

WATERTOWN PLANNING BOARD

DATE: October 30, 2024 | PLACE: City Council Chamber | TIME: 6:00 PM | COMMENCED: 6:00 PM

PURPOSE OF MEETING: Public Hearing

PRESENT: Janet Buck, Chair; Abigail Hammett; Rachael Sack; Payson Whitney; Sarah Scott; Jason Cohen; Steven Magoon, Assistant City Manager for Community Development and Planning; Gideon Schreiber, Director of Planning & Zoning; Erika Jerram, Director of Community Design; Larry Field, Senior Planner; Matthew Neubacher, Planner

CONTINUATION OF PUBLIC HEARING

Chair Buck begins the continuation of the public hearing to review the proposed Watertown Square amendments to the zoning ordinance.

Continuation of Discussion of Zoning Text

Steven Magoon presents the *DCCDP UPDATES TO WSQ ZONING PACKAGE* document, reviewing each item in the document in order.

Regarding the first item, on the definition of Household, Member Sack reiterates the point made by Councilor Feltner at the joint meeting on 10/29/2024 concerning the scope of the term “housekeeping” in the proposed definition. She asks if more specific terminology should be used.

Regarding the fifth item, on including language regarding Universal Design, Member Whitney asks for clarification on what Universal Design means. Mr. Magoon explains it is a broad term used to describe good design.

Regarding the seventh item, on ground floor height, Member Cohen asks why there was a height limit to begin with. Mr. Magoon explains that the original height limit was a suggestion by a consultant.

Regarding the eighth and ninth items, on Flat Roof Stories and Step Backs, Mr. Schreiber acknowledged that the intent of these changes is to preserve historic facades and work with narrow streets where there are currently no sidewalks. Member Whitney asks if this text could define the types of lots or facades this applies to. Member Hammett follows and asks if these concerns can be addressed in site plan review.

Regarding the tenth item, on open space contributions in-lieu, Chair Buck asks whether the language should include language to the effect of, “...where it’s not possible to add open space.” Member Hammett confirmed with staff that a developer cannot give a piece of land as a contribution in-lieu that is not good for open space. Member Whitney asks who “The City” refers to in the proposed text. Mr. Magoon clarifies that the term is intentionally ambiguous to allow both Staff and the Planning Board to weigh in during Site Plan Review and Special Permits. Member Cohen asks if the proposed text removes financial contributions as valid contributions in-lieu. Mr. Magoon clarifies that a payment can be a contribution as intended in the text. Members Cohen, Sack, Whitney, and Chair Buck agree that the proposed text should specify “financial contributions” as an option for contributions in-lieu.

Regarding the eleventh item, on the definition of Open Space, member Hammett suggests adding balconies to the definition of Open Space. Member Whitney says that the Open Space requirements should reference both the definition of open space and the proposed text, to make sure they tie together properly. Chair Buck concurs. Member Hammett confirms with staff that the proposed text is a clarification of requirements and is not changing what is allowed, and Member Cohen confirms with staff that the Open Space requirements are set up such that a property may have (for example) 100% building coverage and 50% open space.

Regarding the twelfth item, on façade articulation, Chair Buck suggests replacing the word “may” with the word “shall” to read: “Buildings shall be required to...”. Mr. Magoon notes that the proposed text adds specificity to requirements expressed elsewhere regarding facades and fenestrations. Member Cohen asks if the proposed text is overly subjective and impossible to enforce. Mr. Magoon states the ambiguity is intentional, and Mr. Schreiber says the text allows room for incorporating the Watertown Design Guidelines. Chair Buck revises her point and suggests that stronger language should be used to articulate façade requirements. Mr. Schreiber suggests using the word “Will” to strengthen the language.

Regarding the thirteenth item, on unbundled parking, Member Cohen asks about the use of the word “encouraged” in the proposed text and comments that “‘encouraged’ has no teeth” for enforcement. Mr. Magoon notes that parking requirements will be different for commercial and residential projects. Member Whitney notes that the Board can use unbundling as a condition of approval for projects, and Mr. Schreiber confirms there is precedent for this. Member Scott requests adding unbundled parking to the list of subjects for further study, to review how it strategically ties into Transportation Demand Management (TDM) policies and TDM review, as well as impacts of removing overnight parking bans in the winter and how the city manages its public spaces overall.

Regarding the fourteenth item, on screening garages, member Cohen asks how screening is enforceable. Mr. Schreiber responds that the Planning Board can require this during review, and Mr. Magoon states it is important not to be overly prescriptive in writing code. Member Hammett notes that this provision gives the Planning Board a reason to bring up screening of garages and related façade considerations. Member Whitney clarifies with staff that the term “residence districts” refers to residential zoning districts.

