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Somerville Planning Board: Keep 55-foot buildings in city

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Despite residents and aldermen calling for revisions, the Planning Board voted to continue allowing 55-foot buildings to be built in Somerville, saying they did not want to "second-guess" an earlier decision.

"I believed that in 2009, when we worked in this, it was complete. It was an educated vote, a good vote," said board chairman Kevin Prior at an Oct. 17 meeting. "I don't believe we should be second guessing ourselves in this matter."

When city officials rezoned the Union Square area in 2009, they created a new category known as CCD-55, or a Corridor Commercial District with heights of 55 feet, to promote commercial activity. Other areas in the city have been re-zoned to that designation since then, but have subsequently been criticized for being out of character for the neighborhood.

At a meeting on Sept.19, several aldermen called to overturn the rezoning, calling it a mistake and citing wide opposition from neighbors.

"In the push and the opportunity for development, sometimes what happens is you don't really look at the entire picture and I think that's what happened here," said Ward 3 Alderman Tom Taylor, who was concerned about plans to re-zone an area outside of Union Square to allow 55-foot-tall buildings.

But in a close vote at the Oct. 17 meeting, the Planning Board rejected an amendment to the zoning ordinance that would lower building heights across the board. The amendment proposed changing CCD55 districts in Ward 3 to CCD45 – which allows for a maximum height of 45 feet -- and reducing CCD55 and CCD45 districts in Ward 4 to residential districts, with a maximum height of 40 feet.

Prior and members Joseph Favaloro and Elizabeth Moroney voted in favor of rejecting the amendment. Members Michael Capuano and James Kirilyo voted against and Gerard Amaral abstained.

"I'm not going to throw the baby out with the bathwater because of one development," Favaloro said. "I'm not going to react emotionally just based on the [neighbors]."

Kirilyo and Capuano advocated for taking into account many neighbors' negative reactions towards 55-foot buildings on Washington Street in Union Square. Both voted against rejecting the amendment.

"I'm afraid it's going to be helter-skelter, it's going to look like hell. I don't see how taking 55 feet down a level would hurt anything," Kirilyo said. "If you can't change your minds, that's too bad. But I can change my mind and I think it should go down to 45 feet."

"The scope of the building should be changed according to the realities of the people who have to live with the project," Capuano said, also noting that he initially voted for the wider rezoning proposal in 2009 despite opposing CCD-55.

Favaloro and Prior agreed that the board should be able to judge whether a 55-foot development makes sense for an area on a "case-by-case basis." Amaral also upheld this position.

"I'm willing to fight the fight when 55 feet isn't appropriate," Prior said. "Our job is to make sure we enforce what we voted on."

Prior also argued that reversing the zoning decision would drive away possible investors in what was meant to be a lively, commercial downtown area, citing his own experience as a developer.

"The eyes of the business community in Massachusetts will look at us differently if we go through a long, deliberate process, then re-do our policy over one project," Moroney said. "Did we look at it in the long term, or are we reacting to one controversial development?"

"We believe in the process," Favaloro said. "I'd much rather be in a position where we can negotiate down from 55 feet. It's never going to go up from 45 feet."

The board voted unanimously to delay the Board of Aldermen vote on the amendment until Nov. 7.

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