

**MELROSE PLANNING BOARD
ZONING SUBCOMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES
Thursday, October 17, 2013
7:00 PM**

Basement Conference Room, Basement Level, City Hall, 562 Main Street

PRESENT: Anne DeSouza-Ward, Paul King, John Sadowski, and Jack Welch

ABSENT: Carla Morelli, and Sharon Petrillo

Denise Gaffey, Director and City Planner, and Adam Duchesneau, Assistant Planning Director, were present.

The meeting was called to order at 7:05 PM by Ms. DeSouza-Ward.

Commuter Rail Corridor Plan

Ms. Gaffey began by providing a brief recap of the public process which preceded the writing of the plan, including a brief overview of the two public meetings that were held. Eric Halvorsen from the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) was in attendance to give a summary presentation on the Commuter Rail Corridor Plan he had written. Mr. Halvorsen indicated that a good amount of public input fed into the recommendations of the plan. He noted that the plan essentially examined the ½ mile radius around each Commuter Rail station, but in particular it looked specifically at the study area for data and analysis. Mr. Halvorsen stated that boardings at the Highlands Commuter Rail station had been increasing each year since 2006. He went on to note that MAPC looked at the demographics, mode splits, and walkability of the two Commuter Rail stations in the Corridor.

Mr. Halvorsen indicated that new housing opportunities, preferred business types, neighborhood commuters, and the most valued assets of the Corridor were all discussed at each of the public meetings. Mr. King asked if the Deering Lumber site was going to be turned into an assisted living facility. Ms. Gaffey stated that it would require a zoning change for this use to locate there or, for an Applicant to seek a number of zoning variances, including a use variance. Mr. Welch asked, as this area begins to redevelop, where would the types of businesses that are located in this Corridor relocate? Ms. Gaffey indicated that an overlay district for the area has been discussed which would not make the existing uses in the area nonconforming. Instead, an overlay district would simply provide additional development opportunities for the current property owners in the Corridor. Ms. DeSouza-Ward indicated that she could see how an overlay district would make a lot of sense in that regard.

Mr. Halvorsen also indicated that RKG had performed a market analysis for the Corridor which looked at the potential demand for residential, retail, and office uses in the area. Mr. Welch asked if alcohol sales were allowed outside of the downtown. Ms. Gaffey indicated that they are, but there are only three permits that allow for alcohol sales in conjunction with a convenient store or food sales, all of which are currently being used. However, there are still plenty of dining alcohol permits which require an establishment to have a minimum of 50 seats.

Mr. Halvorsen then explained how the plan examined the existing zoning around the Commuter Rail stations, in particular their requirements for Floor Area Ratio (FAR), maximum height, front, side, and rear setbacks, and off-street parking, which are all viewed by potential developers as constraints to a property. He continued on to note that the BC zones around the Commuter Rail stations are one of the few locations in the City where mixed use development is permitted. In these BC zones there are no side or rear

yard setbacks and therefore, among other reasons, these parcels are more conducive to development options.

The summary presentation then turned to a discussion about the recommendations of the Corridor Plan. Mr. Halvorsen noted that the plan is suggesting to create an overlay zoning district where the BB/BB-1 zones are currently located and to replace the BC zones with new, transit oriented development (TOD) base underlying zoning. This TOD zoning should increase the FAR to 1.0 or 1.5 and increase the maximum allowable height to 4½ stories or 50 feet. Ms. DeSouza-Ward expressed concern that the streets in this area were too narrow to permit buildings of this height. Ms. Gaffey pointed out that there is already a 4-story building near the Cedar Park Commuter Rail station. Mr. Halvorsen indicated that the plan calls for taking some of the existing Smart Growth District design criteria and applying them to the Tremont Street/Essex Street Corridor.

Ms. Gaffey inquired how far the 185 Essex Street building is setback from the street, noting that she felt the front yard landscaping is a positive aspect of this project. Mr. Halvorsen stated that when there is a first floor residential use a larger front yard setback probably makes sense, but if there are commercial uses on the first floor of a building it would be better to have a minimal front yard setback. Mr. Halvorsen continued on to note that it may be beneficial to have minimum and maximum parking requirements for the Corridor which would allow developers the flexibility to determine how much parking is permitted or appropriate for a project. Mr. King noted that for higher density developments, a Zip Car or Car Share program would be able to cover a lot of trips from a site. Mr. Halvorsen also suggested creating a shared parking ordinance for residential and commercial uses, especially around the Commuter Rail stations. This would allow for maximum usage of parking spaces during certain peak times. Mr. Halvorsen then went over two development scenarios that had been modeled for a particular parcel in the Corridor using the existing zoning requirements and if the Smart Growth District requirements were implemented in the Corridor.

