

Union Square Neighborhood Council Meeting

May 28, 2019

7 pm – 9 pm

Public Safety Building

220 Washington St.

Attendees:

Michèle Hansen

Bill Cavellini

Jacob Kramer

Andy Greenspon

Bill Shelton

Tori Antonino

Community Members:

Cosmo DiSchino

Gary Trujillo

Patrick McCormick

Jessica Eshleman

Joe Beckmann

Wig Zamore

1. Welcome and Introductions

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2. Public Comment

Jessica Eshleman: I want to mention Union Square Main Streets (USMS) activities related to the Union Square Neighborhood Council (USNC). We are excited to welcome USNC to table at the community booth during the Farmers Markets. Someone needs to let us know which dates work for you, so that we do not schedule someone else for the space first. There are 26 more weeks available. This invitation also extends to the Fluff Festival where there will also be a Community Booth -- Saturday September 21, 3-7 pm. Rain date is Sunday September 22.

USMS recently did a survey to get feedback on our newsletter to increase viewership. One big feedback item was to include new news as a separate header. When the USNC has another event such as the CBA summit or a social, please let us know so that it gets a separate header as a new item. In response to this feedback, we've begun listing USNC General Meetings under the Mark Your Calendar section of the publication to keep readers informed.

"Good food for all" is the last week in June to raise awareness and funds for the SNAP match at the Farmers Market. Thank you for sharing news about this last year, and I hope you can share it again this year.

USNC acknowledges they will share this item.

Joe Beckmann: There are lots of other groups and committees in Somerville such as Our Revolution Somerville, YIMBYS, Democratic City Committee etc. These groups have been talking about how to coordinate better. They are all interested in the same things. They should coordinate better. For example, there is a Citywide Democratic meeting Thursday.

Gary Trujillo: The Outreach & Communications (O&C) committee met a week ago. One subject talked about was establishing a presence at the Farmers Market.

3) Approval of Minutes of May 14, 2019 Meeting

USNC Board does not have a quorum, so approval postponed to next meeting.

***Bill Cav** provided a few minor changes to May 14 meeting minutes.
Quick changes approved by the Board without objection.*

Bill S requests the meeting notes be more concise.

Discussion of whether to make the notes more concise.

Bill Cav: Previously, the Board agreed that public comment notes would be verbatim and then just write summaries of other parts of the meeting.

***Andy** will try to prepare the meeting notes similar to how the USNC Board previously agreed as **Bill Cav** states.*

4) Presentation by Bill Shelton on basic principles for determining support for individual development projects

*Only 6 USNC Board members present. **Bill S** would like to postpone the presentation due to lack of large portion of the Board present.*

***Bill S** will present at the end of the meeting in case more people show up.*

***Bill S** will also make the same presentation at the next USNC meeting assuming a larger portion of the Board is present.*

5) Report & Recommendations of Outreach and Communications Committee 20 minutes

***Andy** summarizes O&C meeting from May 21, 2019.*

Full Committee Notes here: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1WluYAKAMLi87dJdljr0-O-KUJmwFLiIkNOOT8TMe7M/edit?usp=sharing>

Discussion:

Agreement that the outreach committee needs more people involved. We need to figure out more creative ways for people to be involved. Suggestion to have a specific message to community members for tabling at events like the Farmers Market. Have people come and give their feedback on how they want to see things change (or not change) in Union Square.

Question asked: What does membership to the Neighborhood Council bring?

Bill S: There is a challenge that some stakeholder groups are estranged from the group due to the nature of the first USNC election. Involving them requires engaging them with issues that they care about enough to get involved in and having ways to engage them such as establishing a committee to handle that issue. Then mobilize people beyond that stakeholder group's narrow interests but that can involve the whole neighborhood.

Michèle states that the USNC has engaged in specific ways with people who were estranged, and the USNC has not blocked itself off from parts of the community.

Regarding outreach at the Union Square Farmers Market:

Contact: Farmersmarket@Unionsquaremain.org or Kait@Unionsquaremain.org to get up to date info on what dates are available to table at the Farmers Market.

