

Union Square Neighborhood Council Meeting

October 12, 2020

7 pm – 9 pm

Zoom Meeting

Attendees:

Board Members:

Michèle Hansen
Ann Camara
Andy Greenspon
Isabella Drago
Bill Cavellini
Bill Shelton
David Scott
Gary Trujillo
Sarah Dunbar
Danyal Najmi
Tori Antonino
Pennie Taylor

Community Members:

Thomas Lichoulas
Cosmo Di Schino
Edwidge L Hercule
Alain Jehlen
Kelsey Clark

1. Welcome and Introductions

2. Public Comment

Bill Cav: There was an item I requested to be on the agenda tonight that as not put on the agenda - The report back from the CBA Monitoring Committee from our most recent meeting with US2.

Gary: I sent an email earlier today explaining that we can remove a couple agenda items I initially requested. Removal of these agenda items will give more time for the report from the CBA Monitoring Committee.

X. Report from the CBA Monitoring Committee

Bill Cav: US2 Monitoring Committee provided 13 questions asking for answers from Greg K and Jeff on Oct 5.

The land has not been transferred from the SRA to US2 yet. It will not transfer until they receive the building permits. The approximate time for that to happen will be January 1, 2021. The land will still not transfer until all the lenders are in line. Apparently there are still some issues with lenders for the development. The site work will begin at some point before the end of the year, likely in December.

The Mitigation Taskforce has not met yet. They are still finalizing agreements with the contractors regarding mitigation around construction. They expect the first meeting of that taskforce to be at the beginning of November.

US2 provided drawings and slides of the plans for the elevator. There will be just one elevator. They've met 3 times with the MBTA to make sure the elevator is built to required standards. The contracts have been given to USMS and First Source for signature but are not signed yet. US2 met with the high school, Sean Callahan, for a program for CCTE (Technical education). They have made almost no progress on the affordable housing for D4.3. They do not have appraisals for the value of the garages on that property now. US2 says appraisals are very busy right now because of people taking advantage of low mortgage rates.

Josh on the committee said appraisals are generally done within less than 3 months. US2 said they are having trouble getting all the information for an appraisal to be done because they don't own the land.

We asked about getting an appraisal for D4.2 triangle - this is a possible location for some of the required parking for the affordable housing planned for D4.3. Because otherwise, the building may take land from the adjacent community garden. US2 agreed to get that appraisal. We hope to see those appraisals at our next meeting with US2 in January.

US2 said they need to go through the approvals and changes in the CDSP they will need to build D4.3 and that requires support from the USNC.

They went to the City Housing Department about getting money from the AHTF for what will be needed to build D4.3.

We asked about their willingness to be part of a multi-development project to be part of a centralized aggregated community space and said DLJ is open to it. US2 said they are open to it also.

US2 pointed out the changes in costs as the start date gets later - costs mostly go up, but there are some construction costs that might come down due to the pandemic. PassiveHaus construction on D4.3 might actually be less than original estimate because the production of that type of housing is becoming more sophisticated as more PassiveHaus construction is built.

The contracts for staff positions for USMS and First Source did not include reporting requirements to the USNC. We asked US2 to work with us to pressure the City to include us. US2 did not answer whether they would help with this. This may be a non-compliance violation of the CBA, as USNC is supposed to monitor the spending of all these funds. We might be able to go to the Sugar Law Foundation to get pro bono legal advice on how to proceed on this issue. How would the Board feel about this?

Sarah: Does US2 have any spot for a community center?

Michèle: D1 is a spot that can have the community center in the development plans.

Bill S: It's been quite a long time since US2 was given approval to build the Lab Science Building on D2.

Bill Cav: US2 has not stated explicitly why their development has been delayed. US2 changed contractors from Skansa to Gilbane, which probably delayed building. Maybe also the pandemic? This is strange considering how much US2 stressed to the City Council and Planning Board that in order to avoid losing money they needed to start the development. In order to get any details from US2, we keep having to ask follow-up questions.

Pennie: The difference in building by DLJ of their life sciences building compared to the delays by US2 is striking.

Michèle: It appears US2 wants to avoid spending any money until they really need to at the last second.

Gary: I would like more details on possible plans for consolidation of community center space which have been talked about, i.e. on the US2 D1 site and the DLJ Boynton Yards site.

6. Brief description of Boston University student Kelsey Clark's project and how the requested interviews can be recorded

Gary: Kelsey Clark, has joined us tonight for a brief period. She is a social work student at Boston University and would like to interview some people in connection with her effort.