Regarding the eighteenth item, on LEED requirements, member Scott notes that recent litigation contends that imposing LEED requirements preempts the Building Code and is not allowed per the Massachusetts Attorney General. She suggests that sites can be required to be LEED “certifiable” but not “certified”.

Regarding the zoning map changes to Arsenal St, member Scott questions whether to increase the density of the brick apartments on the south side of Arsenal St to WSQ3 zoning. Mr. Magoon notes that these properties would not meet the WSQ3 requirements.

Regarding the zoning map changes to Winter St, Mr. Magoon notes that the proposed changes will make one apartment building nonconforming.

Regarding the zoning map changes to Galen St, member Sack questions if there will be impacts on the west side of Galen from upzoning the east side properties. Members Whitney and Hammett

comment that the proposed upzoning will create a good transition from the residential lots on the south to the density of Watertown Square. Member Cohen says that it is good these lots are being upzoned because it gives incentive for them to be redeveloped.

Regarding the zoning map changes to Riverside St, member Scott notes that there exists an “inventoried historic district” – a concentration of historic buildings, as recognized by the Commonwealth – and suggests that the NMU zoning should be consistent across this neighborhood. Member Hammett notes that what is allowed in the NMU is nearly the same as what is allowed in the T zone. Chair Buck and Member Cohen ask if this is an example of spot zoning at someone’s request. Member Whitney asks if zoning these lots as NMU is meant to attract people and businesses, that rezoning gives incentive for redevelopment; Mr. Schreiber notes that the NMU allows residential-only properties. Member Hammett asks if these lots will be impacted by the changing street configuration of the Watertown Square Area plan, staff confirm it will not. Member Whitney says it makes sense for the proposed lots to be included in the NMU district, but also asks if the entire NMU area should actually be T 2-family. Mr. Schreiber notes that the existing structures all resemble NMU. Member Cohen asks if the Board should consider the motivations of the requestor. Member Whitney confirms with staff that the proposed lots are in common ownership. Chair Buck states that the Board can assume the owner has potential development plans or aspirations, and supports rezoning the two parcels as proposed.

Regarding the zoning map change to the Main St Delta, member Hammett asks if this use precludes any commercial uses on the delta, e.g., kiosks or activating retail. Mr. Magoon says it will not prohibit such uses.

Public Comment

Discussion concluded and the floor was opened to public comment. No members of the public presented comments. Member Sack stated she received letters regarding affordable housing and asked Mr. Magoon to reiterate the staff’s plan to move forward. Mr. Magoon reiterates the staff’s commitment to investigate the efficacy of various affordable housing incentives. As an issue that has received high levels of attention from several members of the Planning Board, City Council, and members of the public, staff will ensure that affordable housing receives constant attention moving forward.

Mr. Magoon asks the Chair to move forward with discussion and voting on the proposed zoning text and its amendments as presented during the hearing.

Discussion Summary

Chair Buck summarizes the previous discussion for consideration by the Board, as follows:

- Items 1-8 and 13-17 were all supported as presented.
- Regarding item 9, the Board recommended adding exceptions to the 12’ sidewalk width requirement. Member Whitney suggested language for this provision: “except where detrimental or not feasible”.
- Regarding item 10, the Board recommended adding “financial contributions” as valid contributions in-lieu for open space.

- Regarding item 11, the Board recommended tying in the Open Space requirements to the definition of open space.
- Regarding item 12, the Board recommended including the word “will” rather than “may” to strengthen the language on façade articulation requirements.
- Items 13-18 were all supported as presented.

Board Vote on Proposed Text

Payson Whitney motions that the Planning Board recommend the proposed zoning code with DCDP updates and changes as discussed during the public hearing to the City Council for consideration.

The motion was seconded by Jason Cohen and passed unanimously (6-0), with Janet Buck, Payson Whitney, Abigail Hammett, Sarah Scott, Jason Cohen, and Rachael Sack voting in favor.

Board Vote on Proposed Map

Payson Whitney motions that the Planning Board recommend the proposed zoning map with DCDP updates and changes as discussed during the public hearing to the City Council for consideration.

The motion was seconded by Abigail Hammett and passed unanimously (6-0), with Janet Buck, Payson Whitney, Abigail Hammett, Sarah Scott and Rachael Sack voting in favor.

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The motion to adjourn was made by Janet Buck seconded by Jason Cohen (6-0). Janet Buck adjourned the meeting at 7:51 pm.