



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS

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MAYOR

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Change is coming to Union Square. The opening of the Green Line Extension station by 2017 that our community has pursued for decades carries with it transformative potential. However, we do not want to transform Union Square into something else. We want to preserve what we love about Union Square, its unique character and diversity with its small businesses, ethnic stores, a vibrant artist community and affordable housing options. We must ensure that redevelopment in the neighborhood enhances and complements this historic commercial center. The new T station guarantees that there will be interest in redevelopment within the square. But if we want to ensure a balance between redevelopment and preservation as well as hold to our community vision, we must manage that change.

This is why the Somerville Redevelopment Authority will release a request for qualifications for a master development partner to work with the seven parcels identified for redevelopment in the Union Square Revitalization Plan. The developer must have a proven ability to preserve a unique sense of place in a distinctive urban environment, creating opportunities for economic growth and success in transit. Without a primary developer who will work with both existing property owners and the community, the future of Union Square will not be dictated by the community, but by an unfettered market that cannot ensure the realization of the community's goals determined by years of public processes including SomerVision.

Developed over two years of intensive discussion by community members, SomerVision calls for the creation in Union Square and Boynton Yards of 4,300 new jobs, 850 new housing units with a range of affordability, green and sustainable development, more public green space, transit-oriented and walkable streetscapes, and a true mixed-use neighborhood that seamlessly blends with the neighborhood and retains Union Square's identity. That follows the community-driven rezoning of Union Square in 2009, which reflected the community's desire to see new types of development, economic growth and employment opportunities in the area. These are smart, forward-thinking goals that a host of individual developers looking to develop small properties with what will deliver the highest financial return—luxury condos/rentals above retail—will not be able to provide us. The community did and will continue to do the important work of shaping the vision. I intend to do my part by making sure that vision is realized. A primary developer is key to that.

While a T-stop generates interest, it does not guarantee a vibrant neighborhood will appear around it. Sullivan Square or Alewife would look very different if that were the case. A primary developer will have the resources to contribute to the estimated \$50 million in infrastructure improvements that will improve the square for everyone, as well as the resources to address any



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contamination potentially located on sites that currently host light industrial uses.

A master developer will make it easier for the public to engage in discussions around the vision—and the details—for the square by offering a unified community process for feedback not just on individual projects within the master plan, but also on how they all integrate and jointly achieve overall community goals.

The now-forming Union Square Community Advisory Committee made up of residents and local community and business leaders will help select the primary developer and will continue to provide regular feedback and suggestions as plans solidify for the redevelopment parcels. Along with the public, they will ensure that we stay true to shared community values and goals. And there will be public processes every step of the way.

We can't wait decades just to see what happens. Davis Square grew more vibrant after the T arrived in 1984, but it's easy to forget that took decades—even though nearly all of the Square's infrastructure and office and retail space was already there. In Union, we have acres of blighted properties that will not be as easily transformed. Of the 490 brownfield sites in Somerville, approximately 25% are located within the boundary of the Revitalization Plan, an area that represents just 4% of the land in the city. Single developers tend to shy away from such properties. Master developers are skilled at transforming them.

There are plenty of success stories around the nation of master developers working within urban neighborhoods. In Portland, Oregon, 34 acres of former brownfields at the Hoyt Street Rail Streets—like a larger version of Boynton Yards—has become a mixed-use neighborhood filled with residences, restaurants, stores, offices, art galleries and parks. Mission Bay in San Francisco has changed from a 300-acre rail yard into a blossoming neighborhood of homes, biotech and lab space, retail, open space and a University of California campus.

A primary developer can pull together parcels by partnering with existing property owners or purchasing those parcels, creating the critical mass that can create the mix of uses the community wants over time. Properties in the Square are already being snapped up by speculators reaching out to owners who are benefitting from the value we have already created in the Square. A master developer will be tasked with making similar offers in the public interest. And that public interest goes beyond desired infrastructure or job creation goals. A primary developer will be able to better afford the higher affordable housing requirements the community requested via a community process for the square. Half of the blocks have been rezoned to require affordable units far exceeding the 12.5 percent state requirement with 15 or 17.5 percent requirements.

And let me be clear, eminent domain is a last resort. The RFQ will state unequivocally that the primary developer partner is expected to work directly with each property owner and either agree to a sale of the property or create a partnership, with the property owner essentially investing in the redevelopment of his or her property. Property owners will have choices, but we must retain this last resort option to avoid situations like in Teele Square, where a commercial building burned down more than a year ago. Now, an empty lot sits without a buyer, because as of yet the cost of purchasing and cleaning up contamination on the site has been too great to attract an investor for this prime location just minutes from Davis Square. We must also avoid the risk where one parcel holder holds the neighborhood at ransom with an exorbitant asking price and

thus remains undeveloped, causing a domino effect that affects redevelopment of surrounding parcels.

Should it come to this last resort, owners of parcels identified for redevelopment in the Revitalization Plan will receive fair market value for their property and relocation assistance and funds, and any purchases will happen only after an extensive public process including a public hearing, notification, written offer and State approval. We also want to keep current businesses that lend to Union Square's unique character in the square, and will work with those businesses to find them a home. Existing businesses like Ricky's that enrich the square must be a part of the solution. SomerVision's goals are not only about creating jobs, housing and open space, but about preserving what we already love about our neighborhoods.

We want to expand the conversation that began with SomerVision and continues at community meetings. On Thursday, Dec. 5 at 12:30 p.m., we will hold an online chat where you can ask me and our planning staff questions directly about redevelopment of Union Square. Questions can be asked in real-time on the chat, emailed in advance to my office at Mayor@somervillema.gov, or submitted by calling 311 in advance. A transcript will be posted on the City website and mailed to persons without Internet access upon request. To take part in the chat, please visit our homepage at www.somervillema.gov. A link will be posted a few days in advance.

I also remind all of you that each step of the way in Union Square, we will continue to have a dialogue between the City, residents and developers. I believe in our community, in engagement and in forming a consensus around the future of our City. It has worked before, and it will work again.

Mayor Joseph A. Curtatone