

City of Somerville  
Mayor's Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development

## **A Vision for Porter Square**

### **Meeting Minutes**

Monday, May 18, 2009, 6:00 PM  
Kennedy elementary School Library, Room 325

This and all the Porter Square Visioning meetings are open to the public and we encourage all residents and business owners to participate.

#### **Summary:**

This third of four community meeting was focused on reporting back on the visual survey and aerial photographs of each block analyzed by participants. They were able to see how each block fits into the urban fabric of the community, made comments on what they like or dislike about a particular block, and identified what they would like to change or preserve.

#### Minutes

David Guzman began the meeting by providing an overview why the City was conducting a visioning process for the surrounding Porter Square area. Then, he moved on to make a power point presentation that summarized the history of the area, identified challenges and changes coming to the Squares in the area, and review the conditions of the build environment.

#### *Presentation:*

Monica Lamboy began his portion of the meeting by recapping the previous meeting Ms. Lamboy continued the visual survey process by presenting the comments developed at the May 11<sup>th</sup> meeting. Participants were then encouraged to add more comments on what they like or dislike about a particular block/area, and identified what they would like to change or preserve based on the ideas of the former presentation.

Here are the highlights of the meeting:

#### Visual Survey

- The Vision process involves strengths, impediment to development, what do we want to keep and preserve and opportunities.
- Rail road site is a physical barrier between the two communities surrounding Somerville Ave.
- How do we reconnect neighborhoods?

#### Somerville Ave: Galleria to Beacon St.

- Develop mixed use on top of the tracks
- Find a way to link both sides of tracks through new development•
- Mixed use commercial (1stfloor) /residential (top floors)

- Rezone this stretch so it's friendlier to small business like the florist –not to national chains.
- Hotel potential

#### Additional comments

- Keep rail roads as open green space.
- Ms. Lamboy explained that the MBTA owns the Air Right over the commuter rail line. The City does not have any control over State land, but when it goes to private development, the City does have control through Zoning.
- This visioning process is trying to put policies in place that will help eventually what happens on that site. Air rights is inheritably more expensive to build
- Ms Lamboy explained that the Vision process is about what the people/community want to see, what we typically do is putting policies in place in the zoning that determines height, size, dimensional configurations, and then the private market will come and move forward – we are talking in general terms- at this area, the City does not have a particular project
- A resident proposes open space and a park on top of the rail roads
- Trees and more green space from Galleria to Beacon St. a resident express concern in trees maintenance along Somerville Ave. corridor. The City is starting a city-wide tree inventory.
- Some residents pose that they want to keep the rail roads as they are.

#### Beacon Terrace to Beacon St.

- Bike lanes continuous.
- Install prominent new platform with stairway/ elevator access
- Replace rusty old chain link fence on west side of Somerville Avenue facing the railroad tracks with aesthetic railings.

#### Additional comments

- Useful to have better access to the commuter rail platform from Beacon Street and Somerville Ave.
- Open space was suggested on top of the rail roads.
- Another entrance to the T-station could be a possibility to discuss.

#### Somerville Avenue: Adelaide Road toward Wilson Square

- Consider rezoning Somerville Avenue to promote small businesses.
- More trees along avenue
- The eventual spillover from the Arts Institute at Lesley offers the potential for small art-related business that might be perfect for small shops or the development of the shallow lots that abut the tracks.

#### Additional comments

- Mostly the area is zoned RB, which currently allow small scale businesses in residential areas.
- Residents stated concerns about increasing traffic in the area under study.
- Pedestrian safety is always priority. Low scale pedestrian-traffic lights in key intersections on Somerville Ave. are vital and crucial.
- Wilson Sq. is horrible, the mix of business is not appropriate for the area, and the traffic is heavy.
- Porter St. traffic in both lanes in the area is a critical and sensitive matter for residents.
- Continues street retail along the Somerville Ave. and Wilson Sq. would be appropriate for the commercial development of the area.

#### Somerville Avenue: Wilson Square Mall

- Concern with cut-through traffic next to Laundromat is a problem.
- Building has its ugly back to Elm Street.
- Replace the strip mall with a building with commercial on ground floor, parking underground, and residential on top floors.
- Look at historic building on site for inspiration
- More small business storefronts would be appropriate at Somerville Ave./ Elm St. juncture.

#### Additional comments

- The gas station is a opportunity site to some development more friendly. The City requires to provide more incentives like parking requirements and design to attract new development
- A resident would like the idea of transforming Wilson Square as a destination connecting Porter Sq. and Union Sq. instead of still using it as a cut-through.
- Residents were asking on how to mitigate traffic concerns on Somerville Ave. during and after of the reconstruction process. The City's Traffic Engineer was requested to answer question in next meetings.

