

To: Somerville Redevelopment Authority

From: Gilman Square City Redevelopment Parcels Civic Advisory Committee

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RE Urban renewal considerations in Gilman Square

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Summary

The Gilman Square City Redevelopment Parcels Civic Advisory Committee (CAC) would like to provide Somerville Redevelopment Authority (SRA) members with a summary of current considerations of urban renewal in Gilman Square. The CAC is tasked by the City of Somerville and the SRA with providing feedback to the City and the SRA regarding the redevelopment of City-owned land within Gilman Square and the potential use of urban renewal on an abutting Mobile Gas Station. This letter provides background on the work of the CAC thus far and priorities identified for redevelopment, as well as context for the current pause on planning for redevelopment of City-owned parcels as the City completes a study of its underutilized landholdings. It then considers options for how to achieve neighborhood goals, including potentially pursuing urban renewal ahead of completion of the City study so as not to further delay the process.

Planning background and the work of the Civic Advisory Committee

The Gilman Square Station Area Plan (SAP) was adopted by the Somerville City Council in 2014 and laid out the neighborhood's vision for "both public and private investment" around the Gilman Square MBTA Green Line Station. (See Exhibit A for the area covered by the SAP.) The plan envisions "a mix of service, employment, cultural, and transportation options" and "mixed-use development...to complement the surviving historic commercial buildings," and identifies several prominent parcels (both City- and privately-owned) for redevelopment.

One of the steps necessary to make the SAP a reality is to redevelop the City-owned land holdings among these prominent parcels, potentially in conjunction with adjacent parcels. These land holdings include:

- A site colloquially known as the “Gilman Triangle,” which is a steeply sloped lawn along the eastern edge of the intersection of Pearl and Medford Streets.
- 350 Medford Street, which was home to the Reid and Murdock Building / Homans Building before it was torn down to make room for MBTA laydown space during the Green Line station construction. This site is known colloquially as the “Homans lot.” This site is currently used for a combination of parking for Somerville High School staff and storage by the Department of Public Works. During Summer 2024, a portion of the site was also used for a temporary activation that included new ground covering and support for programming; that portion will remain publicly accessible until the site is redeveloped or maintenance factors cause it to be closed.

Although not a current City landholding, the SAP also considered combined redevelopment of 350 Medford Street with the abutting Mobil Gas Station site at 360 Medford Street, and a zoning and massing study commissioned by the City examined options with and without the Mobil site. (See Exhibit B for a Map of City-owned parcels and the adjacent Mobil Station.) One option considered to facilitate combined redevelopment has been urban renewal.

Neighborhood stakeholders have consistently engaged in elements of plan implementation. Since 2019, City staff have met regularly with the Gilman Square Neighborhood Council (GSNC) to discuss implementation of the SAP. This has included work around the redevelopment of 350 Medford Street such as workshops, review of the aforementioned massing study, and work to articulate desired community benefits.

Development of City-owned parcels is also linked to other elements of plan implementation. For instance, in 2022 the City produced 60% design drawings for streetscape improvements to Medford and School Streets and explored the possibility of closing the Medford Street Bridge east of the intersection with Pearl Street. This work is intended to be completed in conjunction with development of the site due to likely needs for dedicating a portion of the site’s street frontage to these improvements.

The Gilman Square City Redevelopment Parcels Civic Advisory Committee (CAC) was created in 2022 to provide a forum in which neighborhood perspectives related to redevelopment of these parcels can be collected and shared, both at the time of determining the direction of redevelopment and throughout that redevelopment process. Per a 2021 memorandum of understanding between the Somerville Redevelopment Authority (SRA) and the Somerville City Council, the CAC format of engagement was selected due to active considerations of urban renewal at 360 Medford Street; however, the group will provide feedback on the redevelopment of City-owned parcels regardless of whether urban renewal is used. The CAC is made up of diverse stakeholders appointed by the Mayor representing residents, businesses, and non-profit partners, along with two city councilors, Ward 4 Councilor Jesse Clingan and Ward 3 Councilor Ben Ewen-Campen. The CAC meets every 1-3 months.