Kelsey: I've lived in Union Square for five years. I'm getting a Masters in Social Work at BU. For our class "Communities and Organizations," we are doing asset assessments of community organizations in the Boston area with a group. We decided to look at Union Square. We're interested in gathering all sorts of data, demographic data, the history of the square, observational data, looking at businesses, community organizations, community portrayals. One part of the study is conducting interviews with "key informants" -- people who know the community well, conceptualize the opportunities and challenges. See how people feel given all the changes happening here. I've prepared a Google Form that people can fill out if they want to be interviewed by a small group of social work students, whenever it is convenient. We are trying to conduct them in the next few weeks. If there is anyone else you know who would have a perspective and things to say about the Square, feel free to forward this Google Form to them.

Google Form Link here: <https://forms.gle/w1w8EAdZsaFTANBi8>

David: Would we be able to get copies of the video interviews you do?

Kelsey: We'll ask people ahead of time if they want their interviews recorded, and with their consent, we can share the interviews.

David: I have been trying to get the word out about the USNC and encourage participation. A lot of people don't have a good sense of what we do, how to get involved, or how getting involved might help them achieve their aspirations.

Are you doing a final report that might be useful to us?

Kelsey: We will be doing a 20-30 minute presentation, along with an appendix. We are doing a community asset map and collecting and organizing various data in an appendix. I am fine providing that to you all, but I have to check if my group members agree to that as well.

Bill Cav: I would like to know if we'll be able to get this information from the report before interviewing and participating.

Kelsey: Absolutely. I just have to check with my group members about access to any recordings and materials we prepare.

Tori: Make sure to ask permission from everyone before sharing their interviews.

X. Report from the US2 Monitoring Committee

Bill Cav: Motion to give permission for US2 Monitoring Committee to consult Sugar Law Foundation on the question about CBA compliance discussed earlier.

10 yes, 1 abstain.

3. Approval of minutes from last meeting 2020-September-29

Bill Cav: Corrections from last meeting minutes: Item 6, Q 2. We did not ask US2 to approach the owner of Parcel D4.2. We asked for an appraisal of D4.2

Gary did a detailed rewrite of Tori's response to item 4 discussing DLJ.

Gary: I went back to the recording of what Tori said, so the rewrite was to make the minutes as accurate as possible.

Bill Cav: I still want to make sure Tori approves of the change before voting to approve them.

Bill S: I'm uncomfortable with suggesting a rewrite of what someone said in a public meeting. If Gary just copied word for word what Tori wrote, then it is accurate. As compared to someone later explaining that what they meant was actually different from what they said at the meeting and the Board approving an edit to those minutes.

Bill Cav: What I am asking is for Tori to confirm that what Gary wrote is an accurate representation of what she said.

Gary: I wrote exactly what Tori said in the recording.

Tori should confirm Gary transcribed her words from the recording correctly.

2020-September-29 meeting minutes will be discussed at the next meeting for approval.

X. Discussion and Updates on Planned Development by Thomas Lichoulas

Tom: First, was there any confusion among anyone at this meeting about the size of the development I was proposing?

The current rear setback on Dane St required is 10 feet. I am proposing to increase the rear setback of the building. The immediate neighbor on Dane St was concerned about a wall of building as a boundary to their property. Increasing the setback will make it larger than where the current building is right now. This will make the building 10-15% smaller.

I am not asking anyone if I can do this MR4 building. I am telling everyone that as someone who has lived here for a while that I think a FAB building is wrong for this area and that MR4 would be a better solution for the community. I could probably make more money on a FAB building. But certain things from a financial perspective are not feasible on the property, such as a pocket park. But I will do everything that I can within financial feasibility that the neighborhood would like.

David asks for clarification about the rear set back. **Tom** says the new rear set back would be 20 feet on the current on the Training Room site and on the current red house it will be 40 feet.

Sarah asks about making an agreement with the neighborhood to make an additional setback.

Tom does not see this as negotiating, but rather as discussions with the neighborhood to see what everyone can agree is a good development for them.

Alain: The red house on this development lot is currently zoned as NR. What is the motivation or advantage to changing that to MR4?

Tom: I don't know if there is an advantage. That is for the neighborhood to decide. I just know that if I lived there, I would probably prefer MR4 over one FAB building and one NR building. It also seems like a mistake to have an NR building stuck between two very tall FAB buildings with maximum 60 foot walls.

