

**Union Square Neighborhood Council
Built Environment Committee Meeting
February 18, 2018, 2:30-4:30 pm, Somerville Public Library**

Attendees:

Tori Antonino
Michèle Hansen
Ann Camara
Andy Greenspon
Simon Hill
Lhadon Tethong
Joe Beckman
Gary Trujillo
Katie Gradowski
Philip Parsons
Wig Zamore

Meeting Minutes:

Meeting Minutes approved from 2018-Feb-11.

Tori: Renee Scott and David Scott and others set-up a Facebook group Drive for 125 that Wig has been working on.

Tori: Item 4, Zoning. First public meeting is March 13, but can submit public testimony until then. Looked through section 13 of the Zoning, the Public Realm. Suggest we look at the different sections and each person focus on each area.

Simon: USQ was zoned overlay and approved last June. Do you want to look at everything that is not those 15 acres?

Philip: The 15 acres special permit does not get changed to this zoning overhaul. Zoning does not tell you how you get open space, does form-based zoning for if there is open space, these are the parameters that need to be followed. There is not strategy to achieve open space in the zoning. Most of the transformative districts are zoned commercial at different heights. For each building height, there is a 20% open space requirement, but it does not even require it to be publicly accessible.

Katie: We have a good sense of what did and did not get accomplished from the zoning working group in Union Square. Some pieces of USQ zoning won't apply to zoning overhaul because they were specific towards the USQ development.

Simon: Can the zoning overhaul impact USQ zoning already passed.

Tori: Katjana said yes because there are certain categories that the new zoning could supplant. However, because the CDSP was already granted, does that mean any new zoning cannot affect the US2 development?

Philip: We (Fred Berman and Bill Shelton) submitted two recent modification requests to Assembly Square zoning overlay district. But it may be different in USQ because of the nature of the specific agreement with US2. But I could be wrong. It's murky. If the Aldermen don't know the answer, then it's hard to say.

Michele: If it's murky, then it means we could try to change it - it may not be set in stone.

Philip: In Assembly, developer wants to build a tower by I-93 twice the allowable height in current zoning with very little open space. Existing zoning says 10 additional sq ft beyond limits in zoning, get 1 sq ft open space, but that's not very much.

Tori: I would like to see the new percentages applied for all mid to high rise buildings.

Philip: Zoning overhaul draft 20% of ground area in mid to hi-rise districts must be open space. (which was the same as the previous version)
How immutable is the zoning overlay in USQ to new zoning changes?

Gary: Public comment period on zoning March 13. So there is time to effect change?

Tori: Question is can we change the USQ overlay through the zoning overhaul? What are the provisions in the new zoning for open space, but it seems there are none.

Ann: City is not being creative enough to get the necessary Open Space through creative designs like overpass or over and under areas to add extra space.

Philip: The CDSP does not really show US2's design thinking - it's very programmatic. But even if you look at US2's preliminary design ideas, I agree there is not a lot of imagination in the current state of design. I want the design review for each block

therefore to be very robust because there's a concern with the overall urban design in addition to the open space issues.

Michele: Is the USQ overlay just for US2 development blocks or all of Union Square?

Andy: Based on looking at the USQ zoning overlay website, it includes the D blocks and a few other areas right in the commercial center of USQ.

Tori: Should we look at a sample of the zoning?

Use projector to show zoning overhaul pdf.

Exploration of zoning atlas and discussion of specific areas.

Tori: Provisions in section 1 say "To implement comprehensive Master Plan of the City of Somerville and enforce officially adopted plans and policies".

Philip: But SomerVision requirements still are not legally binding by state law.

Michele: George at Feb 13 zoning meeting implied SomerVision is malleable and aspirational.

Katie: But they are still legally required to reference it.

Tori: Acknowledging it is a good push to move towards our goals, even if SomerVision needs to be re-written. It may not be practical to achieve it fully, but if the City says it is their aspiration, we should push towards it.

Michele: Every time the City says these things, they are implying it is a legal document but then they say it's only aspirational. Why are they saying that if they aren't going to try to achieve it?

