

Union Square Neighborhood Council

Comments and recommendations by Philip Parsons, 20 Bonner Avenue

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As someone who played a major role in determining the organization and voting methods used for the election of the founding board of the Union Square Neighborhood Council, and who worked with others to determine the winners of the election, I submit the following comments:

The actual election of the Founding Board was scrupulously managed, and achieved vigorous and enthusiastic participation. The results are not in question; there have been no challenges.

I write to advocate for **temporary and conditional** recognition of the Neighborhood Council and its Founding Board, pending substantive examination of the role and organization of Neighborhood Councils in the City as a whole, including boundaries, election methods, and responsibilities, resulting in a Community Benefits Ordinance.

As someone who administered the election, I was left with questions and concerns, as were many in the community:

Resolution 17779 before the Board of Aldermen, seeking recognition of the Founding Board as the group authorized to negotiate Community Benefits Agreement with the Master Developer, US2, clarifies in its preamble the rationale for recognizing the Founding Board:

*“The City of Somerville seeks to ensure that **the community as a whole** secures appropriate benefits from the development of Union Square”.*

The community as a whole received no written notification of the existence of the Council and its potential role, or of the elections. Many, and perhaps a majority, of those living within the district remain unaware of the Council and its role. City resources were unavailable to ensure comprehensive awareness.

“The Master Developer specified in the Master Developer Designation Agreement (MDDA) has agreed to work with a recognized neighborhood organization to negotiate a Community Benefits Agreement (“CBA”) under a Covenant signed with the current Mayor of Somerville”.

It is unclear how the Neighborhood Council can be recognized for this role in the absence of a Community Benefits Ordinance. There are other Union Square organizations which, if they chose, could reasonably compete for this role. Completion of a Community Benefits Ordinance seems to be a necessary pre-condition for recognition of a specific private body, if it is to negotiate distribution of public funds.

“The indisputable need for representation of local businesses, workers and residents in the development of their community confirms the necessity of a strong, independent and empowered voice for the neighborhood.....”

Contrary to meeting this “indisputable need” the elected Board of the Neighborhood Council includes no representatives of brick and mortar businesses. Of the 15 members, 13 were elected from an organized slate of candidates that excluded any such businesses. The slate also excluded members of the CAC and Locus groups, which have worked for several years on Union Square issues, and included only two property owners, while property owners probably account for about one third of those eligible to vote.

The election system developed by Fred Berman and myself allowed voters to pick up to 15 candidates from a roster of 42. A group of 15 candidates calling itself ABCDE was formed to conform minimally with the distribution requirements of the election, and the group then sought endorsement from members of Our Revolution, a group that had been influential in the very recent municipal elections. This strategy proved highly successful, and resulted in 13 of the 15 elected board members being from the ABCDE slate. No other groups in the Union Square district contemplated forming a slate until they became aware at a late date of ABCDE’s existence and its strategy.

In retrospect, a decision to allow voters 15 votes each was an invitation to develop this kind of strategy. Had voters been allowed to vote for, say, only six candidates, the outcome of the election might well have been very different, and a far broader and more inclusive board might have been created.

As it is, the election has had the effect of further dividing the community and marginalizing many who have played an active volunteer role in the planning Union Square redevelopment for many years. It also appears that the elected board has a single focus on negotiating a Community Benefits Agreement consistent with the provisions of the Covenant with US2, while neighborhood councils in the City, if they are to be effective over time, need to have a broader and more long-term view.

Having said that, it remains true that the election was fairly won, and should, I believe, be recognized for now, but under certain conditions:

1. Any working committees of the Neighborhood Council should be required to include broader representation of the community, including: brick and mortar businesses, advocates for public space and environmental issues, members of the CAC and/or Locus, residents with design and planning expertise and experience. The approved Neighborhood Council bylaws allow for the inclusion of non-board members.
2. The City should form a working group to review and prepare recommendations for a revised city-wide Community Benefits Ordinance, building on the Union Square experience over the past year. The group should explore strategies to ensure opportunities for all Somerville residents to participate in Neighborhood Councils; this will mean looking at the question of neighborhood boundaries, and opportunities to participate in particular councils. It should also look at voting systems likely to encourage genuine diversity of representation, while discouraging partisanship. It might also look at the work done by the Locus group in defining the potential responsibilities of Neighborhood Councils.
3. An independent Union Square group, **with equal numbers of elected board members and non-board members**, should review election processes and bylaws and make recommendations to the US Founding Board and to the City.
4. The Founding Board of the Union Square Neighborhood Council should be given **a six month trial period** prior to being given any more extended role.