



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
MAYOR'S OFFICE OF STRATEGIC PLANNING & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
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MAYOR

TO: Somerville Planning Board and George Proakis, OSPCD Executive Director
FROM: Sarah Lewis, Planning Director
DATE: June 6th, 2019
RE: Union Square Parcel D2 Applications

As you are aware, the Planning Division has been reviewing the Design and Site Plan Review (DSPR) submittal for the D2 sites, as well as some interesting alternative plans, over recent months. After much debate, internally and externally, along with a lot of research and fact-checking, the Planning Department has decided to support the design for the D2 parcel that has been submitted to the Planning Board for DSPR in accordance with the Somerville Zoning Ordinance Section 6.8 Union Square Overlay District, with some minor proposed amendments and/or conditions.

The Neighborhood Plan (<https://2xibcm3dmb5g12akbzq9ef2k-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Union-Square-NP-FINAL-WEB.pdf>) was developed over many years, with public input and collaboration amongst neighbors, professionals, and elected officials. As with any community, some of the players change and new people bring different opinions but that should not undermine work that was previously completed. While a Neighborhood Plan is not a static document, each decision cannot be completely revisited at every implementation step or forward progress will never be made.

Every effort has been made to respond to neighborhood concerns, whether voiced by a few or by many, as the Planning Department takes the custodianship of our city seriously. Whether the information provided is the answer desired or not, we will always seek out facts and provide our perspective in response to the issue. Our peer review engineer and a financial feasibility expert have reviewed the cost estimates for the alternative parking option. Rather than revisit these cost estimates and peer reviews, this memorandum will discuss some key financial and timing issues, and then focus on the merits of the proposed urban design – specifically the building program, the civic space, and other citywide considerations.

Financial and Timing Considerations

The process of development is a risky proposition given the great deal of risk involved with constantly changing variables. There are often unforeseen slowdowns in schedules, increased land/materials/labor costs, and challenges of contamination or infrastructure that can all alter expenses and, therefore, the bottom line. It is important to keep in mind that the “bottom line” is not just about profit, but the very feasibility of the project itself. While we often hear, and agree, that the City should not be encouraging excessive developer profit at the expense of the community’s well-being, we do know that we cannot achieve our housing and job goals without developers reaching an acceptable minimum profit that allows them to keep developing in our city. The building program and construction methods are inherently tied to the factors mentioned above, as part of the delicate balance that makes a successful project.

The proposed design, and indirectly the proforma, for all the disposition parcels were schematically approved under the Coordinated Development Special Permit (CDSP) (https://s3.amazonaws.com/ifa.somervillema.gov/documents/US2-UnionSquare_CDSP_Application.pdf). The D2 parcel is the first submittal under the CDSP for review under the DSPR process and is faced with increased scrutiny and demands. However, this is not the entire project. As with any “first adopter” there is a necessity to push towards the ideal concepts of the future while still accommodating many of the current market demands and requirements.

A good example of this is the parking requirements. Given that D2 is the location of the Union Square Station directly at the MBTA’s Greenline Extension, in an ideal world the Planning Department would prefer a lot less or no parking at all. However, the reality of the project demands that vehicles still need to be accommodated in the near term. The number of spaces has already been greatly reduced from typical requirements. Investigations were even done to test the possibility of mechanical solutions and off-site parking scenarios. But, the project at this time requires parking and we now know that parking must be on-site. Moving the garage underground certainly would provide benefits, albeit at costs that are likely beyond the means of the project.

It is also important to consider the time it takes to bring a significant development project from concept to construction. Changing a substantial part of the building program or a construction requirement well into the overall process requires the project to be completely re-evaluated from a feasibility perspective. This is the case with changing the parking from an above-grade structure to underground. Regardless of the cost implications, extending the timeline for development of the D2 parcel causes a major problem for the development team, risks the loss of a biotech partner in the project (Skanska), and puts additional financial pressures on the City.

There are three financial challenges for the City created by further delays in this project:

- a. A portion of the sale price of this project site is due to pay for further improvements to the Union Square streetscape, particularly the design and construction of the plaza.
- b. A portion of the sale price of this project will pay off settlements for the original land takings. The payments for these settlements, in excess of \$2 million, are due in the end of September 2019, and the city would need to borrow funds for these settlements if the land sale does not close by that time.
- c. The taxes generated from this project is an important part of our FY 2021 (July 2020-June 2021) growth projection – these are the funds that allow us to continue to support

key city priorities including annual increases in school budgets and commitments to equity programs throughout city government.

Urban Design Considerations

The Union Square Overlay District was written to implement the goals established by the Neighborhood Plan and allows the Mid-Rise Podium Tower Building Type (6-story podium with a residential point tower up to 27 stories maximum) in High Rise zones. The building program at the station will not only move us 450 units closer to meeting our SomerVision housing goals, and will provide 90 permanently affordable units. While increasing the number of one- and two-bedroom units may seem counter-intuitive to supporting our local families, these new units allow singles and young couples to move out of room-mate situations in the larger (3- and 4-bedroom) homes in the residential neighborhoods and potentially making those available for families.

A residential tower is a new building type for the Union Square neighborhood so we believe it is important to make sure there is enough distance and buffering to the existing residential scale that is traditional to Somerville. The rear alley provides some of this distance from the Allen Street/Linden Street neighborhood and takes all loading and parking entrances off the main streets to reduce conflicts with pedestrians and provide for better streetscapes. The parking garage along the alley is 3-stories with a step-back to 4-stories of residential above which provides a massing transition of at least 150' from the proposed tower to the rear of the 4-story-zoned side of Allen Street. It also permits this side (at the alley) of Allen Street to evolve over time into multi-story residential buildings that can access their parking off the alley as well.

