



## CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

**Joseph A. Curtatone**  
Mayor

December 14, 2010

Honorable Board of Aldermen  
City Hall  
93 Highland Avenue  
Somerville, MA 02143

Re: Final Report with Recommendations for Expansion of Somerville's Local Historic Districts –  
**Group C**

Dear Honorable Aldermen,

Based upon a favorable vote (6-0) at our meeting tonight, the Somerville Historic Preservation Commission (SHPC) is pleased to submit for review and consideration its Final Report for the third round of properties recommended as additions to the City's map of Local Historic Districts (LHDs). These twenty-two properties, known as Group C, are representative of the City's older structures built from 1865-1873, a time of notable growth during the more prosperous times following the Civil War. A favorable vote on all of the properties would create five new local historic districts (LHDs), (East Somerville, Hinckley-Magoun, Orchard Street, Prospect Hill, and Union Square), as well as expand one existing district, now known as the CASS LHD (that incorporates the streets of Central/Atherton/Spring/Summer). These properties would join the over three hundred LHDs previously adopted by the City in 1985, 1989, 2003, and more recently in 2010.

Our recommendations are based upon extensive surveying of sections of the City, in-depth research and documentation of each individual property by a professional team of architectural historians, and a series of informational activities from June 2006 to February 2007 to inform owners that their properties were proposed for local designation. Since then, to ensure that every owner was fully aware of the designation, OSPCD staff has undertaken another series of outreach activities over the past six months. The details of that outreach process is described in an OSPCD Staff Report to the Mayor, dated April 22, 2010, which is included in Tab 3 of your notebook entitled "Expansion of Somerville's Local Historic Districts 2009 - 2010."

In addition, the SHPC recently sponsored a public hearing, jointly with your Legislative Matters Committee, on November 16, 2010, in the Aldermanic Chambers of City Hall. Following a

Power Point presentation about the designation process and the proposed properties, the hearing was opened to public comment. Seven people testified. A summary of their comments follows:

1) James McGinnis, owner of 26 Bow Street, a historic property that is part of the Bow Street LHD as of 1985, spoke in favor of local historic districts and particularly for the designation of 380 Somerville Avenue that would become part of a new district to be known as the Union Square LHD. He believed that this mixed use building was architecturally significant, sat in a prominent location in the Square, and without designation is threatened as a key anchor in the commercial-residential district that is being envisioned for the Union Square area.

2) Laura Mackil, owner of 22 Summer Street, which is also proposed for designation within the Union Square LHD, noted that she fully approved of designation and she hopes it will “happen with all due speed.”

3) Joe Mazzio, owner of 24 Summer Street, testified that designation was “an honor,” and as the third generation in his family to care for this house, this vote further reinforced the great pride he has in his home.

4) Peter Tsourianis spoke as a representative of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary Greek Orthodox Church on Central Street that also owned 7 Central St. This was his second time speaking before the Board in opposition and the reasons were still the same. The church is thinking of other uses for the property and they want to keep their options open, especially since it lies adjacent to a parking lot.

5) Narge Sparages, also representing the same church, wanted to elaborate on Mr. Tsourianis’ very general reasons against designation. He noted that they would like to make changes to the interior and possibly find new uses for the structure. A follow-up letter from the Church to BOA President Connolly, dated November 18, 2010, further indicates that “our objective has been and is to repair the property and rent the refurbished spaces to the public...to complete this project soon...and to turn the property into a two-family home.”

6) Diane Collins, whose elderly father of 89 years lives at 23 Fiske Avenue, said that this house is very small and probably needs to be altered, possibly raising the roof for additional height on the second floor. For this reason she did not think that she was in favor of designation.

7) Mary Ann Breen, who lives at 14 Harvard Place, noted that her primary focus needs to be on caring for her elderly parents, who may need handicapped provisions, and since she could not foresee the future and the economy, she felt the designation could be “burdensome.”

Following the public testimony, several members of the Commission in attendance, indicated why they strongly believed that the proposed designations were important to the City’s future vitality and appeal. Kevin Allen noted that in his professional experience working in other communities, historic preservation commissions can be viewed as “hysterical,” but that this was certainly not justified in his several years of serving on the Somerville body. He pointed to the fact that of the approximately 40-50 cases heard by the SHPC each year, he knew of only one case decision that had been appealed since 2001. Vice Chairman Abby Freedman, as well as other members, noted how flexible the overall Commission is when reviewing individual cases, and that their primary interest was to help owners realize their particular home improvement

goals, without destroying any defining features of the subject property. For this reason, the Commission wanted it known that the type of alterations raised by some people testifying tonight as potentially needed for their properties in the future were not absolutely prohibited, but they were simply subject to review and discussion with the SHPC and its staff. The Commission recognized that houses often need to be updated to meet changing situations within a household; they emphasized that the type of expertise and experience with older properties that the Commission can collectively offer to owners, free of charge, can be invaluable, and actually save money for owners in the longer term. Chairman Dick Bauer further reminded the assembled public and Aldermen that the SHPC can serve a very important role in protecting a property *before* inappropriate alterations are made and are not reversible.

