

WATERTOWN PLANNING BOARD

DATE: June 14, 2023 PLACE: City Council Chamber TIME: 7:00 PM COMMENCED: 7:00 PM

PURPOSE OF MEETING: Public Hearing

PRESENT: Janet Buck, Chair; Payson Whitney; Jason Cohen; Abigail Hammett
Ingrid Marchesano, Clerk to the Board; Gideon Schreiber, Senior Planner; Larry Field,
Senior Planner

ADMINISTRATIVE BUSINESS

Jason Cohen motioned to approve Minutes of the May 10, 2023 meeting,
Payson Whitney seconded the motion.

VOTE: 4-0 In favor

PUBLIC HEARING - TO CONSIDER TWO CITIZENS PETITIONS PROPOSING WATERTOWN'S ZONING ORDINANCE AMENDMENTS

1. Reducing the maximum Floor Area Ratio in the Central Business District from 4.00 to 2.2

Amendments to be considered amend language as necessary, including to Section 5.04 and notes relating to the Table of Dimensional Regulations.

Janet Buck, we have received 2 citizen petitions.. The Board will discuss both and the staff will present staff report.

Gideon Schreiber, 2 separate petitions have been submitted:

We the undersigned registered voters of Watertown respectfully request that the City Council initiate an amendment to the Zoning Ordinance to change the floor area ratio in the CB District from FAR 4 to FAR 2.2, as shown in Section 5.04 Table of Dimensional Regulations.

We make this request out of concern that the current allowable floor area ratio is a relic of 1960's "spine" planning and design theory and is incompatible with the goals set forth in the Watertown Comprehensive Plan for Watertown Square cited on Page 33 of the plan. Zoning focuses on numbers and ratios, is difficult for residents to understand, and frequently does not address residents' concerns about the community's authenticity, historical heritage, and neighborhood scale.

We respectfully request that the City Council forward this request for the aforementioned zoning amendment to the Planning Board. We further request that the Planning Board be instructed to consider the requested amendment in the context of the Commonwealth's Smart Growth/Smart Energy Form-Based codes (FBCs). FBCs prescribe a "different vision of how development should occur. Focused more on the form of development rather than the use. FBCs use a larger neighborhood perspective to determine the mass of buildings, their design elements, connections between sites, and their relationship to the public realm."

Conventional zoning uses numerical parameters such as floor area ratios, height limits, and parking ratios while ignoring community intentions. The result is often development based on land use and not on the form, scale, and character of Watertown's distinct neighborhoods as envisioned in the Comprehensive Plan.

Payson Whitney, there are 2 elements of this petition. The second part contradicts the first part. I am not sure what the petitioners want. How did they come up with 2.2 being the correct number? What is the basis for that? A budget was approved by the City Council last night, part of it is \$50,000 for the comprehensive plan.

Janet Buck, my notes are similar. This proposal is out of the context, this is not the way to make the changes. The FAR was not always 4.0, this is a much broader context, these are very subjective items.

Jason Cohen, these are not new ideas, I am very much against these amendments as written. Article from Sarasota Observer states that form based codes are associated with wealthier cities that are mostly in California and Florida. There is time and place for form based, Watertown is no place for it.

Abigail Hammett, I agree with Jason, we have a zoning process that will start soon to look at the existing zoning for the CB zone and Watertown Square. There are restrictions in Zoning Ordinance that do not max out the FAR 4.0. Developers are not building up to it. The project under construction now would have been compliant. Small zoning changes would not make much difference.

Larry Field, staff recommends unfavorable vote. City Manager proposed budget includes \$200,000 for Watertown Square which was approved by the City Council last night. Watertown Square study will address all these issues, transportation, zoning, etc. \$50,000 is a separate plan that will start in July. Many planners are interested in exploring form based code, they will consider both. The process is already in motion, zoning is just one piece of the plan. For that reason we feel its appropriate to deny tonight's petition.

.....Friedman, I am in favor of form based codes. More large buildings should be part of the plan.

Clyde Younger, 188 Acton Street, my comments are applicable to both petitions. I have spend 25 years in government. This Board is suppose to be helping the community. The comments should be taken under consideration. I am in favor of the petition, we should not be dense. How did the Planning staff decide who should be notified? Petition may not satisfy all the city's needs. The City does not have a vision, people do. Visibility and transparency is important.

