

Madalyn Letellier

From: Claire O'Neill [REDACTED]
Sent: Wednesday, May 21, 2025 6:24 PM
To: Public Comments
Subject: Concerns Regarding Proposed Somernova Zoning Amendment

Follow Up Flag: Follow up
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To whom it may concern.

Dear Representatives,

I urge you to reconsider the proposed zoning amendment for the Somernova site, which would allow high-rise commercial development at a scale exceeding Boynton Yards and fundamentally change the character of the area. This proposal contradicts Somerville's established planning principles and threatens to set troubling precedents citywide. Key concerns include:

1. **Insufficient Civic Space:** The plan requires only 10% civic space, far below other districts in Somerville (Union Square 17.5%, Boynton Yards 20%, Assembly Square 25%) and regional norms, undermining Somervision and open space goals.
2. **Lack of Usable Green Space:** Much of the civic space may be vehicle-accessible and not usable parkland. Compared to similar developments, nearly an acre of green space is missing, e.g., the size of four Walnut Street parks.
3. **Shading of Open Space and Parks:** Proposed buildings (150 feet tall) would cast prolonged shadows on civic space and Conway Park, degrading usability and violating current zoning requirements for sunlit open spaces.
4. **Substandard Sidewalk Widths:** The zoning allows sidewalks as narrow as 12 feet, ignoring existing 18-foot minimums for high-rise zones and contradicting Somervision and the Safe Streets ordinance.
5. **Weak Green Infrastructure Standards:** The district's green score is set at a minimum of 0.2, while other commercial zones target 0.25.
6. **Lack of Public Planning Process:** The proposal has advanced without a transparent, inclusive master planning effort. This process bypasses community input and fails to reflect good urban design practices.

This rezoning undermines Somerville's commitment to a healthy public realm, equitable access to green space, and community-driven planning. I urge you to pause this amendment and initiate a robust public process.

Sincerely,
Claire O'Neill

Somerville Resident (Spring Hill)

Madalyn Letellier

From: [REDACTED]
Sent: Sunday, June 1, 2025 9:24 AM
To: Public Comments
Subject: Somernova

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My name is Patricia Wild.

I live at [REDACTED]; Ward 3.

I have been a Somerville resident since 1979, have raised four daughters here, taught at Somerville's adult learning center, SCALE, for many years, and in many ways, large and small, have actively contributed to this community.

I plan to age in place here.

I write to you because I feel betrayed by the public officials of the community I so love.

When I first heard the plans for Somernova, I simply could not believe such an egregiously bad idea would happen! Simply considering how such an enormous construction project would impact already congested Union Square traffic seemed an obvious, hard NO.

Surely, I believed, early on in the planning process, wise souls at City Hall would say: "This plan is detrimental to the lives of thousands of Union Square residents—and businesses. Their health and their quality of life are at risk."

Yet, here we are, three days before a vote on a radical change to existing zoning laws?

Why?

I beseech you: Protect Somerville residents like me.



This week's post:
"A Conscious Stillness"
PatriciaWild.net

Madalyn Letellier

From: Francesca Cigliano [REDACTED]
Sent: Monday, June 2, 2025 11:03 AM
To: All City Council; Public Comments
Subject: Comments RE Proposed Somernova Rezone

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Good morning Councilors,

I hope you're all doing well. My name is Francesca Cigliano and I am a Somerville resident living at [REDACTED] in Union Square. I'm writing to express my opposition to the proposed Somernova zoning amendment being considered by the Planning Board.

For context, I've lived in Somerville for 5 years since graduating from planning graduate school and I hope to live here for many more years to come. I've spent the past 6 years as a planner for the City of Lowell where I've overseen all development projects seeking review from land use boards, proposed zoning amendments, our comprehensive plan rewrite, and now a full zoning overhaul.

I'm concerned about the proposed rezone for the following reasons:

1. Large-scale upzoning should be supported by and rooted in a city's comprehensive plan. The comprehensive plan is the shared vision of the city, and was crafted carefully with years of community input. Had the Somerville community felt that this was an appropriate location for upzoning at this scale, it would have been identified as a "transform" zone, like Assembly and Union Square, during the comprehensive plan process.
2. I'm concerned about adding so many jobs and parking spaces and inducing new vehicular trips without good access to public transit. Other "transform" areas identified in Somervision have good transit access/MBTA connections which help mitigate the need for new vehicular trips.

