

**Union Square Neighbors, General Meeting,  
NU Cafe, 197 Washington Street  
March 26, 2017**

**Members of the General Public in Attendance: 42**

**Elected Officials in Attendance:** Bill White, Dennis Sullivan, Katjana Ballantyne, Bob McWatters, Maryann Heuston, Mary Jo Rossetti, Mark Niedergang.

**Overview (Rob Buchanan, Chair, USN):**

- Founded in 2014, with an earlier iteration in 2009, Union Square Neighbors (USN) [www.unionsquareneighbors.com](http://www.unionsquareneighbors.com) is a neighborhood association dedicated to making sure Union Square becomes an even better place to live, work, and play. Its by-laws call for a General Meetings to be held 4-6 times a year.
  
- **Union Square background:**
  - Green line extension is now expected to be completed in 2020 or 2021.
  - USN defines the Union Square neighborhood to include Boynton Yards,

East Union Square to McGrath, Prospect Hill, West Union Square, Duck Village, Lincoln Park, and Brickbottom. All the areas around Union Square are affected by what goes on in the Square.

- SomerVision (2012)  
[www.Somervillebydesign.com](http://www.Somervillebydesign.com) was a city-wide community process laying out the goals of the City. It envisions 30K new jobs, 6K new homes, 125 acres of *new* open space. As part of that larger plan, the Union Square neighborhood will have 15.5K new jobs, 2,350 new homes, and 12 acres of open space. With the current 6000+ units, 2,350 new homes would constitute a 40 percent increase. The Plan also calls for 12 acres of open space, which would double the current open space.
- How will it happen? in 2012, the Board of Aldermen (BOA) passed a Union Square Revitalization Plan  
[www.somervillema.gov/sites/default/files/UnionSquareRevitalizationPlanFINAL\\_0.pdf](http://www.somervillema.gov/sites/default/files/UnionSquareRevitalizationPlanFINAL_0.pdf) which kicked off many more planning steps. The plan empowers the Somerville Redevelopment Authority (SRA)  
[www.somervillema.gov/departments/somerville-redevelopment-authority](http://www.somervillema.gov/departments/somerville-redevelopment-authority) to take

land by eminent domain and to hire a master developer and establish a contractual relationship with the developer. The D ("development") blocks are areas in Union Square are part of this process.

- A large number of community groups have met and become involved. They include:
  - **City-based groups:**
  - Somerville Redevelopment Authority (SRA)
  - Civic Advisory Committee (which appears to have been put on hold)
  - LOCUS [www.somervillema.gov/news/innovative-public-benefits-model-be-created-through-city-partnership-locus](http://www.somervillema.gov/news/innovative-public-benefits-model-be-created-through-city-partnership-locus)
  - City Planning Board
  - Design Review Committee
  - Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development (SPCD)
  - **Neighborhood-based groups:**
  - Neighborhood Council
  - Green and Open
  - Chamber of Commerce
  - Union United
  - Union Square Neighbors
  - Union Square Main Streets

## Discussion of Community Benefits

[www.unionsquareneighbors.com/land-use-and-community-benefits.html](http://www.unionsquareneighbors.com/land-use-and-community-benefits.html)

### (Rob Buchanan and JT Scott):

- Benefits related to development include: affordable housing, arts & community, good jobs, green and open space, public safety, small business support, mobility (green line, traffic mitigation, complete streets), and public realm
- Our community benefit enforcement and mechanisms include:
  - **Zoning Overlay**  
[www.somervillema.gov/sites/default/files/Proposed Union Square Zoning Overlay Map.pdf](http://www.somervillema.gov/sites/default/files/Proposed%20Union%20Square%20Zoning%20Overlay%20Map.pdf) (basically, "R" stands for residential, "C" for commercial)
  - **Master Land Disposition Agreement**  
[www.somervillema.gov/departments/ospc-d-economic-development/union-square-revitalization](http://www.somervillema.gov/departments/ospc-d-economic-development/union-square-revitalization), a contract between SRA, and US2 (the current Master Developer for Union Square). The Mayor's Office is not planning to significantly change MLDA, including how development will be phased-in. The Mayor's staff is signing it directly with the master developer (US2)

and will not released it until it is finalized. Also, the Mayor will not sign it until it has been presented to the BOA and the public.

- **Development Covenant**, this contract between the City and US2 will stipulate that the developer needs to negotiate a Community Benefits Agreement with a duly-appointed Neighborhood Council. The Covenant will include provisions for assessments, such as a per square foot tax on the development of the Green Line, as well as considerable expected infrastructure costs, including water and sewer. We also understand that the City will impose a community benefits fee which the developers will pay into a fund. A community benefits ordinance will outline how these funds will be distributed.
- **Community Benefits Agreement** (Contract between Neighborhood Council and master developer)
- **Coordinated Development Special Permit**. Once the zoning gets passed, everything has to go before the planning board for approval.

### **Comments from the audience:**

- I am concerned that we won't have a document that will be used for future developers.
- There is also a state review/approval step that we need to add to the outline.
- USN has been learning more from the meetings with the Mayor than the BOA has learned.
- Until the zoning passes, we cannot move to the last step (coordinated special permit review)

### **Discussion of Zoning Ordinance Open Issues (Tim Talun)**

- **Will there be enough open space? What constitutes open space?**
  - The definition has gotten clearer in the most recent zoning proposal, and no longer includes sidewalks.
  - We must think comprehensively about open space. At this point, it seems that we have just leftover open space.
  - When we passed those open space goals as part of SomerVision, we should have

created a committee that developed a long-term plan for acquisition and development of open space. If you look at transformative neighborhoods in Cambridge or Boston, they set aside far more open space. Unlike other issues, such as parking, once open space is gone, it is lost forever; we'll never get it back. It is critical that we get this right before it is too late and the gate closes.