Ann: You're not at all interested in just making it a 3 floor building, are you?

Tom: To keep the project financially viable, it would need a fourth floor as an MR4. I don't think anyone is negatively impacted by the extra half floor vs. a three floor building, in terms of extra shadows.

Michèle: We will either have an MR4 building with business at the bottom and residents above, or a tall FAB building where there could be all sorts of things built inside.

Tom: Whatever decision the neighborhood wants, I would ask that they make it sooner rather than later, as it is very expensive to pay to hold two vacant properties.

Sarah: If that one site stays NR, then it will become very expensive condos most likely, which would not be better either. I would prefer a larger number of residential units where a percentage would be affordable. So it makes sense to make this lot MR4.

Tom: Sarah is correct that the NR site could be fully built out, including a carriage house up to the lot line in the back. Which is not what I would like to do.

Michèle: I suggest you be very clear to the neighbors about the differences in possible developments. And make extra design plans if that is needed to clearly convey this information.

Tom: New plans might cost me \$20,000, which is not financially viable as a small developer. But I see your point about clearly explaining the possible development plans to the neighborhood.

4. Report and decide if, and how, to be involved in Columbia/Webster development

Bill Cav: I was at the neighborhood meeting on October 5. I asked if they would be willing to meet with the USNC and show their proposed design for a 260,000 sq ft lab building (*Bill S later corrected this to say the development is actually a 400,000 sq ft plan*). The principals agreed that they'd be willing to make a presentation to us. The site is where the garages and auto repair shops are off Webster in Boynton Yards. The Zoning in this area has no height limits. They plan a 14-16 story building at the corner of Columbia and South St, across from the Royal Hospitality Laundry. And a low-rise facing the residential buildings on Norfolk St and Webster Ave. They have also bought the 4 story garage next to the site. They do not own the land, just the site. They are leaving the open space next to the garage and will improve it. They will work with the neighborhood on the design of that. They can have a max 400 parking spaces. They will have less than that. The zoning requires it to be underground.

This is a big project, and we should have a meeting with them at some point. The developers are anxious to start, but they have not requested any meeting with the Planning Board. It appears they have met with the Planning Staff at least once.

A lot of neighbors attended the Zoom meeting and asked most of the questions. They were very concerned about shadows, parking, congestion, infrastructure needed for this size of development.

Andy asks if the garage is not owned by the developers but leased? **Bill S** says the developers have a landlease for 35 years.

Bill S: 20 million sq ft of lab space is in the pipeline in Cambridge, Somerville, and Boston Seaport. Most developers understand that after the pandemic passes, companies have figured out they don't need workers in offices, so all the developers are trying to do lab space, which does need workers there to get work done. Most of the complaints from neighbors were about massing, that neighbors didn't know such a tall building would be built near them. A secondary issue was traffic generated from the site. The developer knew the new unlimited height zoning, and paid a premium on the land in anticipation of building that much. JT Scott who hosted the meeting did vote to approve that zoning in Boynton Yards.

Bill Cav: There are neighbors both across the street and on the same side of the street near the planned development. There is an apartment building that will be close to the 16 story building, with some open space between the two buildings of unknown size.

Unanimous approval to schedule a meeting with this developer.

Andy will make a poll when2meet to schedule when the USNC will meet with these developers.

8. Brief report on where things stand with the COVID-19 pandemic relief for landlords and tenants and where legislation in the State House for that purpose now stands

Gary: We hope that the bill Mike Connolly co-sponsored for providing relief to tenants and landlords will pass.

Bill Cav: Some of us attended some rallies around the eviction moratorium expiring on October 17. The governor had a press conference today. He's going to let the moratorium expire. Tenants will have to fend for themselves. But he is allocating \$171 million of the \$1 billion he has in reserves for a housing budget, to help tenants and small landlords in this period from now until January 1, where there is only federal eviction moratorium protection. But the federal protection is limited because you have to show that you have been impacted by the pandemic in such a way that you cannot afford to pay rent at all, which can be very hard to prove. People in the middle will not qualify either. So we really need the state moratorium to stay in place. The governor said this will not happen. Mike Connolly's bills might pass the legislature, which would be better than the moratorium. But that is certainly not assured, despite him having 70-80 sponsors for the bill. The activists around tenants and small landlords, Homes for All, are asking those bills to move forward in the legislature. Connolly's bill was voted out of committee 7-2. But it doesn't look like it will pass any time soon. The governor's \$171 million is RAFT money, direct cash, but it has to go through a legal process. Much of the money will go to existing agencies providing help to tenants as they get their eviction notices. It will be a free for all out there. Many agencies are preparing to take action to block evictions.

