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Somerville Board of Aldermen

via Mr. Peter Forcellese

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Somerville Planning Board

via Mr. George Proakis

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RE: Union Square Zoning

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Dear Members of the Boards,

I am writing with a few belated comments about Union Square zoning, entitlement and development. But first I want to note my deep gratitude for all who are devoting so much time and energy to Union Square and to Somerville re-development efforts, including the very hard work and time consuming efforts of elected officials, city staff and many of our citizens. Though I have some concern about the efficiency of our efforts, a fair amount of zigging and zagging is inevitable, even instructive. And I cannot remember any time in the last three decades when we have had so many good people so focused. We need to get it right if we can. I will touch on land use mix, density, and green and open space needs.

Land Use Mix. Somervision, the Comprehensive Plan, ended up in a good place. The city-wide goals - to add 30,000 jobs, 6,000 housing units, 1,200 affordable, and 125 acres of green and open space - are excellent, and will result in a community that achieves live work balance, is much more able to fund equity needs and makes significant progress toward a more sustainable natural environment and a healthier human environment. These are reachable goals if we work on real solutions to them, with some private sector contributions, and some public-sector creativity. The changes will not be evenly spread. New jobs and green space must be more heavily created in our transformative districts.

It is important to be mindful of the general mix of commercial and residential built space needed to hit our goals, and of the sub-types within some categories, especially commercial. Retail is a quality of life category and may be ancillary to either residential or commercial property. It can be sub-divided into restaurant/entertainment and sale of good and services. Large scale retailers, grocers and box boxes, are net fiscal negative. Hotels are also ancillary, as local and regional room needs are determined by weekday and weekend demand. These commercial categories should not be confused with upper story office or research and development job space, the economic driver that we most need.

It is critical for us to develop more office, research and development square feet than residential of all types. The ratio of “upper story” office, research and development to housing could be 55:45 or **60:40*** or even 67:33 in the transformative districts. With retail and hotel making up a considerably lesser amount, and carved out pro rata. Or we could aim for 60:30:10 or **54:36:10** including the “other commercial”. Anywhere in these ranges will help our drastic shortage of jobs relative to workforce, which has hovered near 5,000 jobs short of breakeven per square mile, the worst in Massachusetts out of 351 cities and towns. We need office, research and development to be **50% or more** of new built space.

At four jobs per 1000 square feet of commercial built space, the city needs roughly 7.5 million square feet of new commercial space, heavily shaded toward upper story office, and research and development. To the extent we can become an alternative provider of small and mid-scale research and development space complementary to East Cambridge and Boston’s Innovation and Medical districts, we will serve a dire strategic need in the regional economy as well as our own need to bridge down to smaller scale start-ups, makers and artists who already have a vibrant beachhead in Union Square and Somerville.

At 1,250 gross square feet per new mixed income housing unit, we also need roughly 7.5 million square feet of new housing city wide. But unlike the new commercial space which will be concentrated in transformative districts, our housing will be more spread out across transformative, enhancement and conserved areas. We need very strong affordability components in both our commercial and our residential developments, or we will not be able to maintain a diverse community which is close to the state median income on average. I would suggest strong affordability standards for **20%** of all new housing and **10%** of all new commercial space. In both there should be a range of affordability and product.

The developable residential and commercial targets will need to shrink roughly pro rata to any desirable new civic or institutional space so that we may increasingly enjoy built fabric that is supportive and enriching for all our citizens and visitors. Similarly, the expression of new buildings at ground level should be broken up as much as possible to maintain and foster an enriched and varied pedestrian environment. The most loved town and city center streetscapes are those which have a fine-grained variety of facades and of buildings that is authentic and more than skin deep. Hanover St. in the North End, Charles St. below Beacon Hill and Elm St. in Davis Square are all good examples of this **articulated scale***.

Density. One of the curiosities of the draft Union Square Zoning is the absence of discussion of floor area ratios and densities. Floor area ratio or FAR is generally understood within the architectural design community to be above ground gross square feet of building divided by lot area. But for legal purposes and quantity takeoff purposes, including zoning, development entitlements, private sector pro formas and public sector infrastructure calculations, FAR is generally considered to be total proposed development gross square feet of building divided by total controlled contiguous land (not lot) area before development. Without a clear understanding of FAR, things can get very murky indeed.

** Highlighted terms relate to the Union Square transformative district, not the whole city.*

Once a developer understands the FAR and density they will be entitled to, it becomes possible to begin to calculate costs and expenses - land, building, operating, other - and returns. An understanding of legally entitled FAR and density also allows a fair negotiation between local landowners and would be developers. Once city staff and interested others understand FAR and density allowed or projected for different land uses, they can begin to think about infrastructure and operating needs - surface transportation, water and sewer, energy and electronic capacity, education, police, fire, and other proportional needs - as well as their costs and future annual expenses, and their surpluses or deficits.

In the absence of clear and transparent FAR and density in zoning, and in other entitlement processes, all the interested parties must scramble to figure out their best guesses as to likely densities, with some more able to do so and thereby acquiring a negotiating advantage. With clear FAR and density other factors may more easily be addressed - the value of developable land, costs of new infrastructure, municipal operating expenses, community trade-offs involved between building heights and new public green and open space. In the case of Fan Pier on the South Boston waterfront the FAR of 4.0 led to easier resolution of the rest, especially open space, as FAR was most important to the developers.

Green and Open Space. No area of Somerville's goals will be harder to accomplish than creation of 125 new acres of public green and open space. And no area is more important for Somerville's long term well-being. Well placed and preserved open space can last long enough that it may be the single most valuable legacy we can leave for future residents. With less green and open space per 1000 residents than almost any other Massachusetts municipality, we have a lot of ground to make up. This amount of new acreage will require private development contributions, and public sector creativity and strategic planning. It is on all of us to work together to figure out how to accomplish this most important goal.

We can start by requiring the equivalent of 30% of all developer controlled acreage to become new public green and open space. As much as possible of this obligation should be on-site or on abutting parcels. The remainder should be strategically located wherever there is the greatest community need, and opportunity. Given the degree of disagreement about the green and open space creation in concert with significant new transformative development at North Point in Cambridge and on Fan Pier in South Boston, this is an area where an independently appointed outside panel might inform the Board of Aldermen as to best practices, using some nearby whole cities and a few transformative developments.

Three Fan Pier slides are attached as food for thought. It is especially dismaying that the 2000 South Boston Municipal Harbor Plan, substituting for MGL Chapter 91, requires 54% open space on Fan Pier and Pier 4, of which 14% may be new on-site streets and sidewalks but fully 40% must be new green space or public plaza. (There are some indoor public spaces too.) This legal right has been held in trust for the public under the stewardship of the BRA and the Commonwealth, both of which have robust manpower. Yet Somerville city staff believe that the public's right to 40% has withered to 20% or so. What must we fear then in Somerville if this first zoning draft is 15% for large parcels and 0% for small parcels?

With Best Regards, Wig Zamore