- **When will we see new jobs and commercial tax revenue to offset infrastructure investments?**
  - **Jobs:** Expectation is that they will flow from D2 block first -- within two years of the opening of the green line station.
  - What kind of jobs will be created?
  - Strong emphasis on seeing some of the spillover from Kendall into Union.
  - Every commercial development square foot provides three time the tax revenue as residential.
- **Housing:** Want to make sure there are family-sized housing and ownership opportunities. Low-income and moderate-income units are especially challenged.

- **Public realm:** Tim demonstrated how critical it is that we get it right before construction begins and certificates of occupancies are issued. He listed three projects with different attributes, built in Somerville, and other cities, respectively, under the current zoning:
  - 70 Prospect Street vs. Bartlett Square condominiums. Bartlett is set back to create an open and green space.
  - Trolley Square vs. Washington Street 195-197. Trolley Square has far nicer quality of public spaces, both in front *and in the back*. Trolley Square also has covered parking.
  - Millbrook Lofts near Twin City Plaza (receiving an variance from the Somerville Planning Board) has less than 10% open space -- just a small gravel area. Setbacks matter.
  - **Comments:**
    - We must consider the open spaces we already have today, like the view from Prospect Hill park. Do we really want the horizon broken by tall buildings?

- The D6 block (Midnight Convenience) can be as high as five stories, *with no height limit* per story.
- In a shadow demonstration, using slides, Tim Talun demonstrated the need for more studies -- especially given the dramatic and negative changes produced when a building goes from 70 to 110 feet. The entire social center of Union Square would largely be overshadowed.
- **Design review:** What input will the community have?
- **Parking:** Area needs garage for 1,500 cars.
- **Comments/Questions:**
  - Why such a delay on the Prospect Street redevelopment? Currently, any land owner can build under the current zoning. Even though it was designated as a development area, they were able to build under the current zoning. That's a concern we have about delaying. It'll be all residential (rental) five-story zoning. Nothing moves forward without the zoning passing. Need to set the ground rules for what's going to happen next.

- What's the right height on the d-6 block?  
Somewhere between 80 and 85 feet.
- Why did the Millbrook lofts get a variance on open space? I think it was the Zoning Board of Appeal which decided. Developer claimed they could not fit all of their surface parking in.

### **Residential versus commercial development.**

This was perhaps the most critical point raised at the meeting. Commercial development (i.e. lab space) generates far more tax revenue for the city than residential construction and is critical to pay for the considerable cost of new infrastructure (including its share of bringing the Green Line to Union Square) facing the city in the years ahead. Unless commercial predates residential construction, the city may soon face dire fiscal consequences. Various solutions have been batted around, and at today's meeting it was proposed by many that two years of commercial construction should take place before residential, including critical affordable housing development, commenced.

## Union Square Neighborhood Council (JT Scott)

- **History:** The Civic Advisory Committee/LOCUS eventually morphed into an effort to create a grassroots and consensus-based Neighborhood Council that can steward the community for decades, empower community, increase economic opportunity and promote independence and inclusion.
- Specifically, the Council will: a) Identify community needs; b) Analyze impacts of public proposals; c) Analyze proposed project and coordinate public feedback; d) Negotiate community benefits meeting; e) Monitor and seek enforcement of community benefits (and have legal standing to sue); f) Authorize distribution of community benefits fund, and g) Monitor progress in meeting community goals.
- **Comments/Questions:**
  - How do we make sure that all of the voices will be represented? *Anything that gets presented to the Board of Aldermen will have a thorough public process representing different philosophies and views.*  
How long would the elected terms on the Neighborhood Council be? *It would likely*

*be an interim council. The one-year term would allow for the creation of a permanent Council.*

- Member of Union United [www.unionunitedsomerville.com/](http://www.unionunitedsomerville.com/) and Green and Open Somerville [www.greenopensomerville.blogspot.com/](http://www.greenopensomerville.blogspot.com/).  
The Neighborhood Council should undertake enforcement and have legal standing to file lawsuits.
- MLDA not clearly defined.
- How can we vote on anything unless we know that the developer operates in good faith?
- All the letters submitted by Union Square Neighbors can be found on its website ([www.unionsquareneighbors.com](http://www.unionsquareneighbors.com))
- Every dollar an organization such as the Neighborhood Council spend on staff takes critical resources away from the community benefits fund. Volunteers are therefore very important.
- City trimmed funding for tree canopy for no known reason.
- How can someone get involved? Probably by showing up at the next Neighborhood Council organizational meeting, which is in

the process of trying to formulate and agree on by-laws.

**Traffic Calming (Renee Scott):**

The process to get traffic to slow down has been long and frustrating. On the positive side, speed limits have, thanks to the efforts of the USN's Traffic Calming group, assorted enthusiastic souls, and members of the Board of Aldermen, been reduced in many parts of the City. However, speed limits, while an important tool to reduce speeding, is not the most favored way to reduce the speed of automotive traffic in the city, it is somewhat autocratic and relies on expensive enforcement. Rather, we wish for the drivers themselves to experience the side streets as a neighborhood with green spaces, pedestrians, many of whom are children. The idea is that the streetscape itself should be designed in such a way that it enhances the driving experience and thus discouraging speeding. This is not just a pipe dream; many communities have successfully completed such enhancements which has led to lower speeds and greater awareness of the streetscape. This includes a system of *neighborways* <http://www.somervillestreets.com/>, which we are currently in talks to establish at Prospect Hill and in the Lincoln Park area of the City. We hope to be able to expand on this development at the next USN General Meeting, *tentatively* to be held, also at NU Cafe, on the

last Sunday in May, or first the Sunday in June, from 2-4 PM.

End