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April 6, 2010

REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON LEGISLATIVE MATTERS
MEETING IN JOINT SESSION WITH THE HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

The Committee on Legislative Matters convened in Joint Session with the Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) on April 6, 2010 with Chairman Thomas Taylor presiding and Committee Members Aldermen Robert Trane and John Connolly also present and voting. Also present were Aldermen Dennis Sullivan, William White, Maryann Heuston, Bruce Desmond and Sean O'Donovan, members of the Historic Preservation Commission, Monica Lamboy from OSPCD, Brandon Wilson from Historic Preservation and interested members of the public.

The committee met to discuss and to conduct a public hearing on a proposal to designate an additional 15 properties as local historic districts (LHDs) in the City of Somerville. Collectively the properties have been labeled as Group B: 1793-1865 and are comprised of the following:

- Boston Street LHD: 71-73 Boston Street
- Florence–Myrtle LHD: 67 Florence Street
- Florence–Myrtle LHD: 53-55 Myrtle Street
- Upper Franklin Street LHD: 74 Franklin Street
- Upper Franklin Street LHD: 80 Franklin Street
- Lowell LHD: 326-328 Lowell Street
- Lowell LHD: 342 Lowell Street
- Lowell LHD: 5-7 Lowell Terrace
- Lowell LHD: 28 Nashua Street
- Mt Vernon Street LHD: 17 Mt. Vernon Street
- Perkins Street LHD: 1 Webster Street
- Porter Street LHD: 31 Porter Street
- Somerville Ave-Union Square LHD, 461 Somerville Avenue
- Single Bldg LHD: 14 Everett Street
- Single Bldg LHD: 60 Linden Avenue

Ms. Lamboy spoke about the value of Historic Districts (HD) to the city, benefits to HD homeowners, criteria for property designation and gave a brief history of Somerville during the period from 1600 to 1865. Each property was described as to its historical significance.

The members discussed missed opportunities for preserving properties, such as One Benton Road and St. Polycarp's Church and asked how to prevent this from happening in the future. Alderman Heuston stated that the authority to designate a property as historic lies with the Board of Aldermen. Alderman White explained that Somerville's approach is to designate historical properties piecemeal instead of by district and he asked for information from other communities as to the methods they employ, whether they are limited by location and how many properties exist with historic designations.

Ms. Lamboy told the members that OSPCD is working on a plan to group properties into historic districts and she stressed that being in the program doesn't require an owner to do anything to the property, but if work is done, it would have to conform to the historic standards. By designating a property, the city could effectively "freeze" it from being altered.

Alderman Desmond asked if the designation might make a property more difficult to sell and if so, would funds be available to offset a portion of a loss from the resulting reduced selling price. Ms. Lamboy responded by saying that she has information on 10 case studies showing that the value of the properties increased as a result of the designations.

Alderman White requested that a simplified list of what can and can't be done to a historically designated property be provided and Ms. Lamboy replied that such a list is currently being developed.

Members of the Historical Preservation Commission said that they looked at a much larger list of properties before narrowing it down to these 15. Members also noted that any in-kind repair can be done as of right to a historically designated property. The Commission only has influence regarding the outside of a property and also has a hardship policy whereby the commission will try to work with owners whenever feasible to make it possible to keep properties in good repair.

PUBLIC HEARING:

In Favor:

- Martin Scott of 17 Mt. Vernon Street spoke in favor of the proposal stating that it's important to retain the look of the past, noting that it's part of being a responsible member of community
- Sarah Shugers and Peter Jehlen of 342 Lowell Street spoke in favor of the proposal saying that they believe that the HPC will work with homeowners

Against:

- Jose Barros of 71-73 Boston Street spoke against the proposal
- Rocco DiRenzo of 67 Florence Street spoke against the proposal citing difficulty in selling the property and increased repair costs
- Rosemary Roderick of 461 Somerville Avenue spoke against the proposal citing hardship circumstances
- Ms. Lamboy read a letter from Maryann Manfra of 31 Porter Street in opposition to the proposal

The public hearing was closed.

Alderman White suggested that perhaps the HPC could again state to those individuals who have objections why their properties should receive the historic designation. Alderman Heuston said that insight could be gained from speaking to individuals who own HD properties and from real estate agents who deal

with historic properties. Alderman Desmond asked the commission to provide an outline of just what assistance could be given, e.g., would members of the commission, or its staff, speak to potential buyers to promote the benefit of the designation.

Chairman Taylor requested that a communication be sent to the Administration inquiring if there are any tax credits that might be offered to owners of historically designated properties and that a response to this question be provided to the Legislative Matters Committee by May 15th.

The HPC will leave the record open for written comment until April 9th. The Legislative Matters Committee will leave the record open for written comment until April 30th.

No papers were acted on.

Alderman Thomas F. Taylor, Chairman
Committee on Legislative Matters