Once the CAC was formed, CAC members and City staff conducted additional engagement to identify community priorities for redevelopment of these parcels, given that eight years had passed since the adoption of the SAP. (In these eight years, the MBTA also significantly changed the design of the Gilman Square Green Line Station, which was initially intended to have a bridge crossing the Commuter Rail line through Gilman Square and a headhouse that opened onto Medford Street at its intersection with Pearl Street.) This outreach was aimed at reaching a range of voices within the neighborhood and included workshops with Somerville High School students and senior residents of Pearl Street Park and tabling during several public events. Community priorities included (but were not limited to):

- Providing a “no hill” route from the intersection of Medford and Pearl Streets up to the GLX station entrance, due to the steep grade of School Street leading to the existing station entrance. This could be achieved through improvements such as an elevator, funicular, or escalator, which could possibly be integrated into a future development to make costs more feasible.
- Supporting and complementing existing local businesses, and bringing more quick, casual, low-cost dining options (such as coffee, sandwiches, etc.) to the square.
- Including a variety of comfortable outdoor public and green spaces available year-round, accessible for all ages and abilities. A strong need was expressed to create more space for teenagers, given the sites’ proximity to Somerville High School.
- Addressing neighborhood flooding.
- Prioritizing housing on the upper floors.

The CAC’s goal is to address community priorities both through the type of development as well as through negotiated benefits from development teams. A coordinated approach to development that pulls in City resources and/or contributions from multiple developers in the area can also help achieve benefits that a single developer could not deliver.

CAC members have also reaffirmed a strong community desire to develop 350 Medford Street in combination with the abutting Mobil Station at 360 Medford to create a larger and more efficient development parcel that will help achieve greater community benefits. CAC members also expressed wanting to avoid an outcome in which a gas station is located directly adjacent to an MBTA station, and in providing improved food options to what is currently provided by the Mobil convenience store.

While the CAC continues to meet, planning for redevelopment of the City-owned parcels in Gilman Square has paused while City staff complete a study to create a strategy for disposition of all underutilized City landholdings. This study was spurred partially by an incident at the Winter Hill Community Innovation School in June 2023 in which a piece of cement fell from the ceiling, which both highlighted the need for a citywide strategy to use City landholdings to respond to emergencies and made City staff directly consider use of the Homans lot for a replacement school (which has since been ruled out) or construction laydown space. (It also

builds on previous considerations by City staff to use 350 Medford Street to address other city needs, such as by locating stormwater infrastructure on the site to reduce neighborhood flooding.) However, CAC members and other community members have expressed an interest in continuing to explore steps towards acquiring the Mobil station without waiting for this study of underutilized landholdings to be complete, so that the process is not further delayed. Given the engagement that has occurred around these City-owned parcels and the immediate proximity to the Green Line station, CAC members feel a sense of urgency to have a clearer direction for development by the time that the real estate market has rebounded from its current downturn and development teams are taking on more new projects.

Potential next steps towards site redevelopment

1. Pursue urban renewal.

CAC members have expressed interest in moving forward with the process of urban renewal for the Mobil station while the City completes the study of its landholdings. Members expressed concern with waiting to pursue this option until after the study of disposition strategies is complete, given the sometimes significant time involved in creating an urban renewal plan. CAC members are asking SRA members to consider this option, which would initiate staff investigation into and community engagement around the use of urban renewal in Gilman Square. This is with an understanding that beginning this work does not commit the SRA or CAC to ultimately pursuing eminent domain of the Mobil station, but prevents a situation in which this question is unanswered until after completion of the study of disposition strategies. This is also with an understanding that this option may lead to a situation in which the community and SRA determine that urban renewal is not an appropriate tool at this site.

2. Explore alternative methods for incentivizing joint development of 350 Medford and 360 Medford

Beyond urban renewal, the CAC has also discussed some alternative strategies for achieving combined development of 350 and 360 Medford Street. Given that the City already owns 350 Medford Street, a member of the SRA had suggested at their February meeting that the City could use methods such as adding financial- or time-based incentives in any request for proposals (RFP) for development of 350 Medford Street to encourage the selected development partner to also purchase and develop 360 Medford Street. For instance, staff could offer a “density bonus” that allows a development team to build a taller building if they manage to acquire the Mobil station, or could provide time to a development team to attempt to purchase the Mobil station after being selected as the development partner. CAC members have expressed interest in having staff pursue this option if more efficient than urban renewal but stress the importance of achieving joint development of the sites.

Exhibit A: Map of the Gilman Square Station Area. (Source: Gilman Square Station Area Plan, 2014.)

GILMAN SQUARE STATION AREA



Note: The above map identifies the focus area for the Gilman Square Station Area Plan, centered around the intersection of Medford and School Streets, Medford and Pearl Streets, and Pearl and Marshall Streets in Somerville. This map identified the Gilman Square MBTA Green Line Station as opening onto the intersection of Medford and Pearl Streets; however, due to station redesigns and budget cuts, the station currently only opens to the west onto School Street and to the southeast onto the Somerville Community Path.

Exhibit B: Map of the approximate boundaries of City-owned parcels in Gilman Square (350 Medford Street and Gilman Triangle) and adjacent Mobil Station (360 Medford Street)

