



City of Somerville, Massachusetts

City Council Land Use Committee

Meeting Minutes

Thursday, May 18, 2023

6:30 PM

JOINT MEETING WITH THE PLANNING BOARD

This meeting was held via GoToWebinar and was called to order by Chair McLaughlin at 6:36 pm and adjourned at 9:09 pm with a roll call vote of all in favor (Councilor Wilson, Councilor Gomez Mouakad, Councilor Ewen-Campen, Councilor Davis, and Chair McLaughlin), none absent, and none opposed. A recess was taken at 6:37 pm for the Planning Board to convene, and ended at 6:40 pm with a roll call of 4 present (Councilor Wilson, Councilor Gomez Mouakad, Councilor Ewen-Campen, and Chair McLaughlin) and 1 absent (Councilor Davis).

Others present: Dan Bartman – OSPCD, William Blackmer – OSPCD, Morena Zelaya – OSPCD, Karl Seidman – Karl F. Seidman Consulting Services, Jameson Brown, Tim Talun, William Proia, Bryan Chou, Molly Kaviar, Noah Sawyer, Michael Capuano – Planning Board, Erin Geno – Planning Board, Amelia Aboff – Planning Board, Luc Shuster – Planning Board, Michael McNeley – Planning Board, Stephanie Widzowski – Clerk of Committees.

Roll Call

Present: Chairperson Matthew McLaughlin, Vice Chair Lance L. Davis, Ben Ewen-Campen, Beatriz Gomez Mouakad and Jake Wilson

1. Committee Minutes (ID # [23-0719](#)) Approval of the Minutes of the Land Use Committee Meeting of May 4, 2023.

RESULT: ACCEPTED

AYE: Chairperson McLaughlin, Vice Chair Davis, Ward Three City Councilor Ewen-Campen, Ward Five City Councilor Gomez Mouakad and City Councilor At Large Wilson

Public Hearing - Item #23-0506

2. Mayor's Request (ID # [23-0506](#)) Requesting ordainment of an amendment to Section 12.2 of the Zoning Ordinances to reflect the recommendations in the 2022 Somerville Linkage Nexus Study.

Mr. Blackmer said that he has been serving as project manager for the study. He provided historical context for Somerville's linkage fees, explained the purpose of linkage fees to address impacts of large scale development, and spoke to the scope of the study. Ms. Zelaya said that the recommended changes to the linkage ordinance are to increase the housing linkage fee from \$11.23 to \$22.46, establish a graduated housing linkage fee for projects greater than 15,000 sq. ft, and adjust the payment schedule from 3 to 2 payments. Mr. Seidman shared a presentation on the nexus study scope, the

potential financial impact of various housing scenarios on residents, the city and lab development returns, and recommended policy and administrative changes.

The public hearing was opened at 7:06 pm. Nick Barker, a member of the Boynton Yards development team, listed concerns with Mr. Seidman's recommendations, citing market changes in the biotech industry. Richard Stein said that Somerville cannot be compared with municipalities like Cambridge and Boston because of the gap in rent between them. Victoria Antonino spoke in favor of the proposed linkage fees, stating that Somerville is competitive and will attract developers regardless of a heightened linkage fee. Meredith Porter also spoke in favor of the linkage fees. The public hearing was closed at 7:21 pm. Written comment will be accepted until May 26.

Mr. Schuster asked about the tension between tax revenue and one-time linkage fees and whether there is a trade-off at all. Dir. Galligani said that he feels the increased fee is still in a safe area to allow progress to continue. Ms. Aboff asked for the timeline of the study and cited concerns that the market has changed quickly, and also asked if there are plans to amend the study. The study was conducted from May to October in 2022. Mr. Seidman said that the fee increase itself is not a major deterrent, but given the market, it may be wise to defer the increase. Dir. Galligani said that the city stands behind its current recommendations. Ms. Geno asked for clarification on linkage fee versus total fees, the distribution of square footage for planned or recent commercial buildings, and whether there have been other rate increases. Mr. McNeley asked for the reason behind decreasing the number of payments and whether the city considered shifting the weight of those payments. Councilor Wilson asked what projects would be affected by the increased linkage fees. Dir. Galligani said that anything under construction or that has received site plan approval or special permit would be exempt.

Dir. Bartman said that he had emailed the Clerk's Office a replacement PDF for the Zoning Ordinance for tables in each district that reference the old prices. He asked for the Committee to replace the current submission with this file. *Chair McLaughlin moved to replace the current submission with the proposed file. The motion passed with a roll call vote of all in favor (Councilor Wilson, Councilor Gomez Mouakad, Councilor Ewen-Campen, Councilor Davis, and Chair McLaughlin), none absent, and none opposed.*

Councilor Gomez Mouakad requested a submission of a city plan showing current developments that would be impacted and those that would be exempt.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

Public Hearing - Item #23-0634

3. Public Communication (ID # [23-0634](#)) John Fragione and Agostino Feola, requesting the adoption of an amendment to the Zoning Ordinance Map to change the zoning district of 295-297 Medford Street and 93 Walnut Street from MR3 to MR5.

