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From: Aaron Weber [REDACTED]
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To: Planning1; Public Comments; Somerville YIMBY Steering Committee
Subject: Comment on density ratio and density bonuses for net-zero construction

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To the Planning Board and the Land Use Committee:

The most recent joint Land Use Committee and Planning Board meeting, on the subject of the density bonus for green buildings, underscored for me the success that Somerville has had in eliminating several zoning restrictions that overlap or conflict with building codes and other state laws. For example, overcrowding is addressed by building code and fire safety rules, so we quite rightly removed our restriction on the number of unrelated people living in one home. And of course, our zoning code no longer needs to define net-zero buildings, so we can rely on the building code to define that.

But the proposal to eliminate the density bonus which previously served as an incentive to build greener buildings has brought up an interesting point: why do we have this density rule anyway? The Somerville Zoning Ordinance no longer specifies how many people are allowed in a dwelling unit, but it does specify the number of dwelling units per building. That restriction isn't based on safety, of course — the building code specifies how to handle safety. Nor does it directly create "family size" apartments. It merely limits the number of dwelling units in a building, effectively setting a minimum average square footage. The arbitrary nature of the rule suggests that rather than eliminating density bonuses, we should eliminate the density ratio calculation entirely and allow builders and the building code to determine what is appropriate for any given project.

If we want our zoning ordinance to generate apartments with more bedrooms, we should look into ways to encourage that directly. Perhaps adding more "family size" apartments could trigger a dimensional bonus, rather than a density bonus. Alternatively, we could look to reform the state building code, which makes 3 and 4 bedroom apartments unprofitable by prohibiting construction of European-style single-stair apartment buildings (aka "point access blocks").

However, the density ratio serves no obvious purpose, and merely creates an unnecessary and needlessly complex restriction on housing creation. It should be eliminated entirely.

Warmly

Aaron Weber

Somerville YIMBY Steering Committee