#### Wilson Square Car Wash

- Too much pavement.
- Very auto-centric.
- Make it more people-oriented.
- Air rights needed
- Parcel is so shallow

#### Additional comments

- Pedestrian underpass requires more promotion. Folks out there do not know that there is a way to pass across Somerville Ave. and Beacon street.
- A resident mentioned an option to create a road to connect Somerville Ave. and Beacon St.
- Reduces car-auto uses in the area and increase retail activity.

### 369 Beacon Street

- “My dream for Somerville Ave. and Beacon St. is that they become so lively and attractive that people want to walk along them between Porter Square, Union Square and Inman Square.”
- Gas station site should be a gateway to Porter Square and Beacon Street
- Need more open space (parks) and trees.
- Need to have better crosswalks at Oxford St./ Beacon St. / Roseland St./ Bridge – more pedestrian friendly.
- If access road needed for hotel passenger drop-off/pick up, build it behind the hotel, not in front.
- Access to hotel needs to be pedestrian-friendly.

### Additional comments

Ms. Lamboy showed the architectural drawings of the proposed hotel on the 369 Beacon street site to the audience. This initiated a conversation on how the community perceives the potential development. Participants continued to identify key elements that should be addressed previously before development.

- Questions before review process on operational issues: people arriving taxis, bike lanes, accessibility to the site.
- There is not a public hearing yet scheduled.
- They are proposing an electronic parking system to accommodate two cars per slot parking.
- Ms. Lamboy presented the design that involves alternatives to Taxi cab drop off – where DPW, Traffic and parking and Bicycle coordinator were met to provide input on how to mitigate it.
- Ms. Lamboy will make sure that there would be enough space to people make through the sidewalk.
- Star Market parking site could be an opportunity to provide valet parking to potential hotel guest and restaurant customers.
- A resident proposed to use the Air Right over the tracks adjacent to the site for additional development. However, Ms. Lamboy mentioned that the T has not made available the Air rights yet. Nothing can be done on top of the rail roads.
- The MBTA has ownership on the Air Rights.
- Length of the development, if funding, could be potentially less than a year.
- Building pattern to feel like the pattern of buildings in the area. Closeness to abutting residential areas should be discussed in more deep.
- The proposed hotel needs a crosswalk to provide pedestrian safety. That area is pedestrian at all the time. There’s no crosswalk between the Beacon St. Bridge and the Star Market site. Developer should explain how traffic would be mitigated and how pedestrian safety in the area would be addressed.
- A resident mentioned that the design looks like is respectful in distances between residential houses and the house next to it. The point is that this developer is

working to keep something valuable in the community, and we cannot lose the opportunity to respond a plan like.

- A resident mentioned that there are differences reactions on the hotel both positive and negative. The traffic and parking has been a huge topic of conversation – what is the City’s projected number of cars? In terms of the design, we have some input the City feel comfortable with the project. The impact on locals and the traffic, it is a staff level; the traffic engineer has not have respond yet on the info provided by Planning Department.
- Suitable scale development – suburban parking code – diminishes the efficient amount of development. We don’t have the capacity to redo the parking code requirements. Ms. Lamboy explained reduction of parking requirements in Union Square because the transit oriented development.
- Alderman Heuston suggested coordinating valet parking in the Star Market- Beacon Street or Lesley parking lots for the hotel and other restaurants.
- Resident parking is necessarily on Beacon Street. The City needs to balance customers and resident parking.
- A resident mentioned some reasons why he does not want the hotel in the area.

#### Beacon Street at Oxford Street•

- Rezone Beacon Street so is friendly to retail at ground level. •
- Put in curb cut at crosswalk by Shaw’s on Beacon St. (East side)•
- Encourage development over Café Rustica. •
- Redevelop gas station site.

#### White Street at Elm Street•Rezone

- White Street and the parking lot behind it.
- Allow mixed use development in Somerville.
- Close to transit, would make great TOD site.
- Interesting idea to have businesses here.

### **Elements of Vision**

David Guzman wrapped up the meeting presenting the elements of a vision. Following are the crucial elements that are part of the vision process:

- Safe, pedestrian oriented streets
- Ground floor retail and small business uses
- Develop gateways with signature buildings (Wilson Square Triangle, & 369 Beacon)
- Provide more guidelines for new construction
- Appropriate development over MBTA tracks
- Incorporate open space into design
- Promote transit over automobile

Next Meetings:

Tuesday, May 26 at 6:00 PM

Drafting the Vision

- Brainstorming session on how the community feels about itself and what its future may hold.
- Traffic and parking issues. Participants will be able to interact with the City's Parking and Traffic department and have a glimpse on the current design status of the Beacon Street Streetscape Project.

**All meetings will be held in the Library at the Kennedy elementary School, 5 Cherry Street, at the intersection of Cherry Street and Elm Street.**

Conclusion:

The meeting concluded at 8:15 PM.

For more information, please contact David Guzman at 617-625-6600 Ext. 2546 or visit the City's web site at [www.somervillema.gov](http://www.somervillema.gov) under the section 'City Departments, Planning and Zoning'.