Mr. Halvorsen then noted that the Corridor could benefit from certain transportation improvements as well. He pointed out that attendees at the public meetings called for sidewalk improvements and indicated they really wanted bike lanes. As a response to this, the Corridor Plan suggests implementing a bike lane on the southbound side of Tremont Street. Ms. DeSouza-Ward inquired if it would be safer to have the bike lane on the same side of the street as where the cars are parked. It was pointed out that locating the bike lane here would increase the potential conflicts between parking vehicles and cyclists. Mr. King noted that sharrows would keep cyclists in the center of the travel lane and help to prevent cyclists from getting hit with opening doors. There was then some discussion about bicycle laws and cycle tracks. Mr. Halvorsen presented some images of safer pedestrian crossings, coloring for sidewalks to help identify walkways where there are wide curb cuts, and other possible streetscape improvements. He also displayed some images of possible short term solutions which included simple examples of using paint on walls to improve the pedestrian experience in the Corridor. Mr. Welch stated his concerns about the traffic in the Highlands area and noted that a traffic light coordinated with the train gates would work well here. Ms. DeSouza-Ward noted that she thought the Planning Board would be supportive of the recommendations of the Corridor Plan and that likely just the fine tune details would need to be worked out.

At this time, at approximately 8:00 PM, Mr. Sadowski arrived at the meeting.

Ms. DeSouza-Ward then asked what the next steps in the process would be. Ms. Gaffey indicated that the Zoning Subcommittee members should read through the Corridor Plan, brainstorm different uses that might fit into the Corridor, and look at the Smart Growth District zoning for particular criteria that may work well in the Corridor. Mr. King asked how the many of the different items that were being discussed could be realized in the Corridor. Ms. Gaffey indicated that the best way to see these changes occur would

be to change the zoning to create more opportunities for property owners in the Corridor. Mr. Sadowski stated that he was thinking about the Washington Street area and how it relates to the Tremont Street/Essex Street Corridor. He asked himself, if the Planning Board did not act and recommend the zoning changes to this area, would Melrose have the type of development that is occurring in this area now? Mr. Sadowski did not think projects like Stone Place would have occurred in this area without the zoning change. He also stated that he felt the new zoning should not take away any of the existing rights of the properties in the Corridor. Ms. Gaffey added that those in attendance at the public meetings expressed a lot of interest in seeing changes to the Tremont Street/Essex Street Corridor.

Mr. Sadowski pointed out that the property owners in the Corridor would likely view an overlay zoning district as adding value to their existing properties. Mr. King stated that the Commuter Rail corridor seems like it will be a good buffer to the residential properties to the west, but it may also be a negative that many of the properties in the Corridor back up against this rail line.

At this time, at approximately 8:30 PM, Ms. DeSouza-Ward departed the meeting.

Mr. Sadowski stated that the Zoning Subcommittee and Planning Board need to exert caution when thinking about new zoning in this area because there are a larger number of residences in in the Corridor compared to the Smart Growth District area. Mr. King stated that he felt mixed use properties and structures with reduced setbacks would help to bring down the scale of the Corridor and help it feel like more of a destination. Mr. Halvorsen stated that around the Commuter Rail stations there is substantial opportunity to make these areas more like destinations and then other parts of the Corridor could be made to feel more like neighborhoods. Mr. Sadowski asked if the Highlands and other satellite areas in the City could ever be destinations or will they always have vacancies? Mr. Welch stated that he thought these areas could become destinations because they used to be destinations many years ago. Mr. Sadowski stated that one approach to establishing these places as destinations again would be building up the infrastructure in these areas. Mr. Halvorsen pointed out that infrastructure and regulatory power are the two big tools that municipalities have to improve areas.

There was then a discussion about the parking situation in the Highlands area. Mr. Welch pointed out that those traveling to a destination in the Highlands neighborhood park on the side of Franklin Street where their destination is located and never cross the street. This is because the traffic and parking situation in the Highlands is rather difficult. Mr. Welch noted that traffic and pedestrian improvements should be examined to make it easier for pedestrians to cross Franklin Street in one direction or the other.

Meeting adjourned at 8:45 PM.