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Somerville aldermen urge reversing unpopular CCD55 zoning

By Monica Jimenez / Wicked Local Somerville
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Somerville — Several aldermen supported reversing zoning that allows 55-foot buildings in some parts of Somerville during a recent meeting, saying they were wrong to approve it in the first place.

At joint public hearings by the aldermen's Land Use Committee and the Planning Board Sept. 19, which were continued to Oct. 3 with written public comment open until Sept. 27 at noon, aldermen supported proposals to change CCD55 zoning to CCD45 in Ward 3, and to change CCD55 and CCD45 zoning to RC in Ward 4.

"In my opinion, this administration has been pro-development and there's been a rush to change the zoning around Union Square to help with development in anticipation of the Green Line coming in," said Ward 3 Alderman Tom Taylor.

Taylor said 55-foot buildings will "dwarf" and "distort" Prospect Hill neighborhoods, which he did not anticipate when he approved the concept -- partly because of how city planners presented it, he said.

"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," Taylor said. "I think the leaders in the administration and OSPCD were pro-development and did want more development in that area... It's very difficult sometimes to disagree with the experts."

Aldermen President Bill White said 55-foot buildings will create "solid walls" that will negatively affect neighborhoods and the community as a whole, and agreed with Taylor that the city administration's gung-ho approach to development led to zoning that hurt more and helped less than it was supposed to.

"We identified particular areas this city zoning was designed to cover and I saw no cost-benefit analysis of what the downside would be," White said. He added, "You said, 'These commercial developers, they're lurking out there, you just have to give them the zoning and they're going to come.' I haven't seen a blessed commercial developer come in."

City Planner George Proakis defended the zoning, citing the increased building setbacks and other protections it includes that other zoning does not, and he opposed reversing it.

"Somerville has become an area of national interest in the development world because of the administration's interest in clear zoning. This would send a message that we still don't know what we want and expect," Proakis said. "We can't be in a position where we're constantly moving the bar and we're not clear as to where we actually are."

Attracting a larger pool of developers ultimately benefits the city, Proakis said.

"A lot of people come to me and say, we don't like working with this developer or that developer, can we get more competition amongst developers and get more people to look at Somerville?" Proakis said. "My concern is, we do best when we continue to engage some pretty significant focus in the commercial field, especially those who do commercial development, to come into Somerville."

But Taylor said Proakis is focusing on the wrong thing.

"The whole presentation you made was focused around development. All the focus is around development," Taylor said. "We should be looking at development, but not as a primary goal. The goal is to protect the Prospect Hill neighborhood... We're really not in sync with the administration."

To loud applause, Taylor added, "If we change to CCD45 and developers aren't happy, you know what, who gives a damn."

White agreed.

"What it comes down to is should you have three or four stories about the commercial at street level. A number of people want to downsize and I see no analysis of what is the adverse effect of downsizing one story," White said. "That's the type of analysis I would like to see."

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