These are my main concerns from a planning perspective. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Francesca Cigliano

Madalyn Letellier

From: Melissa McWhinney [REDACTED]
Sent: Monday, June 2, 2025 8:30 PM
To: Public Comments
Subject: Please vote NO on Somernova, if it comes to you

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Dear friends: I've been grateful to be involved in a very thoughtful, impassioned online discussion about the proposed Somernova project, even though I live in Teele Square and out of the voting catchment. Even if this project is approved by the community — not a sure thing — I hope you as City Councilor will vote “No”, and ask the USNC to go back to the drawing board for a much broader CBA.

I appreciate all the work and time that the Union Square Neighborhood Council has put into this project, but I think it is not yet a project that will sufficiently benefit Somerville. A few community benefits have been extracted, but much much more should be forthcoming if this giant development is going to be imposed on Somerville. For example, IF there is any housing, currently there are only 30 affordable units proposed, and only 9 of those will be for families. This is way not enough housing to offset the enormous negatives this building will bring. As I say below, RAFI's comments regarding increased traffic are laughable.

Here is the last comment I made about this project, on a thread that started on Green & Open Somerville's email list with concerns about open space.

Again, I ask, who is this giant building **for**? How does it benefit Somerville residents? I don't think it does.

1) Here's just one example, regarding traffic and parking. I'm 67 years old, pretty active, but with a spine injury that I've mostly recovered from, and other parts gradually wearing out in my knees. I won't be riding a bike from my home in Teele Square to the Union Square Farmers Market, and I will need to park my car when I get there. In addition, I regularly shop (by car) at Market Basket. (I do not get to vote on the CBA.)

I, and the people in all the other many thousands of cars that go up and down Somerville Avenue all day long, are concerned about the impact of this building on traffic and parking, among our other concerns.

Although Tori (who I understand works for the developer) says that this is a transit oriented area, in fact she herself acknowledges that it is not! It does **not** meet the technical definition that the city created to define a transit oriented area, i.e. it is not within a 1/2 mile of a transit stop or station. It simply is not a transit oriented area as much as anyone might wish it to be.

I find what the CBA says about increased traffic to be laughable: "Intersection Wait Times: Rafi commits to preventing a noticeable worsening of congestion attributable to the Project and establishes a KPI that the project will not increase the number of vehicles traveling to or from the Project Site in queues by more than 18% at Monitored Intersections. Rafi will use a third party consistent with ITE, NACTO, and other industry best practices or agreed-upon procedures to fairly account for background traffic at Monitored Intersections."

So, Rafi says that it "commits" to not having traffic become more than 18% worse. First of all, why is that okay, to agree to 18% worse? There's already a ton of traffic on Somerville Avenue and the surrounding streets, and the streets are not going to get any wider, so having nearly 20% more cars sounds bad.

Second, how on earth does it propose to "control" the traffic increase if it's 19% worse or 25% worse or 40% worse? It's a completely ridiculous and unenforceable promise.

Are they going to post people on street corners who will lean into cars and suggest that they turn around? Why on earth would we rely on such a nonsensical commitment?

2) Regarding the hope for an increase in commercial tax revenue, how do we **know** that the office/lab space will be filled by businesses, and that those businesses will be successful in a way that increases the tax base? How do we determine that, or are we just hoping and relying on what the developer says?

There is a lot of empty office and lab space in Boston right now, with the value of the buildings falling in a way that truly threatens tax revenues and city services that rely on those revenues. My understanding is that the new bacon building in Union Square (which is a transit oriented area) is still not completely occupied. I'm afraid the city will bend over backward to accommodate the installation of this giant building in Union Square, only to find that it is an enormous financial burden on the city rather than a benefit.

3) This giant building will include only 150 residential units, of which 20% will be affordable, which is in accordance with Somerville law, and not because RAFI is generous. There will be **only** 30 affordable units. Of those, **only 9** will be 2 or 3-bedroom unit, for families. Only nine! This giant building will do almost nothing so solve our housing problem while at the same time it burdens our traffic and parking and sewage infrastructure.

They have said they will give \$500,000 over ten years to the Somerville Community Land Trust, an admirable beneficiary. But \$500,000 is not even enough to buy half of a typical three-family house these days. They should be making it possible for SCLT to buy ten houses this year and every year for the next ten years.

They also promise to "work with USNC to apply for and seek to secure funds from the Somerville Affordable Housing Trust Fund", which means what? They will help us spend city funds for these nine affordable units? Why aren't they promising to make at least nine units permanently affordable without having to use city funds?

