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Washington Street project supporters dominate Somerville Planning Board hearing

By Monica Jimenez / Wicked Local Somerville
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Somerville — Supporters of a proposed Washington Street housing development outnumbered opponents by almost two to one at a Planning Board hearing Thursday night.

The Planning Board is next scheduled to discuss the project July 11, after which the board may vote on the site plan and special permits or request more information.

If the proposal is approved, the Somerville Community Corporation (SCC) will replace the former Boys & Girls Club with 40 units of affordable housing and developer Cathartes Private Investments will build 39 market-rate units and five affordable units where the Cota Funeral Home is now. The two-building, five-story project would also include commercial and office space.

Thursday night in the Visiting Nurse Association community room, some 41 residents spoke about the project. Opponents said the buildings are too tall and would block residents' views; the development would increase traffic on Washington Street; and the SCC did not put enough weight on resident input.

"The SCC is trying to ram a square peg in a round hole. Not once has the SCC yielded or compromised on the sheer size of the development," said Mansfield Street resident and alderman candidate Michael Nionakis.

Boston Street resident Carla Cicerone said she doesn't want to see a sea of cars when she looks out her window.

"You said we're a community. Are you thinking about the people who have been in the community for years?" Cicerone said. "The people in the community now are not being thought of."

Several were skeptical the project would do much good.

"We're not going to solve the affordable housing crisis with one building," said Greenville Street Tony Mandarino.

However, supporters of the project pointed out if this project is not built, another one will be. They stressed the need for as much affordable housing in the city as possible as rents continue to rise.

"It makes sense to prepare for escalating rents before property values get even larger," said Warren Avenue resident Laurie Goldman, who teaches in Tufts University's department of urban policy and planning. "The future is already here. Here's an advance."

The project will help young newcomers to Somerville stay in the city, said Weston Park resident Katie Ferrara, who counts herself among them.

"We really want to lay down roots here and commit to the city," Ferrara said.

Affordable housing will also help longtime Somerville residents, or "lifers," stay in the city, said Eastman Road resident Janet Lotti.

"There are fewer and fewer of us all the time. That's because it's not affordable anymore," Lotti said. "As I witness more and more gentrification of this city, it really bums me out. I want to make sure that part of our diversity, the blue collar part, is not lost."

Somerville is changing and it's up to residents to preserve what matters, said Columbus Avenue resident and alderman candidate Suzanne Bremer.

"If we are to preserve diversity in our vibrant city, we must embrace developers who are building housing but who also want to help us build community," Bremer said. "Personally, I want to live in a city where everyone is welcome."

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I think the real story was how united the neighbors were in asking for a smaller project, at least a floor lower so they could keep at least part of their views of Boston

The real story is that SCC had their staff of paid organizers working overtime for the last week or two sending emails, using social media, posting testimonial videos, making cold calls - everything they could think of, but even so, they couldn't produce many people on their side from the neighborhood. The ones who did speak were employees, spouses of employees, or residents of nearby SCC housing.
Now if planning decisions were some kind of city-wide election, SCC's PR budget would mean they'd wins hands down every time. But the Planning Board is supposed to balance the benefits of more affordable housing, and a private developers profits, against the negative effects of the proposed development on nearby residents.
In the end SCC's big turnout was a lot of sound and fury signifying nothing
kzecchi
5 months ago
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I find this article stunningly one-sided. When asked for a show of hands on who supported the project versus who didn't, the supporters did outnumber the detractors, but only by about 10-20%. The fact that so many neighbors of the project came without any organized effort shows, I believe, the level of concern in the neighborhood.

Every single detractor that spoke made a clear point of saying that they supported affordable housing, and that this is a question of the building, not the residents. We are concerned with the height, with the density, and with the parking and traffic implications. We are looking for the planning board to consider these concerns so that the both the existing AND future residents of the neighborhood can enjoy a human-scaled development conducive to families.

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