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Column: Approve linkage fee to keep Somerville affordable

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This year, the city came forward with two important proposals that address the impact of commercial development in Somerville through linkage fees. As residents affected by that development, we support the proposed amendments to the housing linkage fee and the creation of a jobs linkage fee.

The amendments to the housing ordinance would increase the amount paid by developers from $3.91 to $5.15 per square foot, index it to the cost of living, and lower the threshold for payment to developments of 20,000 square feet or more. The proposed ordinance on jobs linkage would create a jobs linkage fee of $1.40 per square foot, which would go into a Job Creation and Retention Trust.

We strongly believe that the Board of Aldermen should adopt the proposals. The increase in housing linkage will provide critical resources for affordable housing in Somerville. The ordinance is meant to be updated every three years, but has not been updated since 2004. In the meantime, the cost of rental housing in Somerville is increasing faster than the rate of inflation, and the city is losing rental housing due to condo conversions. Somerville residents are already leaving because there is not enough affordable housing.

Affordable housing and jobs create stable, healthy communities. Any developer who balks at contributing is probably not one who will be responsive to community needs overall. We understand the need for commercial development to expand the city's tax base and relieve pressure on residential taxpayers, but that does not mean we support any commercial development regardless of its impact. The people of Somerville want development that benefits the community and prevents displacement.

On September 25, MassDOT approved $393 million dollars to fund the portion of the Green Line Extension that will go to Union Square. Jobs for Somerville has been working with MassDOT and the MBTA to create a workforce development program that will provide training and jobs on the Green Line for Somerville residents. This program will involve a system of local outreach, placement in training programs, and a commitment to hire qualified local participants.

We are very excited about the possibilities of this system, and we think it could work throughout all of Somerville, not just on the Green Line. It's an opportunity to bring Somerville residents, only 16 percent of work in the city, access to the jobs they need to survive and thrive. In order to operate and staff such a system, there needs to be a financial commitment from the City of Somerville. The Jobs Trust Fund, which would receive money from the linkage fee, would be an ideal source of initial funding for that system.

In individual meetings with aldermen, we were dismayed to hear some of them express the idea that Somerville is still suffering from a lack of commercial development. From Assembly Square to Cobble Hill Plaza to Union Square, it is clear to all of us that development is already coming, and elected officials cannot wait until the perfect anchor tenant arrives to deal with the need it creates for affordable housing and jobs. Many of the current aldermanic candidates have expressed their support for both linkage fee proposals. Boston provides a nearby example of a Neighborhood Jobs Trust, funded by linkage fees, that successfully connects residents to training and employment.

Developers in other cities have not been deterred by linkage fees, and Somerville's current fee has not been an obstacle, according to the city's planning department. An increase in the housing linkage fee will responsibly provide for additional affordable housing stock in Somerville, and the creation of a jobs trust fund will jumpstart an innovative and forward-thinking system to connect Somerville residents to training and employment. Somerville has already given countless benefits to Federal Realty and other developers – we can't let them derail these opportunities to keep families in Somerville.

Karen Narefsky is a community organizer for the Somerville Community Corporation. This column was also signed by Beatrice Kwaa, Maria Flores, Van Hardy, Yenii Majano, Mary Jo Connelly, Benny Wheat, and Daisy Vasquez on behalf of Jobs for Somerville; and Ellen Shachter, Lauren Shuffleton, Celia Basilio, Louise Marks, and Catie Ferrara, on behalf of the Affordable Housing Organizing Committee.

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