

Madalyn Letellier

From: Patrick Conte [REDACTED] >
Sent: Friday, June 13, 2025 12:16 PM
To: All City Council; Public Comments
Subject: Rafi/SomerNova Housing
Attachments: Rafi documentation.pdf

Follow Up Flag: Follow up
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Members of the City Council:

I am emailing today regarding the pending Arts and Innovation Subarea rezoning, and its relationship with both Rafi Properties, their planned Somernova development, and the Community Benefits Agreement (CBA) they negotiated with the Union Square Neighborhood Council (USNC).

I attended the public meeting hosted by the USNC on May 22, one week after the final draft of the CBA had been released to the public. At that meeting, it was expressed by the USNC negotiating team that approximately 150 housing units would be produced as a part of this development. A handout provided to attendees at that meeting attested the same, and confirmed that no housing would be produced under an as-of-right scheme. Even Rafi's website currently confirms that 150 dwelling units will be produced as a part of this project (see attached, and linked to here: <https://www.somernova.community/blog/cba>). This was a common talking point amongst voters in the week leading up to the vote on June 4, and was expressed as a significant reason to vote for the CBA.

However, neither the zoning, nor the CBA, obligate Rafi to produce those dwelling units. The CBA only offers additional conditions that Rafi will be subject to should they decide to include housing in the development. The writing is complex and difficult to parse; people took 150 units at face value.

Given that, I am requesting that the Council consider modifying the pending zoning to change the 15% maximum housing limitation, making it a flat 15% housing requirement to ensure that the housing that was advertised is ultimately constructed.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Regards,

Patrick Conte
[REDACTED]

Community Benefits Agreement • Somernova

Union Square Neighborhood Council & Rafi Reach Landmark Community Benefits Agreement on Somernova Expansion

Milestone Agreement Moves to Community for Public Vote on June 4, 2025

SOMERVILLE, MA – May 21, 2025 – [The Union Square Neighborhood Council \(USNC\)](#) and [Rafi Properties](#) are proud to announce a landmark Community Benefits Agreement (CBA) tied to the [Somernova](#) campus expansion in Union Square. This historic agreement, which now advances to the broader community for public vote, represents a transformative vision for inclusive innovation, job creation, arts and culture, sustainability, and equitable economic development in Somerville. The CBA was developed through years of collaborative negotiation and community engagement. It ensures that a proposed development – pending approval of the City of Somerville’s Arts & Innovation SubArea zoning amendment – delivers a range of lasting benefits to Somerville residents.

Fueled by the Arts & Innovation Subarea zoning, Somernova’s expansion envisions 1.5 million square feet of cutting-edge R&D and commercial space to support the next wave of climate and tough tech innovators. Integrated into a vibrant ecosystem of arts and music, local retail, housing, childcare, civic space, and a turnkey community center, this expansion will cement Somernova as a global launchpad for companies emerging from trailblazers like Greentown Labs and The Engine—positioning Somerville at the forefront of solving the world’s toughest challenges.

The Somernova CBA sets a bold new standard for arts-centered development, transforming the campus into a vibrant home for Somerville’s creative community. With over 100,000 square feet dedicated to Arts and Creative Enterprise (ACE), the CBA promises 60,000 square feet of permanently affordable, purpose-built spaces—from art exhibition & galleries to music rehearsal and recording studios. Three dynamic music venues, ranging in size and character, will anchor a cultural ecosystem designed to

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As part of this progressive, unprecedented CBA, Rafi Properties has executed a Project Labor Agreement (PLA) with the Greater Boston Building Trades Unions, North Atlantic States Regional Council of Carpenters and Shawmut Design & Construction for the expansion of Somernova's campus. This agreement will be made possible by the passing of the Arts & Innovation Subarea zoning. This milestone is a testament to what can be accomplished when vision, community, collaboration, and a commitment to progress, align. Rafi is committed to union jobs, fair wages, and local hiring throughout the project.

"The USNC is excited to announce this pivotal CBA, which will provide arts space, dedicated community spaces, and City's first ever private developer Project Labor Agreement, while also advancing small businesses and sustainability in Somerville," said **Emily Doran of the Union Square Neighborhood Council**. "We know the community has been waiting patiently, and we are unbelievably happy it is now in your hands."

"Through hundreds of hours of collaborative work, we now have unprecedented benefits for everyone. What's to come for the arts is truly game changing," said **Ami Bennitt, Volunteer Founder, Arts Stays Here**. "We thank all artists, musicians & supporters who participated in this community process."

"This CBA reflects what is possible when community voices are at the center of development," said **Kristin Phelan, Vice President of Real Estate for Rafi and Somernova**. "It represents our deep commitment to Somerville's future – where community, economic growth, arts, sustainability, and equity go hand in hand."