All the buildings provide retail spaces and lobby entrances along the plaza facing Prospect Street, where they can benefit from significant foot traffic as well as visibility from the street. There are many case studies that prove retail uses are not sustainable when accessed only by a limited population, such as commuters on foot. When buildings have internal-facing (not readily visible from a public street) retail it is more difficult to lease. Just as buildings which have two opposite-facing primary facades (street facing and internal/central) are difficult to service, especially from a retail standpoint. The proposed building program and design allow the retail spaces, even though not accessed directly from the Prospect Street sidewalk, to be more successful businesses, and the visibility supports more vibrant uses to activate the civic space.

We have given a lot of consideration to the location and design of the civic spaces on the disposition parcels and how those open spaces relate to the larger network of parks and plazas throughout the city. The nationally recognized Project for Public Spaces (pps.org) probably sums up good civic spaces best:

A successful public space generally needs to offer four qualities: it should be **accessible**, it should be **comfortable** and have a good **image**, people should be able to engage in an array of **activities**, and, it should be **social**.

... Another important but sometimes overlooked element of great public spaces is their ability to highlight an area's **cultural identity** - whether through local practices, location, history, design, architecture, or art. This is crucial factor for creating a sense of place that can withstand the test of time.

As D2 is the first project under review, there is a large amount of pressure and expectation that

this project alone will solve many of the neighborhood's wishes and problems. However, as approved in the CDSP, the civic space on D2 was always intended to be a Major Plaza - not the Neighborhood Park envisioned for other parcels.

The Union Square Plaza, in front of The Independent, will remain the heart of the neighborhood both physically and symbolically. The new plaza on D2 is, while allowing for gathering places and room for activities, primarily the pedestrian connection between the station and Union Square Plaza. The D2 plaza, as designed, provides a safe and pleasant walk to and from the station, although staff will recommend some design updates to make it even better. There is plenty of visibility from the adjacent street and the new residential units from a personal safety and comfort perspective. Plus, wayfinding is inherent with the historic Post Office and the old Fire Station on Union Square Plaza being visually prominent from the station to help orient visitors to the neighborhood.

Even if the financing required to locate the parking underground was no object, the D2 parcel could not support a park instead of a plaza. A central green space surrounded by residential buildings may feel more like a private space than a public space, and be less welcoming to those moving through it. It is important to note that the cost estimates for the one-story underground garage assumed a plaza on top of an underground garage, not a park. A park (with shade trees and possible water features) would require a garage structure to be buried even deeper than the current assumptions and needs a much heavier structure to support backfill on the top for there to be enough soil depth to support significant tree growth. The landscape design is not yet completely finalized and additional conditions will be added to ensure all requirements are met or exceeded, but the D2 plaza along Prospect Street is the right solution for the constraints in this location.

Somerville is extremely fortunate to be a transit-oriented community especially with the transit system expanding to better serve us. As planners and urban designers, it is our responsibility to coordinate amongst agencies, departments, and disciplines to maximize the benefit from these infrastructure investments. Good station areas are an integration of land use and transportation with concentrated residential and employment uses. This is why the density of uses is proposed to be so much higher near the T stations than in other parts of the city – such as the residential areas that we desire to conserve. Station areas are generally considered to be within a ¼ mile or 5-minute walk so this includes the historic areas of Union Square and the Boynton Yards Transformational Area.

The Planning Department, along with neighbors and elected officials, is aware of the shortcomings of the MBTA's station design. Many different city departments have been attempting to negotiate and alter aspects of the station but we are aware that the MBTA agreed to build the Green Line only under their strict program of cost and design control. The City has focused instead on how to ensure that station designs could evolve in future years. Nonetheless, the pedestrian entrance to the station is unlikely to move from the Prospect Street bridge position, now or in the future. Therefore, the location and orientation of the proposed plaza makes sense - it feeds directly to the station entrance. Furthermore, there are community concerns about equity and accessibility that have not been adequately addressed by the MBTA design. The City, in collaboration with the US2 team, will work to design and build an elevator

from a landing near the Prospect Street bridge to the plaza by the station entrance,

There are also a number of other benefits that good urban design can provide, including:

- Transit-oriented development allows residents to live car-free if they choose - helping towards our SustainaVille goals (<https://www.somervillema.gov/sustainaville>) of reducing Vehicle Miles Traveled and Green House Gas emissions.
- Development of former industrial properties provides an opportunity to clean up or mitigate environmental hazards and tainted soils. The D2 parcel has a history of contamination (as do many of our Transform Areas) that will be remedied by new development.
- All three buildings on D2 will be built to LEED Gold standards to increase the sustainability of the development both during construction and over the life of the buildings – which includes reduced energy usage.

These factors should not be overlooked or underestimated as city-wide benefits.

While the proposed urban design works well, there is still work to be done. Staff will be recommending conditions on this approval or adjustments to the project to address a few remaining issues, including architectural treatments on the podium tower, and design of the alley-facing garage. These will be forthcoming with the staff recommendation at the June 20, 2019 meeting. But, at this point, I hope the Planning Board will join me in moving forward with making the DSPR application, based on the US2 urban design strategy, the best it can be, so it can be approved and construction can begin in 2019.

Thank you.