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Mixed reviews for affordable housing plans in Somerville

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Wicked Local Somerville
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Somerville — While some residents are taking issue with affordable housing and traffic impacts, others feel that a five-story residential development would be a good fit for the vacant Boys & Girls Club building on Washington Street.

At a meeting on Tuesday, more than 100 residents packed City Hall as the **Somerville Community Corporation** presented its first design plans for the building at 181 Washington St. that **they recently bought from the Boys & Girls Club.**

Preliminary plans outline 40 affordable housing units in a five-story building with commercial space on the street level and 35 parking spaces, all within zoning requirements for that space. Close to 70 percent of the units will be reserved for people who live or work in Somerville, according to plans.

Mansfield Street resident, and former alderman candidate, Michael Nionakis said he thinks the project is too large for the site and does not include enough parking for an area that already sees a lot of vehicular traffic. He is worried that if proposals like this are allowed the pass, the city will soon have five-story buildings everywhere with no open areas or green space.

"I really do not believe it is a good proposal for Union Square," he said. "It's too big."

Other residents who spoke against the project say they take issue with subsidized housing in Union Square, are concerned about issues of density, parking, traffic and gentrification.

Unlike the last meeting in November where residents were largely opposed the SCC proposal, Monday's meeting had a number of people speaking in support of the project.

"I strongly favor the project because Somerville has a very strong need for affordable housing," Ellin Reisner, president of the Somerville Transportation Equity Partnership, told Wicked Local Somerville. "I think people's concerns about the design and traffic are resolvable."

Reisner pointed out that the units are not public housing, but housing for people who already live in or fit the Somerville profile.

According to SCC data, rent for the units are significantly less than market rate in the area – a one-bedroom apartment would cost $983 a month and a three-bedroom unit would cost $1,350. Rents would include heat, hot water, and trash.

"We were really pleased with all the feedback we got," said Danny LeBlanc, CEO of the Somerville Community Corporation. "We hope to move ahead with the project."

The current 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 thought the presentation went well," said Ward 3 Alderman Tom Taylor, who helped organize the meeting. "I think they need to go back to the drawing board, take into account the community input and come up with a better plan."

No site studies have been done yet as it is early in the development process, LeBlanc said. SCC intends to work with the community and planning staff to determine which studies need to be done like traffic impact, parking and impact on view.

"We're a long way from going up to the planning board," Taylor said. "I am sure there will be more meetings coming up."

LeBlanc said there should be at least two more community meetings coming up before it moves to the planning board stage.

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