6) Decision on whether to have a third 10 minute Public Comment @ all USNC mtgs

Tori says adding such a comment period could generate goodwill and trust from the broader community to allow people to comment in the middle of the meeting about important issues in addition to the beginning and end.

Bill S has the idea of modeling our meetings after the City Council where there can be a Public Hearing period for specific agenda items that may directly affect the public.

Jacob points out that integration of more public comment into full USNC meetings will not lead to us achieving the goals we are striving for in Union Square. We should have broader events for the community to meet and talk.

Further discussion from the Board that meetings become unmanageable and go far beyond the set time if every member of the public gets time to speak per agenda item, as was the case in the USNC Working Group.

No Board quorum so no vote taken on the issue.

7) Report of last Planning Board meeting & any update on new open space proposal

US2 did not present at the last Somerville Planning Board meeting.

The next Planning Board meeting is June 6 when US2 might present.

US2 is holding informational update meetings with updated plans for D2. They sent a flyer around to community members and listservs.

Discussion by the Board:

What is being presented in these informational update meetings appears to be US2's continued plan to share their new open space proposal to members of the public who, in particular, have been interested in it. US2 saw the huge support for the alternate D2 designs with underground parking, and wanted to respond in some way. They are treating D-block planning as separate from the Community Benefits Agreement. They are also trying to get community feedback, input, and consensus on a proposal for new open space on D2.4, and for the D2 block designs more broadly, in order to get support to get D2 approval from the Planning Board. US2 also showed their alternate open space plan to the CBA Negotiating Committee.

Michèle and Bill Cav will contact US2 for these new plans so everyone can see them and ask questions as needed.

Agenda item taken out of order:

4) Presentation by Bill Shelton on basic principles for determining support for individual development projects

Presentation was done with accompanying Powerpoint slides.

Bill S. This presentation relates to three agenda items in past meetings. From last meeting, this relates to the JJ Sullivan lot development plan by Elan Sassoon, and questions about Beacon St. zoning. It also relates to a discussion three meetings ago with the report back of the first *SomerVision 2040* meeting. For *SomerVision 2040*, seven subgroups were created whose members cannot talk to each other outside the subgroups they joined. And the City wants to get a report from each by July. The City seems like it will just take *SomerVision 2030* and adjust the numbers for 2040. The City also suggested initial target numbers that do not relate to each other in a coherent systematic way.

Somerville has less permanently affordable housing than Cambridge and Boston. Boston and Cambridge have more money, and therefore more spending per resident than Somerville. Cambridge and Boston also have more free cash per resident than Somerville because they have a far larger commercial property percentage than Somerville, and therefore far more property tax income per resident than Somerville. Somerville houses the employees who work in Boston Cambridge, and surrounding cities.

Annual fiscal impact by Somerville land use: Somerville net loses money on residential property as compared to retail, office, and hotel. (Note: This analysis doesn't even include Somerville paying for new City buildings or Somerville infrastructure investments.)

Research and lab space is taxable commercial property, so its value is somewhere between office and hotel, \$5,000/year per 1,000 sq ft.

Open space acres per 1,000 residents in Somerville is much lower than Cambridge and Boston. Second worst amount, just ahead of Chelsea.

Number of pedestrian, cyclist, and public transit trips in Somerville is going up, but number of vehicles registered in Somerville is also going up.

Enrollment in Somerville schools has almost dropped by half since 1985.

Conclusions:

Scant commercial development reduces housing affordability

The only ways to remove more housing from the inflationary market is 1) a Transfer Tax (proposed originally 21 years ago by Bill Shelton, passed by City Council last year but not yet approved by State Legislature to enact), or 2) more commercial property tax to support it. *SomerVision 2040's* starting housing targets would reduce housing affordability by further weakening the City's financing ability to generate affordable housing.

The unbalanced housing development impacts have been masked by maximizing the 2.5% per year allowed property tax increase because of rapidly increasing property valuations, condo conversions which generate more immediate revenue, and building permit fees. e.g. Giving in to developer FRITs demands to lower affordable housing percentage, in order to get the immediate \$3 million in permit fees for the City budget.