Chair McLaughlin stated that the item had been withdrawn, and the public hearing was not held.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE WITHDRAWN

Public Hearing - Item #23-0635

4. Public Communication (ID # [23-0635](#)) Union Square One Development, LLC requesting the adoption of a Zoning Text Amendment to Section 8.17. g. iii to permit variations to build out regulations by special permit in the CC5 District, USQ sub-area.

Mr. Brown, representing Union Square One Development, said that they are looking to build a 200,000 sq ft lab building with first floor retail space, underground parking and indoor and outdoor community space. Mr. Talun and others on the project shared a presentation on site details, scope of the proposed text amendment, and how the amendment would benefit the site and community.

The public hearing was opened at 8:23 pm. John Rattigan, representing US2, stated that the problem with the proposal is that it asks the city to ignore its planning efforts and to breach its contractual relationship with US2. Bill Shelton, a member of the Board of Directors of the Union Square Neighborhood Council, said that the presentation from the applicants is consistent with the current plan or improves on it, and that the Hamilton Company would complete construction sooner than US2. Michele Hansen spoke highly of the proposed plans for public space, but expressed concerns that the single building design would sit too close to the street. She suggested an architectural arcade or walkway with visual interest to address the problem. Matthias Rudolf spoke to a quick timeframe and high likelihood of completion as factors for supporting the proposal. Victoria Antonino said that the Hamilton Company seems to understand more than US2 the community desire for public space, including a library, but she also had doubts about the length of the building. Keja Valens said that she thinks the Hamilton Company plans will benefit Union Square, but stressed that the current discussion is about whether to make allowance for this kind of activity in general. The public hearing was closed at 8:40 pm. Written comment will be accepted until June 9.

Ms. Aboff asked if alternatives to a text amendment have been considered, such as a map change that would allow for a larger footprint. She also noted that the Union Square Neighborhood Plan explicitly calls for this parcel to be developed in two parts, and therefore this proposal is out of alignment with the plan. Mr. Proia said that their team was concerned with consistency, and that changing dimensional aspects more broadly would be more intrusive.

Councilor Ewen-Campen said that he requested a briefing on this item from the Solicitor’s Office. He added that in the proposed amendment, deviations from building length would be allowed if certain criteria are met, such as “enhanced open space” - and asked about the intent behind this broad language. Mr. Proia said the intent is for the developer to need to meet Board standards of enhanced open space.

Councilor Wilson asked how the amendment would impact the Master Plan Special Permit, especially for overlay versus base zoning. Dir. Bartman said he is consulting ISD on that issue.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

Public Hearing - Item #23-0660

5. Mayor's Request
(ID # [23-0660](#))

Requesting ordainment of an amendment to Section 8.1, Affordable Housing, of the Zoning Ordinances to remove errant text and amend the dimensional standards.

Dir. Bartman reviewed the attached amendment. He said that errant text was from when the city was considering a dimensional variability for the UR zoning district, but never adopted it. The amendment also makes language consistent across districts. The main impact of the amendment relates to side and rear setbacks abutting a historical district or property in a NR district in lots under 100 ft in depth or width. Dir. Bartman said that the change is necessary because structural engineering issues have surfaced. Mr. Sawyer of Just-A-Start said that he plans to develop 24 Webster Ave into 100% affordable rentals, but the current ordinance creates structural issues and additional costs on that property.

The public hearing was opened at 8:59 pm and closed at 9:00 pm with no comments. Written comment will be accepted until May 26.

Ms. Geno asked what would help the overlay be used more frequently. Mr. Sawyer said that he feels the proposed changes here are sufficient. Mr. Capuano asked how many properties would fall in the overlay district with these modifications and the impact on taller buildings abutting historical or residence districts. Dir. Bartman said that he can use GIS to answer the first question; for the second, he noted that this standard only applies to MR zoning districts, not NR or UR districts. Mr. Capuano requested the GIS data for next meeting.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

Referenced Documents:

- Land Use - 2023-05-18 23linkageletter (with 23-0506)
- Land Use - 2023-05-18 Somerville Linkage Study (with 23-0506)
- Land Use - 2023-05-18 Linkage Amendment 2023 05 17 Update (with 23-0506)
- Land Use - 2023-05-18 Zoning Presentation V1 (with 23-0635)
- Land Use - 2023-05-18 USQ - D6 - Letter to Somerville City Council and Planning Board (with 23-0635)