

March 6, 2007

**Union Square Neighbors Zoning Petition:  
Proposed Revisions To Zoning Amendment For Union Square  
PUD C, PUD C-1 and Arts Overlay District**

**To The Board of Alderman,**

A significant number of Somerville residents living close to Union Square only recently became aware of proposed zoning changes in the Square and surrounding areas. Many share concerns that the proposed zoning could do **serious long-term damage** to the quality of the neighborhood. A cluster of 140 foot towers in the middle of a close-knit neighborhood of two- and three-family homes is a potential recipe for urban blight. Proposals for similar projects around the country have met with significant opposition. Today's approach is to replace them with multi-family homes and dense, low-rise neighborhoods.

***We believe that by working closely with the City, we can achieve a vibrant, transit-oriented neighborhood in Union Square and Prospect Hill that preserves the unique qualities of Somerville, improves the supply of affordable housing, enhances local business activity, and improves the fiscal condition of the City.***

A group of Union Square neighborhood residents formed over the past two months to explore possible consequences of the proposed zoning and look for **ways in which the City's proposal might be improved**. Several group participants are urban planning professionals. Attached is a copy of the City's zoning amendment that incorporates the suggestions of the group as modifications to the existing draft (included is a copy in with changes noted in redline and a copy with all changes accepted). Also attached is a comparison summary of the changes the group suggests to the October 12 City petition.

The objectives of the zoning amendment as written by the City appear to be:

- **Improving the business climate in Union Square,**
- **Branding Union Square as an Arts District**
- **Expanding the City's tax base,**
- **Generating immediate revenue for the City through sale of surplus property**
- **Increasing the number of affordable housing units in Somerville.**

Our goal in suggesting changes to the proposed zoning is to **support the City's objectives listed above, while protecting the quality of the neighborhood and the character of this Square.**

Our concerns are as follows:

- Context

Residential towers, such as the 140 foot towers proposed here, are only appropriate in certain contexts. (Assembly Square and NorthPoint in Somerville and Cambridge are good examples of where towers can work well, where there is no immediate small scale residential context, and no neighborhood is violated.)

We believe that comparable residential density can be achieved with four story buildings within the Square, and 5 story buildings along the western edge of Prospect Street. Ricky's site, the Public Safety Building site, the Kiley Barrel Site, and additional properties to the east of Prospect Street in the C-1 PUD should be limited to 6 stories. With this approach, density goals can also be met in settings more

appropriate to Union Square and the surrounding small-scale residential neighborhood. With windows that overlook the neighborhood streets and sidewalks, new residents and families will be encouraged to be part of the social and economic fabric of the square and the City. The area surrounding Union Square is in many ways a wonderful example of what current urban planning best practices (e.g. New Urbanism) aspire to, with compact walkable neighborhoods, small scale of buildings, access to transportation and local retail.

- History

The proposed towers will apparently be the same height as the top of the monument at the summit of Prospect Hill, where the first American flag was flown. This local historic site is a treasure. Violating the views from Prospect Hill, and competing with its height, is a sad slap in the eye for American history. We are aware of no neighborhoods in the Boston area or beyond where a cluster of towers has been integrated successfully into a compact historic urban neighborhood.

- Environment

Somerville is among the most densely populated cities in the country not because it has massive high-rise apartment buildings, but because it has minimal parks and open space. The proposed towers will inevitably have essentially no access to local open space, and provide a poor living environment, especially for families.

The towers will block winter sunlight from a large number of houses, as well as from the few open spaces in the neighborhood, in particular Union Square itself, in addition to blocking large areas of the sky and views. In a densely populated urban neighborhood, sunlight is important to health.

Additional traffic generated by what amounts to a 10% proposed increase in Somerville's population in a very concentrated area of intersections with, already, one of the highest traffic counts in the region will increase congestion and pollution, adding to the already unacceptable incidence of asthma in the City.

- Traffic

Traffic is already a serious problem in Union Square, and it is not clear how much any of the current proposed traffic improvement schemes can help the current situation, let alone after the development of up to 1.6 million additional square feet. Concentrating massive proposed population increases directly adjacent to one of Union Square's major intersections can only worsen the situation. **Distributing density through more careful zoning can help.**

- Sustainability

The "three pillars" of sustainability, recognized today across the world, are **the environment, the economy, and the social fabric**. The expectation of an eventual Green Line spur to Union Square offers Somerville the opportunity to achieve greater sustainability in all three areas. The Green Line has the potential to reduce reliance on cars, with a positive impact on the environment. It will also enhance the local economy. However, with the zoning as currently proposed, the impacts on the social fabric are more likely to be negative.

**Davis Square in Somerville has flourished without upzoning**, and would almost certainly lose much of the character that has made it successful since the construction of the Red Line extension if the kind of zoning proposed for Union Square were in place. Scale, character, and continuity are important.

- Economics

The long-term approach to generating sustainable economic development in Union Square is to make it a thriving mixed-use community. By creating a livable, walkable community, we can encourage ground floor commercial use of an appropriate character, increasing the city's tax base where it really matters. By making these kinds of uses available to people, surrounding residential neighborhoods will flourish,

and as those property values increase so will the city's tax base. That means more and better quality commercial interests will want to locate in Union Square – and so a positive feedback system is set up. But the vital element necessary for this, for making a place where people will want to walk and talk and visit, is the quality and character of the physical space, including the light, the sunlight, sky, and presence of a neighborhood. These qualities are much reduced by the presence of outsized buildings, making up a 120' wall across the southeastern portion of sky. The City risks blighting the square, creating streets bordered with multiple levels of parking with housing towers perched on top. The uncertain timeline for completion of the Green Line spur makes this possibility even more real.

The result will do little to hold together the fabric of community in Somerville, or to preserve the mix of first-generation immigrants, ethnic groups, long-time and recent residents, workers, professionals, artists, and other groups that make Somerville a unique community. It will also do little for the development of an improved tax-base for Somerville, and over time may even erode it. Views of sky and sunlight and city have a significant impact on residential property values, and the proposed rezoning will have an impact over a large swath of property in Union Square and on Prospect Hill. Direct sunlight also affects the economic success of local businesses, as those businesses that are south-facing typically experience heavier foot traffic. Long shadows from buildings allowed by the City's proposed zoning would darken large areas of Union Square for most of the day during winter, and much of the day during autumn and spring months. This would have the counterproductive effect on local businesses by making Union Square a cold and uninviting place to pedestrians.

We believe that by adjusting the zoning, a better quality for the overall Union Square area can be achieved, with comparable overall levels of density. The goals of the City can be met, and the special qualities of Somerville as a community can be preserved.

We thank the Board of Aldermen for considering our suggestions. They come from the love we feel for Union Square. We offer them in the spirit of collaboration and from a desire to participate in the transformation our neighborhood.

Union Square Neighbors