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Neighbors reject SCC's plans for affordable housing in Somerville

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Opponents to **Somerville Community Corporation**'s planned affordable housing development came out in force at a community meeting Monday night.

SCC **is in a purchase and sales agreement with the Boys & Girls Club to buy the club's building on Washington Street**, which could create around 40 units of affordable housing plus some ground-floor retail outside of Union Square. The specifics of the project have not been determined yet.

Opponents wore red tissue paper wrapped around their upper arms in solidarity. About half the crowd wore the armbands, but a distinct majority of the speakers in the audience was opposed to the project.

Some concerns were specific to the dimensions of the project – how it would affect traffic, views and whether more retails space was necessary – while others disagreed with the idea of creating affordable housing, arguing primarily that it would drive down property values.

"Union Square can be Davis Square if we stand united and protect our property values," said Zac Zasloff, who interjected throughout the meeting, and said he would prefer a "market rate" development.

Danny LeBlanc, director of SCC, had laid out a meeting agenda to talk about concerns about height and traffic, but that was quickly scrapped by the crowd. They had a host of other concerns, including what the non-profit SCC would make off the development.

"We do earn money," said LeBlanc in response to one of Zasloff's accusations that SCC would make $1.4 million. But LeBlanc said "there were some miscalculations," and that number is incorrect.

Others who showed up to the meeting the in former school's small gymnasium were baffled by the opposition.

"It's really hard to hear that there are people who don't want Somerville to be a place for everyone," said Laura Eronne Steinman, who was drowned out by the opposition, some of whom yelled over her voice, before being a relatively quiet hall to make her point.

Unlike some other SCC developments, which are geared toward the recently homeless, the project on Washington Street would be for working families making a maximum of $57,000 per year, LeBlanc said.

LeBlanc said SCC would stick to the requirements of the 2009 rezoning of Union Square, which allows around 40 units on the site and about four floors – one floor taller than the structure that stands there today.

The building formerly housed the Somerville Public Schools' administration and a functioning Boys & Girls Club until the administration moved out in 2010, forcing the youth center to shut down and put the building on the market.

"I'm getting very confused," said Jack McRae, who lives in the neighborhood. "Why wasn't this meeting held prior to your purchase of the building?"

LeBlanc said he had started the process earlier than other developers by bringing the general idea to the public before SCC has even closed on the property or submitted architectural plans to the Planning Board.

"We're open to a discussion," said LeBlanc, who said SCC planned to build "something that completely complies with zoning in every respect."

Ward 2 Alderman Maryann Heuston asked why LeBlanc wasn't considering senior housing, and encouraged the opponents by recounting past proposed developments that had never been built.

"I don't want people to feel that anything is done or decided," Heuston said. "I've seen projects fail... But these things take a long, long time."

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I think this story got it wrong. In the first place, I would say that about 20-25% of those in attendance wore red armbands. And while it's true that they predominated among those who spoke, most people didn't speak at all. Some were interrupted when they tried to. So, I don't know what most of the people in the room thought, and I would like to. But I can say that not everyone in the room was against the project. I for one am inclined to support it and would like to hear more. From what I know of SCC, where there are valid issues to be discussed, I believe they will be honest and forthright in dealing with them.
Reebee Garofalo

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