4) I don't see anything about rat mitigation! Do you think a few rats might be scared out of their current hiding places, with this construction? Why isn't it in there?

I can't even begin to imagine the negative impact on the surrounding area and the city as a whole if this building is permitted, starting with traffic and parking problems that will be never-ending, and moving on to the expense of trying to improve our ancient sewer system to accommodate the toilet and sink and shower sewage that would come from this building, and the rats, and the complete failure on the affordable housing front, only to find in a year or two that the building will not be fully occupied or even sufficiently occupied to make the cost to the city worthwhile.

For what?

As a last note, I will point out that Carla M. Moynihan, the resident agent for RAFI at Sherin and Lodgin, the law firm representing RAFI in these dealings, lives at 677 Silver Hill Road in Concord, if I'm correct. Google it. It's a very quiet and tree-lined suburban street, with no proposed 18% increase in traffic (at the very least!) and no need for roof gardens or rat mitigation. I haven't yet bothered to find out who actually owns RAFI but my guess is that they, too, live in the leafy suburbs.

These people don't share our concerns about traffic and rats and sewage and whether there is affordable housing for our teachers and police officers and artists. They do not have our best interests at heart in any way.

We can do so much better! If I could vote, I would vote "No", and go back for much much more. And if they walk away, we're no worse off than we were before.

Best to all,

Melissa

Melissa McWhinney, J.D.

Madalyn Letellier

From: Adaline Lining [REDACTED]
Sent: Wednesday, June 4, 2025 7:53 AM
Cc: [REDACTED]; Lance Davis; Naima Sait; [REDACTED]; Ben Ewen-Campen; JT Scott; Matthew McLaughlin; Jake Wilson; [REDACTED] Wilfred Mbah; Willie Burnley, Jr.; Public Comments; All City Council; Planning Board
Subject: The Somernova Project
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Hello to City Councilors (extra emphasis for those on the Land Use Committee), and to members of the Planning Board.

My name is Adaline Lining. I'm a resident of Ward 2 living on Tower Court and a direct abutter to the Somernova project. I'm also a former Union Square Council Board member. I write to you (individually and as a collective) to ask that you consider holding off on taking action on the Somernova project.

After a significant process, the Union Square Neighborhood Council has shared the Community Benefit Agreement that they've negotiated with Rafi Properties. The public vote is Wednesday, June 4th. With this imminent opportunity for the public to weigh in, I'm writing to share my thoughts on the proposed development and to ask the council to hold off on taking any immediate action to allow for full consideration of all the information including the recent zoning proposal and a forthcoming traffic report (due June 5th, I believe).

As a resident who is directly in the shadow of this project, my strong feelings about the Supernova project are unlikely to be surprising. However, my reasons for doing so are not to scuttle the project, nor are they to undermine or question the valuable negotiating work that USNC has done. Negotiations are complicated exercises in cooperation, sacrifice, and stamina, and the proposed CBA has many advantages. However, I will be voting no on the current proposed CBA because I strongly believe that a CBA for the Rafi properties development can offer **more benefits to more people**. Ultimately, there are 3 key reasons I will be voting no:

1. This CBA offers LESS open (civic) space than other developers have in neighboring cities and does not adequately address scale

In terms of **civic space**, the proposed redevelopment of the Gillette site in South Boston is providing more than 25% open space, including a new 6.5 acre waterfront park occupying more than 20% of the site. With regard to **scale**, the Somerville Planning Board recommended to the Land Use Committee to reduce the height and scale of the proposal due to this being a developer-led proposal in an area not scheduled for this kind of transformation in any of the Somervision plans.

2. This CBA offers extremely limited solutions to the disruptive construction. An example of what other projects have offered can be seen in the Construction Management Plan between Medford and Tufts ([see agreement](#)), where they agreed to put \$500,000 in a neighborhood improvement fund to offset impacts from the Project, with another \$510,000 to follow. This fund allows direct payments to go towards the neighbors impacted by the construction and the loss of sunlight from the new construction's shadows. They also negotiated agreements around dust Control and monitoring, as well as a code of conduct for workers.

3. USNC has insufficient funds to take legal action to enforce this CBA. A contract is only as strong as the ability to enforce it, and without sufficient financial means, USNC will struggle to hold the developer accountable.

