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Abutters support, Somerville ZBA questions proposed Cobble Hill development

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Although nearly a dozen residents of Cobble Hill Apartments praised a proposal to replace an adjacent single-story strip mall with a six stories of mostly housing at a recent public hearing by the Somerville Zoning Board of Appeals, others raised concerns about loss of green space, lack of family housing, and a quiet public process.

Attorney Rich DiGirolomo and Somerville resident Frank Valdez of DiMella Shaffer Architects presented the proposal at the board's Sept. 18 hearing, which was continued to Oct. 2. Corcoran Jennison Management Company (CMJ), the owner of Cobble Hill Apartments and the adjacent Cobble Hill Center plaza, is seeking three special permits to raze the strip mall housing Potato Freak, Tedeschi's, Diamond Staffing, Cobble Hill Laundromat and a Portuguese book shop, and build a six-story building with five floors containing 159 residential units above five or six commercial spaces at street level.

"Most people seem to think the public process for this has been very good. But I was really surprised this had advanced so far," said Ellen Reisner. "I've gone to so many community meetings that had opportunities for give and take. I feel this process has not been particularly good."

Although Reisner supported the project, she said she only found out recently that CMJ and the city had been working on this proposal since 2009, which she called "disturbing."

Walnut Street resident Rob Buchanan also supported the project, but questioned how public the process has been.

"I didn't realize this has been going on for three years," Buchanan said.

Resident Wigg Zamore also expressed concern about adding more residential than commercial development, pointing out commercial development would bring the city more revenue and shift the tax burden from the residential to the commercial tax base.

"We seem unable to make progress righting that imbalance," Zamore said.

ZBA member Brandy Brooks agreed.

"We always see a ton of large housing developments over and over in Somerville. I'd love to figure out how we could start to see more commercial development across Somerville," Brooks said.

Additionally, Somerville is "already facing a deficit of family units" Brooks said. The city needs a more diverse housing stock, she and Zamore said, which this project does not seem to offer with its 25 studio apartments, 69 one-bedrooms, 20 units with one bedroom and a study, and 45 two-bedrooms. Only 20 of the units will be affordable, per city regulation.

"My biggest concern is, 159 new units are being built and not one is a family unit. Even the two-bedrooms are more for two people to share and are not oriented toward a single-family unit," Brooks said. "I'd be more excited granting the pretty significant [parking] variance if it added diversity to the housing stock, particularly families."

CMJ is seeking a special permit to include fewer than the 240-odd parking spaces required for a project of this size, instead proposing 131 parking spaces behind the building and 38 spaces in a small lot east of the site. Part of the parking lot could later be used for a "Phase 2" of development that would expand upon this project, Girolomo and City Planning Director George Proakis said.

Additionally, several parallel parking spaces would line a new roadway that would divide the parcel, which CMJ is seeking another special permit to do.

CMJ is also seeking a third special permit for the height of the building, which Buchanan called "imposing."

Buchanan said he's worried about losing more of Somerville's limited green space -- a concern Reisner and several other residents and Zoning Board members shared. Although the proposal includes some 30 percent of open space in the form of a landscaped corner plaza, three times as much as required, Reisner pointed out the plaza will not be public property and predicted the net result would be a "massive reduction of green space."

"SomerVision and the Inner Belt vision said strongly to add green space, not take it away. We need more space people can actually use," Reisner said. "It sets a bad precedent to give away green space. Other developers are going to want the same thing."

Valdez said he's working on improving the landscaping of the plaza, while Proakis said he does not believe the project will set a precedent for losing green space to development.

"Physically, there will be less open space than before, but the quality of what you get in plaza versus green burms... It has to be quality publicly accessible open space so people want to gather there," Proakis said.

Proakis also responded to concerns about the public process.

"If the perception is we spent our time hiding this for the first two years, that was not the intent," Proakis said. "We went through a lot of iterations until we had something we were confident enough for primetime."

Valdez addressed concerns about the diversity of housing stock.

"It's something we can look at, how we can become more accomodating for larger families," Valdez said.

But Valdez said it's telling that his own in-laws chose to move to a smaller apartment in Boston.

"There has been a shift where more people want to live in an urban environment... We provide smaller apartments, so people can afford those rents," Valdez said.

As an example, Valdez said a 1,000-square-foot space at $2 or $3 per square foot would be more affordable than a larger space.

Positive comments from residents of CMJ's four apartment buildings at 90 Washington St. centered on CMJ's good management practices more than the proposed development.

Debra DePasquale, a 23-year resident of the apartments, said CMJ is "meticulous" in maintaing the grounds and the buildings and responds quickly to problems. She said she's confident CMJ would manage the new development the same way.

Bill Lee said he never felt like he had a family until five years ago, when he moved to the Cobble Hill Apartments, where management went above and beyond.

"With that attitude, they're the perfect partner for Somerville and 90 Washington St.," Lee said.

But a few residents spoke specifically about the project, anticipating it will improve the area.

"I think it would be such an asset to the area of East Somerville. It's modern, new and inviting and it enhances the neighborhood beautifully," said Eileen Rowan. "I like to think our part of Somerville as a gateway into East Somerville."

Rowan added, "It's a wakeup call to the other end of Somerville to make it more enticing."

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