



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS

CLERK OF COMMITTEES

February 4, 2020
REPORT OF THE LAND USE COMMITTEE

Attendee Name	Title	Status	Arrived
Ben Ewen-Campen	Chair	Present	
Lance L. Davis	Vice Chair	Present	
William A. White Jr.	City Councilor At Large	Present	
Matthew McLaughlin	Ward One City Councilor	Present	
Mark Niedergang	Ward Five City Councilor	Present	

The meeting was held in the Committee Room and was called to order by Chair Ewen-Campen at 7:01pm and adjourned at 8:04pm.

Others present: Dan Bartman - OSPCD; Ellen Schachter - OSPCD; Ithzel Polanco-Cabadas - OSPCD; Kimberly Wells - Assistant Clerk of Committees

207727: That the Director of SPCD discuss the 100% Affordable Zoning Overlay District proposal now being considered by the Cambridge City Council.

Cambridge considered this idea recently, noting that private developers are an impediment to affordable housing and one of the ways to compete might be to give things that add value to affordable projects in order to incentivize their creation. The zoning that passed in the City recently already includes a density bonus, which allows more units to be built within an existing envelope if all of those units will be affordable.

Mr. Bartman shared a presentation on Removing Barriers to Affordable Housing outlining the process in Cambridge and some recommendations from the Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development (OSPCD) on how Somerville might proceed. He clarified that the only subsidy that Somerville provides is through the Affordable Housing Trust Fund. Cambridge struggled with the part of the proposal that allowed for height increases to four and seven stories, depending on type of district. The setback requirements are very similar to those adopted in Somerville, and the open space requirements vary depending on whether parking is provided. Mr. Bartman cautioned that there was pushback when there were proposed buildings that would be very different from what currently exists in particular neighborhoods.

Chair Ewen-Campen wondered about the permitting process and Mr. Bartman noted that if affordable housing was to be built, it would not require a special permit, though a number of other things would trigger that requirement. Councilor Niedergang also asked whether a project approved by-right would be open to a lawsuit. The interpretation that the building is by-right is a decision that can be appealed. It should be before the Zoning Board of Appeals first but often is sent directly to Land Court. It doesn't carry as much weight as appealing a special permit or variance. There are some communities that do not offer an appeal process for site plan approval. Ms. Schachter added

that an important part about making this Citywide, outside of demographics, is that there are so few plots of land that the goal is to make as many available as possible.

RESULT:

WORK COMPLETED

209478: That the Director of SPCD present recommendations for an "Affordable Housing Overlay District" to this Council's Committee on Land Use, to facilitate the construction of new affordable housing.

Mr. Bartman reviewed the ordinance to outline that residential development is permitted in NR, UR, MR 3-6, and HR districts. Many UR, MR 3-5 and HR buildings already include a bonus for affordable housing. Most of the buildings identified as UR are already at the maximum size permitted. Some possibilities include: Gentle Density in NR, which would be more units within an existing allowable footprint (such as five units within a triple-decker or a house with multiple units plus a backyard cottage); UR building types in NR districts; Gentle Density in UR (removing limits to units for apartments); adding bonus floors for ADUs; adjustments to permitted density in UR, MR, and HR; removing the special permit for household living in MR and HR (which would reduce costs and review process); and calibrating the ADU price by building type (there is an RFP pending to conduct this research).

Any of the suggested items could be addressed through changes to District regulations. It is also a consideration that transit areas could be used as a guide for where to offer these options, rather than the entire City. Councilor Davis asked for clarification around this and the decreased demand for automobiles would enable a reduced parking requirement. He noted further that an Overlay may not be necessary because much of the framework is already established. Parking could be calibrated for whether the property is inside or outside of a transit area. Councilor Niedergang wondered if parking waivers could be granted within an Affordable Housing Overlay District if created and any resident of an affordable unit can request a waiver for a parking permit.

Chair Ewen-Campen wondered if calibrating the percentage of affordable units would be worth exploring and there will likely be different thresholds for different buildings that are deemed ideal. Councilor Davis clarified that the interpretation of anything designated as Commercial Core or MPD Overlay is that commercial use is the intended focus, rather than housing, but 100% affordable housing could be added as a requirement for residential units built above commercial development, if allowed.

The Chair noted that many of the questions are empirical questions for affordable housing developers, and suggested that the Planning staff could have these conversations and determine recommendations based on the feedback. Councilor McLaughlin added that the Affordable Housing Trust did much of the research work in Cambridge, and also that he would be interested in what for-profit developers would have to say as well. Mr. Bartman and Ms. Schachter suggested convening the staff first and then including community organizations such as SCC and POA for a summit.

Councilor McLaughlin added that in Cambridge, there was a divide between residential areas and transit areas. He would prefer to see this citywide, but transit areas are a priority if that is what will get this to pass. He also noted that there are ways to make buildings fit the neighborhoods, even with more floors, and he would rather allow this to see the units built, even if requiring less than 100% affordable is what it takes to achieve that. Councilor Davis agreed and added that there are opportunities within the NR District currently that could be adjusted, because every affordable unit counts. Councilor White noted that a balance also needs to be found to continue to encourage residential home ownership.

RESULT:

KEPT IN COMMITTEE

Presentation:

- 20200204 LUC (with 207727, 209478)