In the flurry of discourse around this CBA, many people have indicated that they are voting yes on the CBA because of the hard work USNC members put in. Hard work is admirable, but it is also the work that people campaigned to do. It is the board members' duty to negotiate, and it is not the community's job to applaud their fulfillment of their responsibilities by accepting the first offer.

Many people seem to be voting yes because of the ACE space, and while more resources for art and artists are a boon to our city, this aspect of the CBA does not impact all stakeholders and, in some ways, exacerbates some of the serious class tensions that this development adds pressure to.

If the community votes down this CBA and negotiations reopen, I hope that a revised CBA includes things like

- An enforcement trust that allows USNC to afford to take legal action to hold Rafi to the CBA- a contract is only as strong as people's ability to enforce it!
- More resident oversight of civic spaces
- A trust for the neighbors in the immediate area to understand home improvements that will mitigate the impact of construction (similar to an agreement Tufts just did with Medford)
- Access to coworking spaces for those residents whose ability to work from home will be impacted by construction
- Access to childcare spaces for those with families whose children need sensory spaces free from construction disruptions

Whether or not the CBA passes, the city council and others will not be done with the discussion about the Somernova project. As decision makers for the city, there are endless demands on your time and countless issues demanding attention. This project has been ongoing for some time, and while the end may be in sight, I urge you, as a council member, to allow more time to get this right. This project will impact the city for decades to come, and while taking action is a core part of an elected official's responsibility, taking **quality** actions must be the goal, rather than action for action's sake.

My request to you is for you to consider the people and environment that will be impacted beyond the ward you represent, the advisors whom you heed, your affinity groups, tenure in this city, and beyond your comfort level before taking action. Regardless of the results of the CBA vote, decisions about this development must be made when all the information is available, rather than in a piecemeal way. I am grateful to the councilors who have graciously responded to my outreach and been in conversation with me about this matter (shout-out to Jake, Ben, and JT).

Again, I ask that you consider holding off on taking action on the Somernova project until more information (traffic, CBA results, etc) is available. What is said yes to today and what gets built tomorrow will have impacts that outlast us all. I welcome further discussion and communication while acknowledging that other urgent matters require your attention.

With thanks,
Adaine

Madalyn Letellier

From: Kate Lila Wheeler [REDACTED] >
Sent: Thursday, June 5, 2025 12:24 PM
To: Public Comments
Subject: Comments on proposed zoning ordinances for tonight's meeting of Planning Board and Land Use Committee

Follow Up Flag: Follow up
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Dear Land Use Committee,

Please don't ignore the Planning Board's recommendations or overlook the many downsides of the Rafi project—issues not addressed in the CBA.

Many of us have already reached out. As a nearby resident, I'm deeply disappointed. Years of "community engagement" with breakout groups and Zooms felt performative, while the real power remained with a well-funded developer. Their deep pockets seem to sway process, priorities, and even laws.

The CBA vote process was flawed. Many residents were only recently made eligible and never properly notified. The under-resourced USNC couldn't handle full outreach, while the developer mobilized paid and other support for a "yes" vote. Volunteers for "no" did their best on foot, but couldn't compete on a two-week timeline.

Yes, the developer has engaged communities, but their promises—including funding neglected city projects—don't erase the problems: time-limited commitments, selective benefits, and privatized space. This is not a model Somerville should embrace.

Please don't treat the CBA as a de facto green light for zoning changes. These ordinances need proper scrutiny. If the CBA "yes" vote prevails, this shouldn't fast-track approval or set dangerous precedent. Rafi resisted stepbacks when USNC pushed, and city planners yielded without verifying the developer's claimed space needs. If tenants are lined up, why is that data withheld? Who are the investors? What if the project fails in phases?

The city's approach to traffic—wait for it to get worse, then respond—is shortsighted and unsupported by evidence. Recent meetings raised valid questions (like whether traffic backstops apply to occupancy phases rather than just during construction), but they went unanswered. Meanwhile, ground-level heat and lack of open space hurt residents, while "green" space is planned far above the sidewalk.

Will the city really be barred from negotiating further if the CBA passes? Can zoning still be improved? These are critical questions. You are the stewards of this process.

Please don't abdicate. Watching this process lurch forward in confusing fits and starts, while calls for scale mitigation are systematically ignored, has left many of us feeling powerless. On a national scale, we're seeing money erode law. Please don't let that happen here in Somerville.

Sincerely,

Kate Wheeler.

[REDACTED]

Somerville, MA

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Kate Lila Wheeler

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

she/hers