

John Long

From: Christopher LaRoche <silvaire@gmail.com>
Sent: Saturday, July 10, 2021 3:23 PM
To: City Clerk Contact; Planning1
Cc: Chris LaRoche
Subject: My feedback on Agenda Items 211889 and 211890 regarding the June 17 meeting of the Land Use Committee and the Planning Board

Dear City Clerk and Planning Board,

Hello. My name is Chris LaRoche and I live at 429 Norfolk Street, Unit 4 in Somerville. I have lived in Union Place for 19 years (one of the original owners/residents) and have been a full-time resident and voter in Somerville for over a quarter of a century. I have been following the zoning updates and Union Square development plans for almost a decade.

Frankly, I am excited about the development of this area and particularly Boynton Yards; however, the methods and tactics of CV development properties regarding the development of the land wrapped around 80 Webster Ave is both distressing and frustrating on several levels.

I followed the zoning process closely from 2015-2019 as much as I could, and even in late summer 2019 attended meetings hosted by JT Scott about the potential zones and areas of zoning updates in our greater neighborhood. The information was always listed that the plot of land between Webster Ave and Columbia would be an MR5 designation (and no mention of overlays). Overlays were never discussed in these meetings and apparently were only placed in this zoning at the very last minute. To the best of my knowledge, there was no public comment or meetings about this particular change and in each discussion with the city, there are tepid responses that 'we followed the rules' and placing the blame on us citizens for not being 'observant enough.' I realize I *may* have missed this change, but I doubt it as all the other area residents I have talked to who followed this never heard of the overlay. I also question this change as this unique situation for zoning on the Webster/Columbia Ave to allow high rise is unlike anywhere else in Somerville and certainly appears to directly be sacrificing the residents at 80 Websters for the sake of greater development. In the numerous meetings I attended about all the zoning, the proposal was always that our streets and area (Norfolk and Tremont) would be urban residential, the Webster/Columbia Ave land 'island' would be MR5 and the larger buildings would be in Boynton Yards proper and north of Columbia (where Royal Laundry and Beacon Sales are located). I do believe there were errors made in this zoning or something put in the last minute that was not subject to public scrutiny. That is unfortunate.

I think CV Properties was also put in an unfortunate situation as all of us in this area only knew about this high-rise overlap for the Webster/Columbia Ave land 'island' when they presented their initial proposal last October. Needless to say, we were stunned as this was new to every attendee of our development at Union Place as well as 80 Webster. At first, I thought that residents could work with the developers to a realistic compromise so all could be accepting of this. As I have been involved in this over the last many months, it has become clear that the CV property development firm has absolutely no intention to realistically listen to the concerns of the residents beyond platitudes, and their presentation at the meeting on July 17th, particularly with their lawyer being exceptionally aggressive hostile and downright mean to any of the zoning amendment or compromise proposed by 80 Webster was both unfortunate and lacking in any sense of trying to assist with a realistic compromise. Additionally, even going to the point of the developers threatening to divide up/remove a ramp used at 80 Webster to assist people using wheelchairs & disabilities was awful and bullying at its most overt.

Additionally, in the meeting on June 17th, I was disappointed with the presentation by the Somerville Planning Board. I would expect that their presentation would be simply a discussion of the zoning as is and what the intention was when the zoning was created. That part was covered, but it became quite obvious during the presentation that the Planning Board was quite enthusiastic and supportive of this development and the developers. The Planning Board also reiterated the position of the developers and either ignored or outright disregarded the concerns and questions of the general public at this meeting. Many quality questions from the public went unanswered. I found this unfortunate as I do not view that as the role of the planning board to be biased in favor of one development or residents – ‘just the facts please’ would have served this presentation much better.

Although this is far from perfect, I strongly support the zoning amendments offered at this meeting as the most realistic compromise to allow both the developers to continue their building while offering the residents at 80 Webster and the greater neighborhood some semblance of a residential neighborhood which was the original intention in this ‘transitional area’ between residential and life sciences.

Sincerely,
Chris LaRoche