5. Progress setting up meetings with OSPCD---Melissa Woods, Sarah Lewis, Tom Galligani, and Ben Summer

Ann: Melissa said that we should meet with Tom Galligani. I replied with some questions and said that Tom wasn't the right person to meet with about this issue. Melissa replied and agreed to schedule a meeting with us, but would prefer during the day.

Bill Cav: Has anyone seen the updated staff report from the Planning Staff. I went to the Somerville Planning Board website and have found no updated report. This should come out ahead of their case being heard again at the October 15 Planning Board meeting. We expect this report to include additional conditions from the Planning Staff required for approval of the Master Plan.

We discussed at our last meeting that after the October 15 meeting and seeing this Planning Staff report, that we would meet with DLJ again. And then after that, we would send an update to the 33 organizations we initially sent a letter to asking for feedback on this planned development.

Ann: John Fenton is working on a letter in response to our powerpoint requests.

Bill S: Meeting with Tom Galligani alone would not be useful. But we should ask Tom to join this meeting with Melissa Woods.

DLJ wants to renegotiate how much to contribute to the infrastructure fund and the Green Line - the point person for that re-negotiation would be Tom Galligani, and then would need to be signed off by George Proakis and the Mayor.

Bill Cav: I would like a separate meeting with Tom Galligani, to separately discuss this re-negotiation with DLJ. And also to discuss the issue of reporting on the USMS and First Source staffing to the USNC. Tom is the point person on that issue. We shouldn't have more than six board members attend these meetings, or else they are considered USNC meetings that we have to publicly announce.

Ann: Any time I write Tom Galligani, he does not answer. But I'll try again.

7. Request for scheduling an O & C committee meeting

Gary emailed a poll to schedule the O & C meeting.

9. Public comment

Cosmo: The DLJ building going up on South St is blocking my entire view of Boston. But it's okay. As long as it gives people work.

Bill Cav: The Zoning in Boynton Yards and Columbia/Webster St and the zoning in Inner Belt and Brickbottom - I don't know how they got that passed with unlimited height. I am going to ask every developer - do you really have to build 16 stories or 25 stories to make this project financially feasible. They are probably going to respond "yes". But I think we should absolutely ask the question. When Cosmo says he cannot see Boston anymore, that is not the only problem with high-rise buildings.

Andy: All of Boynton Yards and Inner Belt I believe are Ward 2, so there is only one local City Councillor representing them, and there is very little residential in these areas and fewer neighbors who would be able to speak to the problems they have with the new zoning. Brickbottom has the Artists Association buildings, but beyond them, there are a lot of auto body shops and industry that make up the bulk of these areas. Brickbottom primarily has a hotel and old industrial buildings. In terms of SomerVision, in terms of getting a larger commercial tax base for the city, a 25 story residential tower is a net negative tax contribution to the city. But a lot of the taller buildings going up in Boynton Yards and planned in Union Square East and eventually Brickbottom are going to be commercial lab space and hotel, which are net positive

tax contributions to the City. So I think part of the reasoning for unlimited height in these areas is that there are very few other places left to build in the city, and the city needs more tax revenue. I may differ from Bill Cav insofar as I am relatively pro- more height because we'll need more height if we want any room for open space in these areas. In certain parts of the industrial areas that are further away from the current residential areas of Somerville, if we complain about our views being blocked by new buildings, then I feel like we are no better than residents of Weston complaining about a four-story apartment building changing the historic character of their neighborhood. But that's just my personal view.

Sarah: I will second what Andy said. I also am personally open to height. But we also need to think critically and argue for a middle-scale size of development. Coming back to Tom Lichoulas's development plan, the neighborhood residential areas we have are nice, but that's not the construction that is energy efficient or that is going to have affordable housing or will do anything to change the city. The edges between the big projects and the house-scale fabric are important. These middle-scale projects also matter.

Bill S: A question we have to ask ourselves before asking the developers a question. There is a trade-off between getting more open space and height. The higher we build, the more space we leave for open space and the more money we have to pay for it. That is a hypothesis that we should discuss and test against real data.

Michèle: As a Somerville resident, Somerville has been done-to by Somerville politicians for a long time. A lot of the infrastructure being built now is not being done for us - it is being done for those who are not from here. But it should have been done for us as well. I don't think we're getting enough for our neighborhood given what we are losing. It really bothers me, and others, but a lot of this is because the City made a lot of bad choices that now need to be paid for.

