

Gilman Square City Redevelopment Parcels Civic Advisory Committee

Date & Time: Thursday, January 25th, 2024, from 5:30-7pm

This public meeting of the Gilman Square City Redevelopment Parcels Civic Advisory Committee was conducted via remote participation. We will post an audio recording, audio-video recording, transcript, or other comprehensive record of these proceedings as soon as possible after the meeting on the project website: <https://voice.somervillema.gov/gilman-square-plan-implementation>.

The meeting was held as a Zoom Webinar.

Meeting recording: <https://youtu.be/QRvlshWxzOo>

Meeting notes

1. Roll call and approval of previous meeting summaries.

Ben Demers, Economic Development Planner for the City of Somerville, welcomed attendees to the meeting.

Roll call:

- In attendance: Ram Kelath, Jack Lister, Jamie Cragnoine, Ben Elgart, Rachel Nadkarni (Staff), Ben Demers (Staff)
- Not in attendance: Jennifer Koerber, Lisa Natale, Brittany Vetter, Diana Marsh, Melinda Coneys, Casey Babbitt, Michelle Machado Moreira, Jesse Clingan (Councilor), Ben Ewen-Campen (Councilor)

CAC members did not express any comments on previous meeting summaries. A quorum was not present to approve the summaries.

2. First public comment period.

No public comment was made.

3. Check-in regarding development of City-owned parcels and the potential use of urban renewal in Gilman Square.

Staff provided an update to CAC members regarding development of City-owned parcels in Gilman Square and the potential use of urban renewal at the Mobil station at 360 Medford Street. A CAC

member had asked at the last meeting about the potential for moving forward on an urban renewal recommendation.

Staff noted that the Winter Hill Community School incident in June 2023 and the subsequent public consideration of how the Homans site (350 Medford Street) may be useful in the response has reinforced the need for the City to take a strategic look at its land holdings before moving forward with development on the Homans site. The City is still planning to complete a “disposition study” over the next 6-8 months that assesses all City-owned land and compiles priorities from the community and City departments. This feels necessary given how little land the City owns and how valuable this land is for making projects feasible. Staff stressed that this process will not ignore the community feedback received from the CAC thus far but rather will incorporate it.

Waiting to move forward with development will also allow staff and the CAC to wait out more of the current real estate cycle, which is making a lot of development teams conservative in their project scopes since construction costs and interest rates are high. It will also allow staff more time to apply for public subsidy to create a connection to the Green Line station as part of the development, since this will be difficult to fund through private development alone.

Staff noted that they have heard two main concerns related to this delay. The first is frustration around the timeline itself since many in the community want to see something built on the Homans lot. The second is the domino effect: Because the City has tied the potential use of urban renewal at the Mobil station at 360 Medford Street to the development of the Homans lot and is not ready to move forward with that development, then the decision around using urban renewal is left in limbo. Staff have heard from several community members that this creates anxiety for the owner of the Mobil station and makes other developers less likely to move forward until there is more security.

Because of the second concern, staff noted that the CAC can at any time choose to make a recommendation regarding the use of urban renewal, which staff will communicate back to the Somerville Redevelopment Authority (SRA) and relevant City departments. This recommendation would likely take the form of a letter. It would then ultimately be the SRA’s decision whether or not to rule out the option of urban renewal in Gilman Square.

Staff noted that while the advantage of making this decision now would be security for land owners in the neighborhood, the downside would be that the City and SRA would not be able to use urban renewal as a tool for neighborhood redevelopment when the City is ready to move forward. This may make it particularly difficult to combine the Homans lot and the Mobil station, though staff noted that they would not preclude a private development team from combining the sites in the future. Staff also reviewed the community’s goals for the site that CAC members have collected, including a “no hill” route from Medford Street to the Green Line station, affordable housing, civic spaces, and more activity in the square. Not combining the sites will not necessarily preclude any of these uses, it just changes the scale at which they can be delivered.

Staff also noted that CAC members would want to consider that urban renewal would likely take 18-24 months if the CAC decides to recommend it in the future. Staff will need to conduct additional outreach,

draft a plan, and then have that plan approved by the SRA, the City Council, and the State's Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities.