Philip: Problems in SomerVision plan details - some are a bit sloppy. One is the open space requirement which has no implementation strategy. By State Law, Comprehensive plans are supposed to have an implementation strategy.

If you look at transformational district, goals of Open Space in each one is just by acreage, and it does not look at the individual unique planned build-outs for each area. So SomerVision is completely lacking there.

Therefore, the Comprehensive Plan needs to be rewritten to address these inadequacies.

Katie: Asking for a rewrite of SomerVision is not going to achieve our Open Space goals.

Philip: But you get to those goals at the end of the rewrite.

Katie: Maybe. Whether it's a legally binding or aspirational document, people use it to get things into zoning that are needed. For example, 60/40 split on commercial/residential in USQ overlay. We don't need to know if it's legally binding to use it to advocate for our needs in the City.

Philip: It's useful politically.

Tori: So how do we move forward? Do we need a community task force to work on an implementation strategy?

Katie: Form-based zoning, so any individual building requirements are not going to be useful to achieving open space. If there is no info about implementation to achieve open space, then it's worth stating.

Simon: *(Simon, remind me what you said here if you want it in)*

Katie: Either zoning needs to be compliant with SomerVision or SomerVision needs to be modified to be consistent with zoning.

Philip: You could do it either way.

Michele: Couldn't you just point out the deficiencies and rewrite SomerVision in that way.

Philip: People rewrite Comprehensive Plans all the time.

Problem of SomerVision was uniformly dividing Open Space among all transformational districts. Far greater density in Union Square than probably will exist anywhere else, but that's not the way SomerVision is written. In that, Inner Belt would be the same as

Union Square, but that is unrealistic. As a development plan or for open space, it's not useful or realistic.

Katie: Does the USQ overlay district apply right now or only after US2 acquires those properties?

Philip: Yes, it applies, they have to follow that zoning.

Katie: I think we should double check that just in case.

Simon: SomerVision is ignored in US2 CDSP - they put up the buildings first in their design and then decided what was left to distribute to Open Space. US2 is in a group of other developers that have to compete for other parcels to develop from brickbottom down to Target. So it would be good for them to get current parcels right to be available for other contracts.

Tori: What can be changed in USQ zoning now? From USQ overlay zoning approved: "Vested Rights a. Amendments to the Somerville Zoning Ordinance are not applicable to development subject to a previously approved Coordinated Development Plan Special Permit, except for the following: i. Article 13: Inclusionary Housing ii. Article 15: Linkage iii. Outdoor Lighting/Dark Sky regulations"

Joe: When the City approved the application for the Green Line, the budget for the Green Line was a lot larger than it is now. Our \$50 million was to a much larger budget. The question is can that re-open up the negotiation of that \$50 million to Open Space now.

Katie: Aren't there agreements already for that \$50 million towards infrastructure and other things?

Joe: Not that I'm aware of.

If we could use it for a subway station that is also an open space as opposed to a piece of far by a railroad track, that would be a vehicle to reopen discussions with US2 and other developers to use that money.

Katie: From what I think Wig told me, there are agreements that have already been made for sharing of Charlestown St. infrastructure with MBTA.

Simon: The air space above a subway station is very expensive to get from the MBTA. Is there something else we can get back from the \$50 million beyond a few station canopies.

Joe: Discussions of Open space are good, but they are abstract.

Tori: I would support you if you come up with a plan for this.

Philip: Finish working through the agenda?

Tori: Yes. So we could assign categories of zoning to different people to read through.

Philip: Should we look through the outline and figure it out?

Simon: Let's read through the zoning and generate questions for George Proakis and then invite him to a meeting.

Divide up Zoning:

Article 8: Overlay Districts - Andy and Tori

Ann: Is there anyway to fight to two high-rises planned for USQ? Use historic view of Boston as an issue?

Article 4: Mid-Rise Districts - Simon

Article 5: High-Rise Districts - Simon

Article 6: Commercial Districts - Michele with support from Katie

Wig arrives.

Article 3: Residential Districts - Ann and Tori

Wig: This is a form-based code, not a use-base code.

Philip: But there's still a lot of stuff based on use. What uses are permitted.

Wig: But impact is use times density.