Key Highlights of the Community Benefits Agreement:

Arts & Creative Enterprise (ACE):

- A minimum of 8% of the overall commercial leaseable space will be programmed for ACE uses (approx. 100,000 sq. ft; 40,000 for Arts Exhibition, 20,000 sq.ft for Artist Studios and Creative Incubators).
- 50% of the ACE space will be affordable & purpose-built with long-term lease options for music recording, rehearsal and performance space.
- Three music venues with capacities ranging from 80 to 325 people.
- A minimum of 9,500 square feet of rehearsal/recording studio space.
- A Curatorial Advisory Team will be established with local artists to guide programming, tenant selection, and public art initiatives.

Community Spaces:

- 20,000 square feet of dedicated community space, including a fully funded, turnkey

- An additional 7,500 square feet of flexible indoor space available for local groups, events, and intergenerational programming.

Jobs & Jobs Training:

- Project Labor Agreement (PLA) for construction jobs (first of its kind in the history of Somerville) guaranteeing prevailing wages, good benefits, and safe working conditions.
- As part of the PLA, the Greater Boston Labor Council will bring its Building Pathways apprenticeship training program, funded by Rafi, to provide a road for advancement to jobs with higher pay.
- \$375,000 over 10 years to support the Somerville Community Corporation's First Source Jobs Program.
- Rafi commits to partnering with Somerville High School on vocational training, job-readiness and placement programs.
- 6,000 construction jobs and 4,000 permanent jobs.

Affordable Housing:

- \$500,000 in funding to the Somerville Community Land Trust over 10 years.
- 150 residential units will include a minimum of 20% affordable units, with a goal of 50%.
 - At least 30% of these units will be 2-bedrooms or 3-bedrooms
- Prioritized housing access for artists and educators, and will work in consultation with Somerville Community Corporation on Affordable Dwelling Unit development.

Small Business & Equity:

- \$250,000 over 10 years to Union Square Main Streets to support local independently owned business and entrepreneurs.
- Retail preference for BIPOC-, women-, LGBTQIA+-, and locally-owned businesses.
- Commitment to cultivate a locally rooted and chain-free retail ecosystem that reflects Somerville's creativity, innovation and entrepreneurs.

Green & Open Space:

- Commitment to exceed civic space minimums with multiple civic spaces, each with at least 50% permeable surfaces, a combination of active and passive recreation, publicly accessible rooftop terraces as well as the redesign of *The Alley @*

- Connections with nature will include rooftop gardens, green walls and roofs, winter gardens, 150+ new trees, 100% Native plants, rain gardens, and no-poison rat control.
- Net-zero-ready buildings with green infrastructure, rainwater reuse, and biophilic design.
- Commitment to LEED Platinum-certifiable commercial buildings and Passive House residential design.

Mobility & Traffic:

- Somerville's most comprehensive and rigid Mobility Management Plan requirements to be developed in consultation with the community with Key Performance Indicators, monthly public reporting, transparent enforcement mechanisms and triggers connected to KPI violations resulting in delay of permit advancement.
- Vehicles traveling to and from Somernova will not increase traffic light queues by more than 18% at monitored intersections.
- Dynamic Parking Pricing will be established, where parking will rise annually until the parking demand meets the target levels. The extra revenue will be reinvested back into a mobility management fund to make ongoing improvements.
- Free community shuttles to transit hubs (and Mystic Learning Center, 750 bike parking spaces, car-sharing incentives, and dynamic parking pricing to reduce congestion.
- EV-ready infrastructure with 25% of parking spaces equipped for electric vehicles.

For more information, the Somernova Community Benefits Agreement is available to view below.

COMMUNITY BENEFITS AGREEMENT
BETWEEN RAFI INVESTMENTS- SOMERVILLE, LLC
UNION SQUARE NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL, INC.

PARTIES

This Community Benefits Agreement (the "Agreement") is entered into this _____ day of _____, 2023, by Rafi Investments, Somerville, LLC, ("Rafi"), and the Union Square Neighborhood Council, Inc. ("USNC"), is binding on the parties hereto and their successors and assigns. The Agreement shall be deemed to run with the land and be binding on any subsequent owner of the project and the project area described below.

BACKGROUND

This Community Benefits Agreement concerns the redevelopment of the Project Site (as defined below) in the City of Somerville through the initial construction of the so-called "Somernova" project, including demolition of currently-existing improvements at the Project Site, and redeveloping old structures and constructing new structures with a mix of uses, including industrial, research and development arts and creative enterprise, residential and retail uses, pursuant to a Master Plan Special Permit granted under the pending zoning amendment to establish the Arts & Innovation Sub Area of the Master Planned Development Overlay District, as described below. (assuming the site that is within such Arts & Innovation Sub Area as shown said pending zoning amendment) (the "Project") and the current proposed plans respecting such Development, as reflected and described on Exhibit A (the "Project Site") in the event that the City Applications (as defined below) are all adopted and ordained by the City of Somerville, are not appealed, and are acceptable to Rafi. A map of the Project site is attached hereto as Exhibit A.

