote, enhance and make possible the kind of real community that I feel we can and should strive to achieve by various means.

Again, I urge you to postpone the vote on the zoning proposal until a MOU for a CBA is agreed, so that we have in place a means by which ongoing oversight by citizens can be achieved and maintained.

Respectfully,  
Gary S. Trujillo (gst@webruary.org)