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Column: Supporting a Somerville for everyone

By By Danny LeBlanc and Ezra Haber Glenn
Wicked Local Somerville
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Somerville — The city of Somerville has come a long way from its days as a streetcar suburb, and even farther from the plaguing late century "Slumerville" reputation. In this 21st century, the city has become a beacon of social diversity, and the demand to live here is high. Where major infrastructure improvements like the Green Line Extension and Assembly Square Redevelopment promise to bring new opportunities to the people of Somerville, they also threaten to make living here significantly more expensive.

Just since 2000, properties values have surged by 75 percent or more in parts of East and West Somerville, and in Union Square – where extension of Green Line is slated to open in 2017 – upwards of 162 percent. In a community where diversity and affordability are consistently identified through public process as core values, it is critical that we take steps today to ensure that Somerville continues to be a place where everyone is welcome tomorrow.

The Somerville Community Corporation shares the vision set forth by the City and hundreds of residents through Mayor Joe Curtatone's SomerVision process. That is, the vision to make Somerville an even more exceptional place to live, work, play and raise a family. As a 40 year old community-based organization dedicated to maintaining diversity and preserving affordability in Somerville, we look forward to working with and being guided by Somerville residents to accomplish the goals set forth by this Comprehensive Plan, such as creating 6,000 new units of housing, 1,200 of them permanently affordable, by 2030. With over 40 percent of Somerville residents currently considered low or very low income, it is our priority to keep housing within reach so that everyone in Somerville can benefit from the investments in our city.

One of SCC's most recent efforts to preserve diversity and opportunity for everyone in Somerville is our proposed redevelopment of the vacant Boys & Girls Club building at 187 Washington Street in Union Square. Working together with our partners at Cathartes Private Investments who are proposing to redevelop the adjacent Cota Funeral Home site, we plan to create a mixed-income, mixed-use site, with community amenities such as public greenspace and ground floor retail.

The SCC-owned site will offer 40 one- to three- bedroom apartments for families making low and moderate incomes, while the Cathartes site will offer an additional 45 apartments including 40 at market rate and 5 below market rate rents (as required by Somerville's inclusionary zoning). We have a collaborative plan to create a thriving neighborhood at the gateway of Union Square that is truly a microcosm of our diverse Somerville community.

While the Cathartes project for the Cota Funeral Home redevelopment will be separately funded and approved, our innovative private/non-profit partnership promises a seamless design and scale between the two properties and an opportunity for Somerville residents of all incomes to take part in this community. By working together, and with the neighborhood, we have a unique opportunity to achieve much more than what a single developer could do, resulting in a vibrant location that reflects the values of the community and a place that is truly everyone's Somerville.

The Somerville Planning Board will have the opportunity to approve SCC's proposal for redevelopment of 181 Washington Street at a public hearing. We hope to convey a clear vision for this project that is driven by many months of SCC-hosted public meetings and design workshops and rooted in community values. We expect that this project will:

Meet Somerville's consumer demand for housing near transit that provides easy access to the Boston metro area and Union Square's commercial district.

Add value and reinforce Union Square's existing diversity and character by combining market-rate and below market-rate housing on a single site to serve Somerville's diverse household incomes.

Create a beautiful and welcoming gateway to Union Square from the East.

Combine the strengths of highly-qualified for-profit and non-profit developers in an innovative partnership that no one developer could match on their own.

Improve the Union Square neighborhood overall by adding an attractive, vital new development to the Washington Street corridor.

It is also worth noting that we are pursuing LEED Gold certification for green design of this project and as well as the possibility of a green roof. Evidence of our award winning real estate development can be seen throughout Somerville in the 200+ homes we have created or preserved for working families and individuals in locations like Temple Street, Linden Street and Saint PolyCarp Village. We look forward to continuing to work with the community to shape our plans every step of the way, and to support a thriving Somerville that is for everyone.

Danny LeBlanc is the CEO of the Somerville Community Corporation and Ezra Haber Glenn is the SCC Board President.

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This was more advertisement than column.

Having lived here over 40 years I wonder just how many more people can fit in what is already one of the most densely populated places in the north east. Unless you can figure out how to completely change the infrastructure, the city is really not able to grow that much. Throwing tall buildings in among houses breaks up communities and ruins views. Tearing down historic neighborhood to create a unified skyline is equally problematic. How can you buy out the current owners at a fair price and still put in anything affordable? Especially how can you do it without over taxing an infrastructure not meant to support building of those sizes?

While the green line helps, people who can afford the rents of living near the T almost all, ironically, have cars. Most of the new proposed development I see is going to leave a lot more cars on already over crowded streets.
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Great article! Union Square has changed dramatically in the last few years since I've lived here, and it will continue to change. If the city is serious about keeping Union Square a diverse, affordable, family-oriented community once the Green Line comes in, it needs to start encouraging more projects like this. Otherwise we'll have another Davis Square, and the families who make Somerville great will be displaced.

No matter what gets developed here, it will increase the density of Union Square. But that's a good thing! Urban density is more sustainable and family-friendly than empty lots and suburban mcmansions. This project will bring much-needed affordable and market-rate housing, retail, and green space. Let's think of it as a model for future redevelopment in Union Square.

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