Tori: Will we get more open space if we increase height? We only get that exchange if we can convince a developer to create more open space, in sort of a personal negotiation. This is one of the reasons Councillor Lance Davis pushed for Davis Square being an MR4. Lance said he was doing that with low height so that there are points of negotiation for future possible development. The only other place we get to have that is in overlay districts, where there is a required set of Civic Space. Otherwise, there is no linkage fee for open space. The petition we submitted to get more open space for taller developments did not pass. If the residents want to keep the NR house to be historic and add a pocket park, then great. But it will take those types of negotiations to get that done.

Bill Cav: The question for trading open space for height on Tom's site at Dane and Washington is a whole different level compared to the huge developments in Boynton and Inner Belt, where they add 8 or 10 stories on top of an initially 10 stories.

Adding stories doesn't just block views - it means shadows and more cars, more traffic, more pollution. There are more trees, but they are working doubly hard to handle traffic pollution. Don't assume you have to trade height for open space. You convince the developer that having more open space will allow him to sell his units or office space to tenants. We did that to some extent with the CBA for US2, but nowhere near the extent to what we were asking for. We have to ask the developer to prove to us the height is needed to be financially feasible and prove to us that the open space is not financially feasible. We need to use prior examples like Post Office Square, University Park, and the Seaport District where open space has increased property values.

Sarah: We have to define our role. Height is something everyone reacts to. But the zoning is in place now, and that is what people are reacting to. But I don't think arguing against the height is the right role because tons of people will have plenty of opinions on that.

Danyal: I don't live in the neighborhood so I don't want to step on those who would be affected by heights of buildings. But given how expensive housing is in the area, I would think that more height would allow more housing units in the area, which would give people more places to live.

Michèle: If you could guarantee that, then I think a lot of people in Somerville would be more open to it.

Andy: I want to be sympathetic to neighbors' concerns about height - a view is important. All these buildings will block the view on Prospect Hill to some degree, which I walk by every day. I live in my apartment, and my view is a parking lot and a neighbor's parking lot, so that's what I live with. Anything that's going to be built will affect an adjacent person to a certain degree, and it's about balancing the needs of neighbors and the effects of the development for the needs of those who want to stay here but there isn't enough housing, or those that don't currently have jobs here but need a job. So it's all a balance.

Regarding open space and zoning, I don't know if it was our fault, or just that nobody was paying attention when the zoning overhaul details for these areas were set. Bill S, Tori, and others did submit a zoning amendment petition to require more open space when taller buildings are built. The zoning has so much power, and I don't remember if it's because of the mayor or the city council, but this open space petition was never acted on by the city. Councillor Lance Davis talked about leverage on developers in Davis Square via the zoning. But instead of downzoning to MR4, why not do more overlay districts, as Tori said, that require open space in an area. Or just include in the zoning that you need open space when you build these tall buildings, as was in the Bill S, Tori, and others' petition. I think the zoning is locked-in for the short term because the city council doesn't want to deal with it again because it took many many months to do the zoning overhaul. This puts us in a more difficult position of trying to negotiate additional things. But Boynton yards and Brickbottom are overlay districts where there will be some required open space, but possibly not enough.

Michèle: Though the City Council did say after the overhaul that the zoning is not really “done”. They will keep amending it.

David: If we intend to negotiate a CBA with Lichoulas, what are the next steps for that? Maybe having something small and manageable would be a great way to start our CBA. Are we pursuing a CBA with Tom?

Andy: We should discuss this in the executive session.

Bill S: Building up leaves more land and the ability to pay for it. The issue is not just open space. The City doesn't have the money to pay for services that are very much needed now. This has been going on since the late 19th century, when the Mayor or Aldermen were developers. We have ended up with an asymmetry of lots of residential property. We need to look at the data to test our hypotheses.

Gary: Bill S did an excellent presentation at the Public Safety Building last year on these issues. I would like him to maybe present on this issue again. We don't want too much residential housing in the City for reasons Bill S laid out in mathematical terms.

Bill S: I wrote down all the information and I can send it to everyone instead of presenting again.

Gary: I hope everyone will sign up for the O & C meeting. I would like to get the time set up as soon as possible so that I can invite the broader community to that meeting.

10. Executive Session for purposes of developer negotiation strategies

Unanimous vote to go into Executive Session.