Lastly, staff noted that even if CAC members choose to make a recommendation against urban renewal, they will still give feedback on the rest of the project once the City is ready to develop the land it owns in Gilman Square.

A CAC member asked how the Committee would initiate deciding to vote. The CAC votes on consensus. If CAC members choose that they would like to send a letter, staff will draft a letter based on CAC member input over the next several meetings and review it in the meeting. Once the draft is complete, the CAC would vote to send the letter to the SRA, and staff would deliver it. Staff stressed that a letter could show differing opinions amongst CAC members, and that ultimately the SRA will weigh these differing views when making their decision.

A CAC member expressed that it does not feel fruitful to invest in this process until the City is ready to move forward, and that not having quorum at the meeting made it difficult to make a decision. It also does not feel fruitful without the full group to make a decision about urban renewal and would not want to take urban renewal off the table until a point at which CAC members could make a more informed decision.

A CAC member asked if it is possible to stop the CAC process without sending a final letter. Staff clarified that the CAC could go on hiatus without sending a recommendation at this time, but the CAC is intended to continue through the duration of development on City-owned land in Gilman Square.

Staff noted that whether or not an urban renewal plan exists, any private property owner has the right to take a project through permitting, so the owner of the Mobil station could move forward with a by-right project and the City and SRA would then need to assess at a future date whether or not the parcel still met the definition of "blight" needed to justify urban renewal. A CAC member asked if the Mobil station currently counts as blighted. Staff said it likely does, but this is ultimately for the City Council and State to confirm through the urban renewal process.

A CAC member noted that even if the Mobil station parcel is not combined with the Homans lot, it would be useful to see the Mobil station parcel become something other than a gas station given its proximity to the Green Line station, so he does not want to take the option of urban renewal off the table.

CAC members responded that, because the City is not ready to move forward, it feels like it would be more fruitful to have a conversation in the future and to potentially take a hiatus until that conversation can happen. CAC members did not want to decide this until a quorum could be met, so will revisit the topic at the next meeting.

A CAC member asked about the potential for hosting a community "chat room" to share ideas about the site and keep communication open while on hiatus, if the CAC goes that route. Staff noted that they can

update SomerVoice to be a space for more comment, or the Gilman Square Neighborhood Council could continue to collect ideas for the site.

4. Temporary programming update.

Staff updated CAC members that they are still working to secure a contractor to organize and implement temporary placemaking activities on the Homans lot and triangular park this coming Spring/Summer. They are also looking for someone to manage these types of activities at 90 Washington Street in the Inner Belt. Though staff had previously expressed hoping to release an RFP to find this contractor, they are now exploring using an existing on-call contract. They are currently working through logistics of this work with the Department of Public Works and the Police Department.

CAC members largely agreed that they did not see an issue with shifting to this method of hiring.

Once a firm is selected, staff will plan to have them join for a future CAC meeting to conduct additional engagement with CAC members about the desirable types of temporary programming on the site. At that point, the group will also revisit the notion of a hiatus until the disposition study is complete.

5. Updates from CAC members.

A CAC member noted that a development has been discussed at 234-236 Pearl Street that would be the “gateway” to the square from the grass. The developer is considering whether to build four floors by-right or to request a zoning change to allow for six floors. The Gilman Square Neighborhood Council would like community members to weigh in on this decision. Councilor Clingan is hosting a meeting on this on January 30th.

A CAC member noted that the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) is hosting a meeting on February 13th regarding McGrath Highway, which borders the eastern edge of the Gilman Square neighborhood. This meeting will be informational, rather than decision-making.

A CAC member asked why cars are currently parked on the Homans lot (350 Medford Street). Staff noted that this is teacher parking. The configuration of this parking may change with temporary programming needs.

A CAC member noted that the owner of 226 Pearl Street (the Pearl Street Studios) recently sold the units of the building to the tenants, which will hopefully help to stabilize the artists and the building.

6. Second public comment period.

No public comment was made.

7. Meeting adjournment.

The meeting adjourned at 6:50pm.