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April 5, 2010

REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON HOUSING AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

The Committee on Housing and Community Development held a meeting on April 5, 2010 with Chairman Rebekah Gewirtz presiding and Committee member Alderman Walter Pero also present and voting. Also present were Aldermen Maryann Heuston and Sean O'Donovan, Administrative Assistant Matt Dias, Robert May from OSPCD, Director of Transportation Michael Lambert, Stephen Mackey from the Chamber of Commerce and Joe Grafton from Somerville Local First.

189103 - approval of a letter to the MA DOT supporting the continuation of the Green Line extension to Route 16:

The committee discussed this issue and Chairman Gewirtz stated that she is pleased with the wording of the letter and thinks that the city needs to move forward with sending it. Chairman Gewirtz informed those present that Alderman Trane informed her he would not be at the meeting. Discussion then ensued about next steps the committee should take since all concerns the committee asked to make in the letter were addressed and members of the Board and the mayor have signed it already. The committee discussed the possibility of whether Mr. Lambert and Mr. Dias should make every effort to speak to any alderman having issues with the letter's wording and make changes, if possible, before the April 8th Board of Aldermen meeting. However, while Alderman Pero feels that the letter would have more force if all members of the Board of Aldermen signed it, he suggested that the committee approve the letter since the committee has done its due-diligence and the matter has been before the committee and ready for action for some time. He further noted that any alderman who has an objection would have an opportunity to be heard on the matter when the committee report is put before the Board on April 8th.

Alderman Pero's motion *that the Committee on Housing and Community Development approve the letter to the Commonwealth's Secretary of Transportation, as jointly written by the Mayor and the Board of Aldermen, with the understanding that any alderman having an issue with the language of the letter propose changes at the Board of Aldermen's meeting,* was approved.

Chairman Gewirtz asked about federal funding for the Green Line extension from Congressman Markey and Mr. Lambert replied that the federal government could provide planning that is less intense with more open dialog. The City of Medford still has not agreed to federal or third party planning for the extension and has yet to sign off on the agreement. OSPCD will keep the committee apprised of the situation.

188866 - the state of business in Somerville:

Mr. May reviewed a report analyzing business and employment trends in the city. In 2007, Health Service establishments in Somerville employed 3,760 people, followed by Retail Trade (3,031) and Administrative and Waste Services (3,016). The primary retail activity in the city, with respect to employment, is the sale of grocery products, yet there is much disparity in worker income when compared to workers in other businesses. Not only does Somerville's retail sector compensate its workers at a low level relative to other businesses, it also compares poorly to retail sectors in neighboring towns. Mr. May told the members that Somerville will partner with the City of Boston on employment training and that it has already partnered with Tufts University and Somerville High School on rehabilitative services. He also said that the city is looking at zoning in an effort to provide a marketable infrastructure to attract new business and that the city's policy for procurement will be reviewed in an effort to hire local retailers. Mr. May discussed the gap report for Union Square and told the members that the gap is the difference between what is available for sale and what is actually sold. The city is working with businesses and with Main Streets to try to lessen the gap. In Davis Square, there is a possibility of losing a retail business. Mr. May reviewed a questionnaire that will be used to get a better picture of the city's business community. OSPCD would like to work with SomerStat and the Chamber of Commerce to make the questionnaire available online. OSPCD hopes to begin collecting this information in June and have follow-up quarterly. Alderman Heuston inquired about the classification of workers being transferred to Somerville Hospital and Mr. May replied that the Bureau of Labor lumps all healthcare workers together, (e.g. doctors, nurses, janitors, technicians, etc.), and that since Somerville Hospital isn't registered as a Somerville business, its employment numbers count toward Cambridge's numbers.

Mr. Grafton addressed the members and said that there is less access to affordable credit for small businesses. Some businesses are having problems paying their rent due to the high cost of leasing property. The permitting process is difficult and businesses could use help to navigate the process.

Mr. Mackey spoke about a number of businesses having economic difficulty and noted the lack of data on this problem. Data collected from surveys and questionnaires might not necessarily be accurate, therefore Mr. Mackey feels that one on one conversations between business owners and their ward aldermen would yield more significant data.

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

189103: Communication from Mayor - Requesting approval of a letter to the MA DOT supporting the continuation of the Green Line extension to Rt. 16.

RECOMMENDATION: Should be approved

VOTE: Unanimous, 2 - 0 in favor

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