Philip: But this won't answer questions about density but will include whether you can put a gas station or an arts studio in places.

If you want to know what will happen in any of the different districts, you need to look at Article 9: Use Provisions.

The use provisions only cover a tiny fraction of the things people do with their lives.

Tori: What we can generate over looking at this is what questions we can ask GEorge.

Philip: No question is too stupid because we have a right to understand.

Article 11: Parking and Mobility - Philip

Article 13: Public Realm - Ann

Philip: Public Realm details are consistent with previous conceptions of open space, but there is still no detail about how to implement all this open space.

Wig: Current inventory of Somerville open spaces is one thing, but going forward how you measure open space is going to be an issue. For example, tiny green strips of land can count towards open space.

Philip: I don't think this Article 13 section is complete. It's uneven - it is complete or overspecific in some areas and lacking details in others.

Article 15: Administration - Andy

Wig: When you match infrastructure to land use, you need to measure impact such as on traffic, public safety, public works.

Tori: I have heard Form-Based zoning is very good for developers.

Wig: Boston will always focus on use and impact. You have to get at both form and use and impact eventually. It seems like MEPA is the only place left where they will assess impacts.

Tori: Nominate Andy to co-chair BEC. Unanimous approval.

Philip: Have done a lot of work on Open Space analysis two or three years ago. No plan for implementing 125 acre SomerVision goal. *Brings up spreadsheet of analysis.*

Vast majority of open space would be in the transformational districts. Using pretty basic measures, to achieve almost all the open space in those districts alone, once the area is parcelized, you would need 70% of the square footage of ground space to be open space. It appears no one did this calculation.

Wig: Neither is implementation plan to achieve other goals like residential and commercial.

Philip: Exactly. So there is a major flaw in SomerVision.

If we re-envision the amount of space to allocate for parking (it can take up 40% of a built-up area), how could we change the space, i.e. more open space or more other things. Need a plan for mobility and parking. Without these plans, the 70% for open space seems impossible.

The City speaks about the Open Space as aspirational and do not actually say how much Open Space they believe is realistic. Issue of holding onto 125 acres - analyze the actual strategies to achieve open space and what can be realistically done without compromising other issues. We personally cannot do that as individuals.

Tori: SomerVision drive for 125 is an issue we need to talk about. We need a strategy to implement it or a revision.

Philip: I agree it's a way to get people to pay attention. It's in the plan, and we need to ask what they meant by it, or what they really mean now. As an aspiration for an already-built out City, it's incredibly complex.

Wig: As an example, South Boston waterfront is a transformational area - they dictated it has to be 54% open space. Developers complied with it. The only way to achieve that open space in transformational districts is mandating such percentages. In the rest of the City, it's more complicated. I'm not as pessimistic as Philip on this. My experience with such large developments is this is achievable but you still might not get great developments.

Lhadon: Looking at the Drive for 125 - this is something I could push to get people interested in and get their videos.

Tori: For understanding, Drive for 125 asks for people to go to the website and make a little video of yourself talking about the need for the open space and stating that it exists in SomerVision and in the beginning of the Zoning Overhaul. That we need to achieve the plans we set out in Somerville.

Lhadon: So the bottom line is we need more open space. And we need to build pressure on decision makers now at this critical time, and we need to also work on the details and needs.

Wig: We want to give ourselves the best chance of ending up somewhere good. Philip and my approaches are different, but our goals are similar. The main thing is that people put energy into achieving the green space. We need to engage substantively with the City.

Simon: Middle position. Put all the green bits in the US2 development together to make them more substantial.

Action Items:

1) Read through assigned Zoning Overhaul draft sections, write down any questions you have, and identify key points:

<https://www.somervillezoning.com>

Article 3: Residential Districts - Ann and Tori

Article 4: Mid-Rise Districts - Simon

Article 5: High-Rise Districts - Simon

Article 6: Commercial Districts - Michele with support from Katie

Article 8: Overlay Districts - Andy and Tori

Article 11: Parking and Mobility - Philip

Article 13: Public Realm - Ann

Article 15: Administration - Andy

2) Be ready to act when US2 publicly submits D2 block designs. See if we can find out anything about those designs before the official public process begins.