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Somerville Planning Board split over Washington Street development

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A proposed two-building, five-story housing development on Washington Street cannot go forward until developers better respond to neighbors' concerns, the Somerville Planning Board decided Thursday.

At a meeting attended by 50-odd people at the Argenziano School, fewer than four Planning Board members supported a proposal for the Somerville Community Corporation (SCC) to replace the former Boys & Girls Club with 40 units of affordable housing and developer Cathartes Private Investments to 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.

Before deciding to continue discussion to July 18, the board was split between respecting abutters' wishes for a smaller project and honoring the new CCD55 zoning that allows five-story buildings.

"This is a neighborhood where people have lived for many, many years. Some of them are raising families. Some of them have paid a lot of money for their homes," member James Kirylo said. "They're investing in the neighborhood, too. Putting a massive development there would do nothing but hurt them."

To the applause and cheers of many of the 50-odd people at the meeting, member Michael Capuano expressed dismay about destroying the Cota Funeral Home, predicted worse traffic snarls, and said the building should be four stories instead of five

"I want to support the project. I really do. [But] I think it's very, very hard to for me to get me to yes until you make dramatic changes to what I think is a flawed project," Capuano said.

Although the project meets zoning requirements, it doesn't meet the neighborhood's needs, Capuano said.

"Nothing ever says we have to look at it with blinders on and not look at how it impacts the rest of the community and the neighborhood," Capuano said. "It may meet the generic rules and they have the right to apply for a building of this size. But that doesn't mean we are obligated to vote for it."

But member Joseph Favoloro supported the height of the building and the zoning that allows it.

"I strongly believe I'm going to be in favor of this proposal because it meets the criteria set forward by all the different visioning agencies in the city," Favoloro said.

Throwing out the zoning provisions disrespects the long, collaborative planning process that produced them and creates a no-win situation, Favoloro said.

"We asked the developer to build to this size. They build to this size. And the concern is, they're building too much," Favoloro said. "What in that context is the right answer?"

The right answer is to realize some people will have concerns no matter what, Moroney said.

"I often joke that my role on the Planning Board is to make half the room mad at me. After reading the emails, it's more like half the city," Moroney said. She added, "There are always going to be some aspects of folks who fear all change that's coming."

The change this project brings is necessary, said Moroney, pointing out Somerville's housing stock is only 9.9 percent affordable – leaving the city vulnerable to developers who could come in under MGL Chapter 40 B.

Moroney agreed with Favoloro, who said he expects SCC and Cathartes to be "more creative" and see "a little more rolling up of sleeves." The developers should reconsider concessions such as moving unsightly rooftop equipment inside the building, Moroney said.

"What all of us want to see is some giveback from the developer on some of these issues. I would like to see more done by the developer to address the needs of the community," Moroney said. "I do think it's an important project, I do want to see it go forward, but I would like to see a couple of changes if possible."

Planning Board Chairman Kevin Prior agreed.

"I'm in favor of development, I'm in favor of affordable housing, I'm in favor of getting four votes on this project, but it's not going to happen unless the development team starts compromising on this project," Prior said. "It's your job to come up with the votes by next Thursday night."

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