Alderman Taylor observed that special funds have been set aside for work by qualified historic property owners. Alderman Connolly wondered about the status of St. Catherine's Church and whether it would be coming forward at some point for designation. Monica Lamboy, Executive Director of the OSPCD, responded that this church had not been surveyed yet, due to an oversight, and because it was not located in an eligible area for using CDBG funds, it would need to wait until other monies could be identified for surveying purposes. Alderman Taylor wanted to make sure that any property owners who appeared to be confused about what designation means for their property were contacted. He noted that the City Clerk had also received several responses by mail and they were to be considered as part of the public record.

The Commission stated that the opportunity for public comments to them would be closed at the end of the week, on Friday, November 19th, while Chairman Taylor said that the Legislative Matter's Committee would keep their record open until Wednesday, November 24, 2010.

Before the close of the public comment period, the following written communication has been received by the City Clerk and forwarded to Brandon Wilson, as staff to the SHPC:

- 1) Letter from Dormition of the Virgin Mary Church that indicated (as also noted in their public testimony) their desire *not* to have their residential property at 7 Central St. designated;
- 2) Letter from Executive Director, Mimi Graney on behalf of the Board of Directors for Union Square Main Streets, recommending in favor of designation of two commercial properties in Union Square – 380 Somerville Avenue and 264 Washington Streets, also known as St. Joseph's Church. She notes that the church is "one of the Square's most prominent structures, and key landmark in the southwest corner and overlooking its center. She further states that "The current use of 380 Somerville Avenue, with moderate scale retail on the first floor and residences on the upper floors, is exactly the model Union Square Main Streets is seeking to replicate throughout the neighborhood...The property continues to function with a mix of commercial and residential uses, the same as it did when first constructed...Main Streets programs work to strengthen the economic engines that first birthed these commercial properties...As stewards for our neighborhood's historic resources...recognize the significance and protect these key properties with official local historic designation"...;
- 3) Nine (9) forms known as a "Position Statement for a Local Historic District Designation," sent to every owner whose property was proposed for LHD by

the City Clerk, were received. In sum, (5) were not in favor with no reasons given (25 Fiske Ave., 37 Fiske Ave., 23 Hinckley St., 23-25 Day St., and 44 Spring St.; (1) with a correction to the proper address (St. Joseph's Church at 264 Washington St., rather than at 13 Webster Ave., an address provided by the Assessor's Office); and (3) in favor of designation (10 Harvard Place, 22 Summer St., and 67 Walnut St. Owner of 22 Summer St. noted on her form "YES, YES, YES! This is the 3<sup>rd</sup> time I've gone through this process in the last 4 years. Just do it!!!")

In addition, the public hearing notices sent by the Commission staff as certified mail, receipt return requested were returned by the U.S. Post Office for 3 properties (170 Summer St. and 10 Lowell Terrace were "unclaimed", and 84 Perkins St. was refused for delivery.)

It is also noted that in keeping with the process set forth in the Somerville Historic Districts Ordinance of 1985 for establishment of new or expanded LHDs, the Planning Board had the Group C properties on their agenda at their regularly scheduled meetings on June 24<sup>th</sup> and July 15, 2010. At the second meeting the Board discussed the proposed designations at greater length, focusing on properties without owner consent. Following a presentation by Monica Lamboy and after due consideration, the Board voted 4-1 (with Jim Kirylo opposed and Kevin Prior absent) to recommend approval of the proposed map amendments, with the added advisory that "the Board of Aldermen should carefully investigate the individual circumstances surrounding cases where property owners are opposed to having their properties designated as part of the LHD."

In addition, both the staff and members of the Massachusetts Historical Commission have reviewed the Commission's report and findings, and they have stated that they were extremely impressed by the magnitude, thoroughness, and quality of our efforts to date, and they look forward to local adoption of our recommendations.

As the City's volunteer Preservation Commission, we find that the proposed Group C map amendments fulfill the original goals of Somerville's Historic District Ordinance adopted in 1985. The overall purpose of the legislation is to make Somerville a more attractive and desirable place to live and work. We firmly believe that designating Somerville's historically and architecturally significant properties as local historic districts, will result not only in their preservation and reinvestment over time, but also in greater public pride in the City and investment in its future well-being.

The Commission sincerely hopes that your Honorable Board will act favorably on this Group C map amendment package, and will thereby ensure protection of twenty-two representative examples of the City's cultural and historical resources that are otherwise endangered.

Sincerely,

Abby Freedman  
Vice Chairman

Cc: Mayor Joseph A. Curtatone  
Monica R. Lamboy, Executive Director, OSPCD

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