The parties hereto acknowledge that the Project can only be undertaken if certain amendments to the Somerville Zoning Ordinance are all adopted and ordained by the City of Somerville, are not appealed, and are acceptable to Rafi for Rafi's reasonable implementation of the Project, and certain changes are made to the Urban Design Framework and Somerville 2040 map, are not appealed, and are acceptable to Rafi for Rafi's reasonable implementation of the Project (with all current and future said applications being collectively the "City Applications").

The City Amendments regarding the Somerville Zoning Ordinance, if adopted and ordained and not appealed, will, in part, establish an Arts & Innovation Sub Area of the Master Planned Development Overlay District. The Project is proposed to be constructed within such Arts & Innovation Sub Area. The proposed City Applications are contained in the current applications by the City of Somerville for certain zoning map and text amendments, being those proposed amendments set out as City Council Items currently numbered:

- 24-1440 (to revise the regulations for laboratory uses and buildings);
- 24-0178 (to establish a new Research & Development zoning district).



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Madalyn Letellier

From: Bill Shelton [REDACTED]
Sent: Sunday, June 15, 2025 3:06 PM
To: All City Council; Public Comments
Subject: The reality that dominates the arguments

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Honorable City Councilors,

You are hearing many thoughtful arguments for and against the proposed Arts and Innovation overlay zoning district. To acknowledge its opponents' arguments: Somernova *is* in the wrong place. It *will* impose burdens on its neighbors, although these are overstated, and their mitigations are often dismissed.

But I would ask you to shift your vision from the immediate arguments to the next 50 to 100 years and understand this: Somernova's fate will define whether Somerville will be what you all say it is and should be.

The kind of economic development that enables cities to thrive happens in [clusters](#). In 1890, [Alfred Marshall](#) observed that businesses in the same industry tend to cluster in one geographic area, for example finance and healthcare in Boston. Or digital- and biotechnology in Cambridge. [Michael Porter](#) and [Paul Krugman](#) elaborated on how and why this happens.

For a few years it appeared that Somerville would host a cluster of emerging biotech enterprises. But there is now something like 16 million square feet of vacant or under-construction biotech space in greater Boston. At that industry's peak growth period it was only absorbing about one million square feet per year.

The office-space market is equally moribund. And retail generates the least municipal net income of all commercial uses, while boosting congestion, pollution, and public-safety costs.

Somerville's one hope to grow its commercial property base sufficiently to pay its bills for the foreseeable future is also our only potential cluster: climate/tough technology. But it is a bright hope. Our small city hosts more start-up enterprises in this sector than does any other location in the nation, and probably on the planet.

Sustaining this cluster requires usable space for the incumbents to expand and for new enterprises to locate here. The more that do so, the more they generate what analysts call "gravity," attracting still more businesses in that sector. And the proposed zoning brilliantly synergizes the cluster's innovative and attractive potency with substantial artist space.

As the cluster grows it attracts vendors that serve the industry. And it supports local businesses that sell goods and services to the cluster's workers but are now languishing in the absence of a daytime population.

Somernova's location is, indeed, less than ideal for this phenomenon. But the property owners in SomerVision's transformation districts are unable or unwilling to develop the type of buildings that the cluster needs to flourish. Instead they are building housing that is unaffordable to people who live here and retail that largely serves a regional market.

And so we are falling behind on SomerVision's key goals. When we set the 2040 goal of achieving permanent affordability for 20% of our housing units, 9.7% were affordable. That figure is now 8.65%. When we set the jobs-equal-to-the-number-of-working-residents goal, we intended for it to also be a proxy for net-revenue growth driven by new commercial development.

But as you are now into this year's budget review, I imagine that you are acquainted with the enormity of our long-term operating and infrastructure needs versus realistic net-revenue projections.

Over the long-term, without substantial commercial-tax-base growth we will be obligated to increase residential taxes, moving us ever further to becoming an affluent enclave with pockets of low-income residents clinging to their tenancy, and everyone else priced out.

I understand why some residents don't want to live in tall buildings' shadows, even though they chose to live in New England's densest city. And I myself am apprehensive about mobility impacts, which is why we wrote into the CBA the ability to shut down development on the Somernova site to mitigate such outcomes.

Yet I would ask you to set aside all other arguments for and against and consider the future that you want for our city.

With neighborly love,
William Camilo Shelton