Bill S. Made this presentation to the mayor the night before Easter. The mayor said he had to absorb this information – haven't heard back yet.

Bill S. Also made this presentation to the *SomerVision 2040* staff. They said that Somerville has to take the lead in building housing to get surrounding cities to get behind it. General consensus from the Board is that this response is absurd and wrong.

Have presented these ideas to to 9 of 11 City Councilors so far – will present to all of them.

Board discussion:

Idea to have a discussion about these issues in a larger community meeting.

8) Public Comment

Joe: The issues Bill S. is raising are much much worse in fact.

Problem: The largest employer in the region is higher education, which is tax-exempt. Lab space is the biggest maker of property tax for the City.

Cummings Building built by Tufts will be used by investors, but it is tax-exempt. The City's largest employer, Tufts, generates the most housing need with the least housing capacity. Tufts has added 4,000 students recently with no new housing since 2006. Tufts has added many laboratories that are all tax-exempt.

Cambridge has these issues as well, but then they got private sector development for laboratory space.

The question then is what affordable housing is even feasible in our situation.

Housing is a spin-off of transportation. The GLX will generate a huge housing need without generating any real open space.

1,200 Somerville High School students right now, and may continue to decline. New high school is designed for 1,590 students, and is the most expensive high school ever built in Massachusetts.

Jessica: In assessing new developments, how are the issues Bill S brought up layered with other things such as sustainability, multi-modal transit, open space?

Cosmo: For reference to City finances, my property tax jumped up \$2,000 very recently because of changes in Union Square.

Wig Zamore: I agree almost entirely on what Bill S. said. For Assembly Square development 20 years ago, there was an understanding of regional context. During current Union Square development, there has not been that understanding of regional context.

No matter how many units are built in Somerville, there will be almost no impact on regional housing demand. We would need to build housing for another 200,000 people to start to dent the demand.

With Assembly Square development, we tried to match regional opportunities to local needs.

Somerville has a 50% higher residential tax rate than Cambridge.

There is no revenue from hotels during economic downturns because most of them go under, so be careful when thinking hotels could be an economic boon for property taxes. Cambridge and Boston collect 4-6x more commercial tax per person per year compared to Somerville. Some of the property and equipment in Cambridge is classified as industrial and isn't even taxed right now. So Cambridge could have 10x more commercial tax per person per year compared to Somerville if they wanted.

The universities in Cambridge did attract all that private lab development, in addition to the City's public transit.

Boston's affordable housing looks better on paper than it really is because they have far less density than Somerville.

Chelsea, like Somerville, has a high percentage of rental units, leading to high turnover due to increasing rents.

As stated earlier, the open space amounts and quality is a huge issue for Somerville.

Gary: I want to correct something Andy said in the O&C report back. The house party idea is separate from social gatherings like the one done at the Greek-American Club last year. House parties are designed to introduce new people to the USNC in an informal setting with discussion, absent rock music or other possible loud distractions.

I like what Jacob said about having another public meeting like the recent CBA report back at the Argenziano. But at that meeting, there wasn't enough time to address all the heartfelt comments coming from the community. People are eager to participate and their absence at USNC general meetings doesn't really indicate a lack of interest in what we are doing. I also thank Tori for advocating for a 10 minute comment period in the middle of the USNC meeting.

We should think about how to enable people to participate in a written form in an interactive manner. This would go a long way to improving participation.

I will prepare my other thoughts in writing to send at a later time.

Tori and Andy support having the discussion of Bill S's presentation at a large community meeting.

Bill S: Three policy recommendations. I will state one of them today: Propose a moratorium on unaffordable housing unless the proposal is tied to also building a commercial space. Boynton Yards recent plans are 60% commercial and 40% residential for reference.

Michèle: Board members should contact the chairs when they cannot come to a meeting so we know if we will have a quorum.

No quorum to go into Executive Session, so official part of meeting was adjourned