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Planning Somerville's Future

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If you don't know where you're going, any path will take you there. That was too often the case in the past, when city officials did not set clear goals for the city's future guided by an agreed-upon vision for the future.

They approved developments that generate relatively low city revenues on land that could support higher-value uses. They approved conversions of commercial properties with high tax rates and low municipal costs, to residential uses with low tax rates and high costs. The result was a structural fiscal deficit.

Now, the mayor wants to set destinations and define the paths that will take us to them, and he wants to involve as many Somerville residents as possible in doing so. Leading the effort are staff from his Strategic Office of Planning and Community Development (SOPCD).

Keith Craig, who is guiding the effort, explains that a provision in Massachusetts General Law authorizes municipalities that wish to, to prepare a comprehensive plan. It's comprehensive because it includes plans for economic development, housing, open space, city services, recreation, and transportation; and because it must account for how each of those elements interacts; and because it must anticipate future trends.

Imagine the nested Chinese boxes or carved Russian dolls that are sold in gift shops. You open one to find another. You open the next to find yet another, and so on through a dozen boxes.

Now imagine that Somerville is the middle box. Within it are boxes that represent the elements being planned for and conditions shaping them within the city. Surrounding it, boxes range outward, from regional dynamics to global economic forces. Finally, imagine that each box is in a state of continual change, affecting and sometimes transforming the boxes around and within it.

Understanding those dynamics is quite a challenge in itself. And the comprehensive plan must provide clear guidance for future decision makers while allowing sufficient flexibility for trends and events that cannot now be foreseen.

Two events that **can** be foreseen are the arrival of the Orange and Green Lines. There is a finite amount of time in which to make plans that will maximize the opportunities they bring, while minimizing such risks as gentrification. What with conducting the comprehensive planning process at the same time, SOPCD staff are busier than a one-legged planner in an ass-kicking contest.

That planning process begins, as it should, with exhaustively collecting and rigorously analyzing those data that describe Somerville's economic, housing, population, and transportation trends. Accurately understanding how they brought us to this moment, while combining this information with regional and national trends, creates a baseline for understanding where we are going. While our city faces the same challenges confronting many cities, we are only 4.2 square miles in scale. So as Keith Craig explains, "Somerville is a microcosm of all the challenges going on in the world, but in a manageable space."

SOPCD staff are conducting a series of open meetings to inform residents of their research findings and solicit insights regarding their meaning. In the next step residents will work together to set a vision for the city's future. Much of the visioning will occur in large public forums in which the price of admission is participation.

SOPCD Executive Director Monica Lamboy anticipates that different participants will inevitably be passionate about different issues. She hopes to conduct a productive conversation-bounded by the finite realities defined in SOPCD's real-world data analysis-through which participants can understand how their issue fits into the whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

The forums' results will go to a 56-member steering committee composed of representatives appointed by the mayor, aldermen, superintendent of education, school committee, key departments, and community organizations. They will prepare drafts of what they've heard and how it has influenced their thinking.

The drafts will go back to the public participants and form the basis of a dialogue between them and the steering committee, from which the committee will draft goals, policies, and action plans.

Once finished, the plan will guide creation of an updated General (land use) Plan, which has not been revised since 1989. It will attract investment to the city by giving developers and commercial tenants comfort about what they can expect within the districts in which they might locate. And it will sensitize and position public and private city leaders to take advantage of future opportunities.

This is a rare moment when it is possible to shape Somerville's future for generations to come. Everyone, who cares about our city should participate. You can learn more, review research produced to date, and find out about participation opportunities at the Comprehensive Plan's website. Go to www.somervillema.gov/, click on "City Departments," and then link to SOPCD. On the right side of the page will be the comprehensive plan link. You can send questions and suggestions to Mr. Craig at krcraig@somervillema.gov.