

City of Somerville
Mayor's Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development
Powder House School Site – Real Estate Analysis

Meeting Minutes

Tuesday, May 19th, 2009, 6:30-8:00 pm
TAB Building, Community Room, 167 Holland Street

Summary:

This initial community meeting is intended to introduce the Real Estate Analysis project, and to solicit ideas from attendees regarding what re-use or redevelopment scenarios should be examined in detail.

Minutes:

Monica Lamboy, Executive Director of the Mayor's Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development provided a welcome and introduction. Ward 7 Alderman Bob Trane was running late due to traffic, and was therefore unable to deliver opening remarks.

Ted Carman, President of Concord Square Planning and Development, Inc. of Boston introduced his firm and the scope of work that his firm would be completing. Concord Square was hired by the City in a competitive bid process to perform a detailed Real Estate Analysis of the former Powder House School site. The firm brings significant expertise in planning for the re-activation of vacant municipal properties, as well as a neutral, outside perspective to the site. The work will involve preparation of detailed cost benefit analyses for 3-4 re-use or redevelopment scenarios that are most acceptable to the community. The purpose of tonight's meeting is to narrow down the list of potential scenarios to be analyzed in detail.

Mr. Carman provided an introduction to the site, reporting that the Somerville School Committee had closed the school in 2003 due to declining enrollment and high operational costs. The City conducted re-use studies in 2004, 2005 and 2007; these studies were specifically focused on one type of re-use scenario at the site (municipal office use). Each study concluded that rehabilitation costs for the existing building would be high, ranging from \$6.5 million in 2004 to \$14.5 million in 2007.

The site is well-served by bus routes, and is a short walk from Davis Square, Teele Square and Tufts University. It is a large site (roughly 81,000 square feet, or 1.9 acres), and is located in the "Residence A" (RA) zoning district. The existing building contains approximately 100,000 square feet of net floor space.

Alderman Trane observed that the City had sold the old Junior High School (now known as the TAB Building) to Tufts years ago. Today the City leases space in the TAB Building from Tufts for office and community use. He suggested that the City might

achieve cost savings if programs currently housed in the TAB Building (Council on Aging, Somerville Center for Adult Learning Experiences) could be relocated to a City-owned property.

Attendees began brainstorming ideas for re-use scenarios. Mr. Carman suggested that he shift away from his prepared slide presentation and begin recording ideas from attendees. Several attendees suggested that a goal should be to get the property back on the tax rolls. Ideas for private re-use included commercial uses (office, artist studios), residential uses (apartments, senior housing, privately-run graduate student housing) as well as private, fee-based garage parking. Questions were raised about other types of commercial uses including retail and hotel development, and whether these would be compatible with the neighborhood or attractive to developers.

Several attendees suggested that the site should incorporate public, community or non-profit uses. Ideas for community re-use included arts-related uses, recreation uses (indoor and/or outdoor), educational uses (library, adult education), and municipal or non-profit office uses. Several attendees expressed a desire for the site to support youth programs or recreation opportunities.

Ted Carman observed that a hybrid public-private re-use scenario might be the best way to meet the needs of all stakeholders. In a hybrid scenario, some portion of the site could be reserved for public or community space, while another portion could be leased or sold for private use. The consultant team would be able to prepare calculations on the land value and public expenditures/savings under different hybrid scenarios.

Gerald Boyle, the City's Director of Capital Projects introduced himself and provided additional background on the 2004, 2005 and 2007 municipal re-use studies. Due to changes in building codes, any re-use of the existing structure would require major expenditures to meet safety and accessibility requirements. The 2007 study estimated these costs to be \$14.5 million.

Several attendees asked whether other City properties would be factored into this study. Monica Lamboy noted that the City is currently working on a new citywide facilities plan, and that the Powder House School study would draw from that big-picture perspective. The Powder House School project, however, will go into far more detail than the citywide facilities study.

Conclusion:

Alderman Trane made closing remarks, thanking attendees for their time. He noted that Concord Square would continue working with city staff to synthesize all of the ideas expressed tonight, and would report back to the community in June with draft calculations.

The meeting concluded at 8:00 pm.

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