Letter: Boys and Girls Club plans fit vision for Somerville

Wicked Local Somerville
Posted Jul 03, 2013 @ 11:29 AM

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Somerville — Much of the opposition to the SCC/Cathartes proposal for redevelopment of the vacant Boys & Girls Club and Cota Funeral Home at 181/197 Washington Street has focused on the height of the buildings (5 stories) and density. While it is important to acknowledge abutters' concerns, it is also imperative to keep in mind that this project is precisely what the city has called for through its resident-driven SomerVision process and more specifically, the 2009 rezoning of Union Square. Believe it or not, the Board of Aldermen unanimously approved new zoning to the Washington Street area of Union Square specifically to encourage exactly what SCC and Cathartes are proposing- high-density commercial and residential activity to support a thriving urban neighborhood served by new transit (the Green Line). The SCC/Cathartes proposal goes a step further by including housing affordable to working families and by pursuing green design.

Some opponents claim that the height and density are out of scale with the neighborhood, but in fact the original scale of Union Square was far denser than anything we see here today or even what is being proposed at 181/197 Washington Street. This new zoning is only one part of a larger, visionary effort on behalf of the city and the thousands of residents who participated in SomerVision to strengthen neighborhood commercial centers that integrate residential uses, facilitate transit-oriented, neighborhood infill development, and transform key opportunity areas such as Union Square into dynamic economic engines for our city.

The SCC/Cathartes proposal is not the only one of its kind being proposed and even already approved for this part of Somerville. In fact, just a few blocks away at 90 Washington Street, the Planning Board recently approved Cobble Hill Apartment Company's proposal for 159 new units of housing- mostly market rate- also at a height of 5 stories, but far surpassing the density of the SCC/Cathartes project. Further down the road on McGrath Highway,the City is considering extending the new zoning in Union Square to accommodate developer interest in building more five+ story apartment buildings over retail. Add to that the SomerVision committment to increasing Somerville's housing stock by 6,000 units- including 1,200 permanently affordable – and I see no reason why this project should not be approved.

It would be a shame to miss this opportunity to significantly contribute to Union Square's vitality and preserved diversity, while also meeting the larger goals of SomerVision, solely to heed the objections of a few property owners who may lose pieces of their views. -- Elijah Plymesser, Raymond Avenue. Plymesser is a member of the Somerville Community Corporation's Land Use Committee

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