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January 6, 2010

REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON HOUSING AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

The Committee on Housing and Community Development held a meeting on January 6, 2010 with Chairman Rebekah Gewirtz presiding and Committee members Aldermen Walter Pero and Dennis Sullivan also present and voting. Also present were Alderman Maryann Heuston, Director of Housing Phil Ercolini, Director of Transportation Michael Lambert, Ellen Reisor from STEP, Wig Zamore, Dave Dahlbaka, and Scott Darling.

188521 – foreclosure prevention efforts:

Mr. Ercolini updated the committee on the various efforts being undertaken within the city to assist residents with preventing and dealing with the effects of foreclosures. Currently, the city's Constituent Services (311) Department is receiving eight to ten foreclosure related calls per week and directing the callers to the appropriate agencies offering assistance, among them, CAAS, SCC and Cambridge-Somerville Legal Services. CAAS has begun a canvassing program to inform individuals possibly facing foreclosure related issues of their rights and to provide them with a list of resources. To date, 122 properties have been canvassed with the residents at 48 of these being spoken to face to face by the CAAS volunteers. CAAS is actively working with eight families and is also tracking 8 new foreclosures per month. There may be more residents being affected by this crisis, however privacy regulations make it difficult to readily determine who might be in need of assistance.

The foreclosures in Somerville have been mainly on condos and two-family properties, with the concentration being found in Ten Hills, Winter Hill and East Somerville. Mr. Ercolini went on to say that President Obama created the HOPE program to try to deal with this issue, but it's not working, in part because many of the lenders holding the notes are secondary lenders. The Office of the Comptroller of the Currency and the Office of Thrift Supervision have reported that nearly 40% of homeowners who had their monthly payments cut by 20% or more last year were delinquent again within a year. Somerville will continue to work with those agencies offering assistance, but it is not in a position to assist financially. Because Somerville is doing better than many other communities, it's not eligible for many funding sources, particularly federal NSP dollars.

Alderman Sullivan asked that a representative from CAAS inform the committee if there have been any successes resulting from their program. Alderman Sullivan also inquired whether the city has a policy in place to keep foreclosed properties from becoming an eyesore due to neglect, (weeds, broken windows, unshoveled walkways, etc.). Alderman Heuston noted that once a property enters foreclosure, the lending institution owns the property and should be responsible for its care, therefore the city needs to track

foreclosed properties and pursue the lenders to make sure that they are living up to their obligations. Mr. Ercolini said that the City of Boston is currently attempting to do just that, but it's difficult to identify who the lenders are, since many of them are secondary lenders.

Alderman Sullivan's motion *that the Executive Director of the Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development develop procedures for determining who owns foreclosed properties within the city and to ensure that said properties are maintained in such a manner so that they do not pose a safety hazard nor inflict a blight to the surrounding area*, was approved.

Green Line update:

The deadline for submitting comments on the Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR)/Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Green Line Extension is Friday, January 8th. Mr. Lambert informed the committee that the Mayor would submit a letter to the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs, stating the city's position that the recommendations be accepted as the final document with the following conditions:

- eliminate the Yard 8 maintenance facility from consideration and continue the environmental assessment of Mirror Scheme H and Option L,
- complete the design and engineering to the Route 16 terminus at the same time as the first phase of the project so that if resources are made available, the Route 16 terminus can be constructed at the same time as the rest of extension,
- complete the 100% design of the Community Path from Northpoint in Cambridge to Lowell Street in Somerville and
- that the MEPA certificate require MassDOT to improve the multimodal connectivity at the stations during the design process and commit to a robust public process going forward.

Mr. Lambert said that the process for working on a re-design has not yet been defined and that the Mayor would be asking for clear a delineation of the next steps. Mr. Lambert also stated that there is a need for both a project advisory group and a maintenance facility advisory group. The state has some design concepts in mind but, at this point, the city does not. The station designs should, however, reflect the feel of the neighborhoods, with access being the key element. Each station should have clear connections to bus lines and the community path. The public process should be clear at all stages of the planning, design and construction and include ways to adjudicate problems as they arise. The greatest problem now would be a delay in the project so it is imperative that it move forward and stay on schedule.

Alderman Pero noted that the reason the city approved the city-wide permit parking was to prepare everyone for the future transportation events that will be effecting the city

Mr. Zamore told the members that he believes that the Mayor's letter, on balance, is good and he stressed the need for a public process. He also pointed out that the Porter Square corridor is very dense and lacks connections, so it would be beneficial if stations could be added there. Mr. Dahlbaka said that the project should include ADA provisions and that a survey of the economic potential of each stop would be beneficial. Mr. Darling told the members that asking for final acceptance might, in fact, delay the project should the state need to conduct further study on the conditions, and he said that it's important to get the money into the pipeline as soon as possible. (For the record, Mr. Darling noted that this is a state project, not an MBTA project.) Ms. Reisor stated that the city needs to partner with the state to make sure everything stays on track.

Chairman Gewirtz suggested that the Board of Aldermen express its desire to move the project along and there was a discussion about the best way to accomplish this given that the deadline is in two days. Chairman Gewirtz asked Mr. Lambert to prepare something and to circulate it to all members of the Board of Aldermen for review and approval. Alderman Pero suggested that if the full Board has not approved and signed-on to the letter/attachment in time, that it be forwarded with the unanimous consent of the Committee on Housing and Community Development.

The committee discussed matters before it and took action on the following item:

188383: Order - By Ald. Connolly and Sullivan, That the Director of SPCD advise this Board whether the City should adopt Appendix 120.AA in place of the energy efficiency requirements of the “base” building code.

RECOMMENDATION: Referred to the Committee on Environment and Energy

VOTE: Unanimous, 3 - 0 in favor

Alderman Rebekah L. Gewirtz, Chairman
Committee on Housing and Community Development