

Union Square Neighborhood Council

Comments and recommendations by Joseph Beckmann, 22 Stone Avenue

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As a member of planning groups from Mayor Capuano's Affordable Housing Task Force (1998) to the Civic Advisory Committee for Union Square, the LOCUS Committee, the Sustainability Committee, Ward Three Democratic Committee, the Transfer Fee Task Force, and the Clean & Open Elections Task Force, I am familiar with the public process of framing community agreements. With the Union Square Neighborhood Council, that process, while well intentioned, lacked many features critical to its long term credibility in framing its mission and selecting its current membership. I would like to amplify and affirm Mr. Parsons' recommendations for a Founding Board with some additional data.

Creating a diverse and participatory Neighborhood Council has few precedents in Somerville, beyond the unique qualities of Union Square. As I am sure you know, most such groups are commonly chosen from above, and have had little background in neighborhood organizing. The strategy in creating this Founding Board was careful and well intended, but lacked the diversity critical to a long term planning system. It was elected, as I am sure the Board of Aldermen recognize, by less than 10% of the voting population that elected the Aldermen from Wards 2 and 3, which will be the primary focus of this Council.

Unlike earlier plans crafted by the Union Square Civic Advisory and LOCUS Committees, it reflects extended discussions of bylaws and virtually no discussion of mission, of budgets, of public space, of traffic, of housing, or of business impact, all of which will be critical to Union Square renewal. It was initially framed to generate those discussions, and not to shortcut the depth of participation the earlier Committees promised. The current agenda of this Founding Board reflects some of those concerns, but, with a calendar now approved for the Green Line itself, there has yet to be any discussion of either options or alternatives available.

As Mr. Parsons notes, a Community Benefits Ordinance is critical to realizing both organizing efforts and long term goals, for Union Square as well as Washington, Gilman, Magoon, and other Squares and locations. To establish a pattern of participation needs considerably more organizing than this Founding Board reflects. It is quite conceivable that these founders can and will reach out to less represented groups, and build a broader coalition. It is also likely that discussions of community benefits will engage more diverse groups. If that outreach is successful, it will then set a standard for other neighborhoods. If it does not reach the voter level of the current Board of Aldermen, however, it will fail to justify its negotiations with the private developer and expose the city to serious and continuing discord. As he suggests, a six month trial period could solve these problems. And the easiest way to measure their success will be in voter turnout, as it has been for you, the elected Aldermen.