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Developers won't shrink size of proposed buildings in Somerville's Union Square

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Somerville — *Correction: A previous version of this story, which ran in the July 18 issue of the Journal, incorrectly identified Jim McGinnis as the president of Union Square Rising. McGinnis is not the president of that group.*

Developers are reworking their proposal for a two-building, five-story housing development on Washington Street leading up to a Planning Board meeting July 18, but will likely not remove a story from the proposed buildings.

At the meeting, which begins 6 p.m. in the aldermanic chamber at City Hall, the Planning Board will continue considering whether to allow the Somerville Community Corporation (SCC) to replace the former Boys & Girls Club with 40 units of affordable housing and developer Cathartes Private Investments to build 39 market-rate units and five affordable units where the Cota Funeral Home is now. The two-building, five-story project would also include commercial and office space.

Most Planning Board members expressed a desire to approve the project in some form at a July 11 meeting at the Argenziano School, which was attended by 50-odd people, but asked for changes ranging from placing noisy, unsightly rooftop equipment inside the Cathartes building, to taking both projects down a story.

The SCC is discussing possible changes with city planning staff that will be presented to the Planning Board July 18, said SCC CEO Dan LeBlanc on July 17.

"We have at their request come to them with what might be called our last, best offer, or what we can do to mitigate the concerns they expressed and still have a live project," LeBlanc said. "We do expect to have a live discussion at the meeting. At this point we've made some significant suggestions and we think they're being actively considered."

It's unlikely the Cathartes project will be reduced one floor, which would reduce its expected profits too much to fund it, Cathartes founder and principal Jim Goldenberg.

Neither is the SCC planning to bring its building down a floor, which would essentially require them to restart the design process, LeBlanc said, arguing a four-floor model is not feasible. City zoning allows and expects five stories, which are part of the city's plan for what that corridor of Union Square should look like in the future, LeBlanc said.

"What we're not doing is saying we can drop down to four floors. That isn't part of what we're discussing," LeBlanc said.

It's also unlikely Cathartes's roof mechanicals will be moved inside, LeBlanc said, although they are being discussed and will most likely be placed closer together and shielded to reduce noise and visual impact.

But changes will be "not insignificant," LeBlanc said.

"My belief is if we were to propose really minor changes, the two Planning Board members who expressed opposition would not see them as significant enough to change their mind," LeBlanc said.

Bringing the buildings down a story is one of the main changes that would make the project acceptable to many abutters, said neighbor Jim McGinnis. Although the project will eliminate open space no matter what, reduced size and other improvements would help, McGinnis said.

"I basically think if the buildings were four stories instead of five and the mechanicals were indoors and there was no driveway on Boston Street, it would represent a compromise people would be willing to accept," McGinnis said. "The other thing that people would be willing to accept would be reducing parking requirements for affordable units."

McGinnis said he's disappointed with the Planning Board members who intend to approve the project because it conforms to zoning, but takes hope from the members trying to take neighbors' concerns into account.

Neighbor Kristen Zecchi is happy Planning Board members read neighbors' testimony and took time to walk through the area, she said. It's great to see the civic process succeed, she said, especially with so much on the line.

"We're not just talking about a project. We're talking about our homes, where we choose to pay our mortgage and raise our children. We're talking about the quality of life for future residents," said Zecchi, who also hopes the buildings drop a story and the rooftop equipment moves inside. "We're all really holding our breath."

At the July 11 meeting, the Planning Board was split between respecting abutters' wishes for a smaller project and honoring the new CCD55 zoning that allows five-story buildings

“This is a neighborhood where people have lived for many, many years. Some of them are raising families. Some of them have paid a lot of money for their homes,” member James Kirylo said. “They’re investing in the neighborhood, too. Putting a massive development there would do nothing but hurt them.”

To applause and cheers, member Michael Capuano expressed dismay about destroying the Cota Funeral Home and the open space it provides, predicted worse traffic snarls, and said the building should be four stories instead of five.

“I want to support the project. I really do. [But] I think it’s very, very hard to for me to get me to yes until you make dramatic changes to what I think is a flawed project,” Capuano said.

Although the project meets zoning requirements, it doesn’t meet the neighborhood’s needs, Capuano said.

“Nothing ever says we have to look at it with blinders on and not look at how it impacts the rest of the community and the neighborhood,” Capuano said. “It may meet the generic rules and they have the right to apply for a building of this size. But that doesn’t mean we are obligated to vote for it.”

But member Joseph Favoloro supported the height of the building and the zoning that allows it.

“I strongly believe I’m going to be in favor of this proposal because it meets the criteria set forward by all the different visioning agencies in the city,” Favoloro said.

Throwing out the zoning provisions disrespects the long, collaborative planning process that produced them and creates a no-win situation, Favoloro said.

“We asked the developer to build to this size. They build to this size. And the concern is, they’re building too much,” Favoloro said. “What in that context is the right answer?”

The right answer is to realize some people will have concerns no matter what, Moroney said.

“I often joke that my role on the Planning Board is to make half the room mad at me. After reading the emails, it’s more like half the city,” Moroney said. She added, “There are always going to be some aspects of folks who fear all change that’s coming.”

The change this project brings is necessary, said Moroney, pointing out Somerville’s housing stock is only 9.9 percent affordable – leaving the city vulnerable to developers who could come in under MGL Chapter 40 B.

Moroney agreed with Favoloro, who said he expects SCC and Cathartes to be “more creative” and see “a little more rolling up of sleeves.” The developers should reconsider concessions such as moving unsightly rooftop equipment inside the building, Moroney said.

“What all of us want to see is some giveback from the developer on some of these issues. I would like to see more done by the developer to address the needs of the community,” Moroney said. “I do think it’s an important project, I do want to see it go forward, but I would like to see a couple of changes if possible.”

Planning Board Chairman Kevin Prior agreed.

“I’m in favor of development, I’m in favor of affordable housing, I’m in favor of getting four votes on this project, but it’s not going to happen unless the development team starts compromising on this project,” Prior said. “It’s your job to come up with the votes by next Thursday night.”

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