

September 13, 2017

Greg Karczewski  
Union Square Station Associates (“US2”)  
31 Union Square  
Somerville, MA 02143

Dear Greg,

As part of the Union Square redevelopment, Somerville’s Zoning Ordinance requires that the master developer, US2, build a “Neighborhood Park” equal to at least 27,000 square feet (0.6 acre) in size. As you know, the community fought hard throughout the Neighborhood Plan and zoning processes to ensure there would be high quality, usable green and open space in the form of a moderately-sized park for all to enjoy.

The final version of the Union Square Neighborhood Plan, which was adopted by the Planning Board, contemplated that the “Neighborhood Park” be located on a parcel of land (referred to as “D4”) adjacent to Webster Avenue between Newton Street and Concord Avenue—currently the site of multiple auto garages and a community garden. While the community and US2 agrees that the present community garden should remain on that parcel, there has been widespread concern that the rest of the site is not an optimal location for a new park. The location is adjacent to busy Webster Avenue and will be impacted by auto exhaust and noise; it is not centrally located; and, it is only two blocks from a much-improved, and much larger Lincoln Park, which is currently undergoing renovation.

Due to the limitations of the D4 parcel, two other locations have been under serious consideration for the new Neighborhood Park: **Merriam Street/Public Safety Building (D1) Parcel** and **Citizens Bank (D7) Parcel**.

We took a walking tour of these sites and were dismayed that, during US2’s open house on September 5th at the Public Safety Building, only D1 was shown as a serious option. Based on the open house, most people in the community would not know that D7 is even an option.

**We are writing to express our desire that US2 show both D1 and D7 as legitimate options**, with equivalent design descriptions and drawings, and **allow for public discourse and engagement on this decision**. The success of this park will be

determined by it being used. If the community is not part of the process to decide the location and design, there is a significant chance it will not succeed. There are good reasons for both the D1 and D7 locations and the community deserves to weigh in on this.

During the walkaround last month, members of Union Square Neighbors and Green & Open Somerville visited both the D1 and D7 locations, looked at shadow studies, and discussed the pros and cons of each site. We believe D7 is a better location for the following reasons:

1. **Centrally located to neighborhood business and uses:** This area is the heart of Union Square, the place where people walk through to go to cafes and small shops. The portion of the park that fronts onto Union Square is contemplated as an expanded plaza space in future streetscape designs, providing additional buffer from traffic and noise.
2. **Provides pedestrian connectivity:** The location could connect some of the existing public spaces in the square, from the Union Square Plaza (home to the farmers' market and festivals throughout the year) and Stone Place Park to the Walnut Street playground, for both pedestrians and bikes.
3. **Adjacent to low-income seniors and people with disabilities:** Properzi Manor, an 11-story public housing tower, abuts this location and has 110 units of low-income housing for seniors and people with disabilities, many of whom have mobility impairments and cannot make the climb to Prospect Hill Park or other green spaces several blocks away. The design of a park on Citizens Bank/D7 could be integrated into the landscaping and/or parking area of Properzi Manor to optimize park access for residents. The side of Properzi Manor itself could be the site of a large vertical mural that faces the new park and bookends the commercial district.
4. **Adjacent to planned family housing:** A large mixed-use building that is geared toward families is contemplated for the lot across Warren Ave where Goodyear is currently located. Up to 50 percent of the units on the Goodyear site may be affordable units according to the "off-site" rules in the new zoning. As a result, the Citizens Bank site would provide for a variety of mixed-income, intergenerational uses in a central location.

5. **South-facing Exposure:** The site has wide southern exposure, ensuring a sunny park throughout the year.

**Locating the Neighborhood Park on the D1 site, as displayed in US2's Open House, has drawbacks:**

1. **Entrance to park between two busy streets:** This location is between two of Union Square's busiest streets, putting park users at close proximity to car exhaust and noise upon entry and exit.
2. **Shadow:** The park would be located behind a 5-story parking garage and a taller commercial building—having the effect of putting the park in shadow for much of the late afternoon and evening, particularly during winter months. The shadows may not affect day-time users, such as office employees eating their lunch, but it would affect the quality of the space for local residents, particularly in the afternoons and evenings, when families and children return from work and school. This issue is addressed extensively in the zoning ordinance. Civic spaces must be sited and oriented to maximize their inherent exposure to the sun.[1] In its discretion to approve or deny a Special Permit authorizing a civic space without an ideal exposure to the sun, the Planning Board must find that is the "only available option" to provide the Neighborhood Park and that neighboring buildings of the directly abutting lots do not cast shadows that adversely limit ground level access to sunlight.
3. **Location:** This area is somewhat "off the beaten path," so the biggest risk of all is that we place our precious green space that we fought so hard for on a spot that does not get used, or is only used by commercial office employees. While pedestrian desire lines may change over time, it is not necessarily a "sure bet." Previous iterations of planning documents showed this location as an opportunity for residential townhomes, which could be good housing stock to create homeownership opportunities in a neighborhood that is approximately 80% rental apartments. We also note that the Neighborhood Plan calls for the creation of a large park with playing fields on nearby Charlestown Street near the future MBTA Green Line Station and many residences on Allen, Linden, and Merriam Streets.

Citizen's Bank (D7) will offer residents, workers, and passersby a place to meet, take a break, eat lunch, and play. It will be a compliment to the busy Union Square Plaza—offering an alternative civic space to relax that is quieter and more green—yet only

steps away from the hustle and bustle than we also enjoy. We think this oasis in the vibrant heart of our square cannot help but succeed.

However, **our desire for the park to be located on D7 is not as strong as our belief that this must be a well-publicized community discussion.** If you seek out the residents and engage them in this process, you will also get community buy-in. That is something we can all get behind, no matter the location.

Sincerely,

Rob Buchanan, Chairperson  
On behalf of **Union Square Neighbors**

Renée Scott, Co-Founder  
On behalf of **Green and Open Somerville**

CC:  
Mayor Joseph Curtatone  
Somerville Board of Aldermen  
Somerville Planning Board

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[1] See page §6.7.9.B.2 Union Square Overlay District, Somerville Zoning Ordinance, available at: <http://www.somervillema.gov/sites/default/files/2017-07%20Zoning-Union%20Sq%20FINAL%206.9.17.pdf>