Janet Buck, there are 2 specific petitions in front of the Planning Board tonight. It would be more appropriate to discuss them with the consultant that is being hired for the Watertown Square and CB district study.

Clyde Younger, I have served on the City Council for many years. This Board can either vote on it or the vote can be postponed.

Jason Cohen, this petition is asking to change one number to other, that is it.

Gideon Schreiber, Planning Board is an advisory board to the City Council. They van continue the petition or provide a report to the Council for the final vote. Public can provide comments, many residents are also online.

Payson Whitney, if the Board decides to continue the petition, they cannot discuss the petition.

Tom Flores, 15 Cleveland Rd, I am here to advocate for free property rights. The proposed amendments would make it more difficult for businesses in Watertown Square. It would not allow businesses to grow, less incentive to update the buildings. I am asking the Planning Board to deny this petition.

Linda Scott, people have right to express their opinion. The Main Street project is as big as it can get, we need protection against such developments. People feel that the City is not listening. I have

attended the Comprehensive Plan meetings. 104 Main Street project will not provide housing that is affordable for our teachers, coaches, etc. People need to be respected for their opinion.

Jason Cohen, we do respect people's opinion, we just need more explanation of some of the items in this petition.

Janet Buck, our City Manager has experience in planning, he will participate in this process. If we do not agree, it does not mean we are not listening. We will hire professional planners who know about zoning. This is a big process, the City Manager will be very involved.

Joan Gumbleton, 32 Falmouth Road, the definition of a City is that its type of government that is guided by its citizens. Watertown is being used as a pass through, people will always take shortest way. More traffic will be added. There are many new apartments that have been build and now they are empty because people cannot afford them. People hear about these large buildings, 4, 5, 6 stories high. Boards and staff might have an experience but they need to look at the human aspects. Why to bother to attend the meetings, we don't want another Cambridge/Somerville. Tonight's petitions represent what people want now.

Abigail Hammett, we appreciate people's activism but people should speak for themselves not for the whole community. There are many opinions, lot of people feel differently.

Joan Gumbleton, we speak for the 200 people who signed the petition.

Jamie Gordon, 84 Fitchburg St, I hope that the Planning Board will not recommend approval. We want to create more attractive Watertown Square. Some older posters from the 80's did not have a problem with density. My family frequents local businesses, we need flexibility to go through planning process.

Jason Cohen, I am listening to all. We have to concentrate on the language of this petition. I apologize but we cannot change the language of the petition.

Jacqui VanLeeuwen, 27 Whites Ave, is the current project at 2.5 FAR? I like the project, density is needed, there is opportunity for business, it would revitalize Watertown Square.

Amy Plownick, 29 Ashland St, Watertown Square can accommodate more density that would support local businesses. I am looking forward to participate in the new process for Watertown Square.

Kathi Breen, 186 Boylston Street, I recommend to deny the petition. We do not need housing density, more needs to be build. All residents need to be listening to, Watertown is no longer small town. It is incorrect to say that all people are in favor of this petition.

Ernesta & Mark Krackiewicz, 77 Riverside St, density in CB district allows people to use transportation and provide affordable housing. I recommend to deny this petition.

Joshua Matlof, 19 School St, I recommend that the Board deny this petition. We need more density in Watertown Square. Changes should not be made before the Planning process. This petition is going backwards, this Board needs to listen to all of us, we need vibrant Watertown Square.

Paul Tamburello, 67 Oliver St, Main Street looks like Rote 6 on Cape Cod. This development should be voted down.

Janet Buck, please note that this is not about specific project, it is about FAR zoning amendment.

Sam, we do not have any analysis why to change the FAR. The government is doing a good job. FAR change will reduce the taxes, it will change/decrease the affordable housing. Will harm inclusionary zoning. Please do not recommend approval of this petition to the City Council.

Josh, I am concerned with merit and the process. This will undercut affordable housing. It will make development harder to comply. We need to attract small businesses and encourage foot traffic. Watertown Square planning process has RFP, spot zoning should not be allowed.

Elodia Thomas, 67 Marion Road, all housing does not have to be clustered in one area. Many units have been added in the last few years. Every community addresses this differently. We are asking for the Board to question this project. 104 Main Street went from 4 to 5 to 6 stories, the Board did not like it but it was approved. For are the benefits for the City, we will loose some buildings. Three companies answered the RFP for the Watertown Square plans. Lot is going on in this town, we are not architects but we see many issues, we expect the Boards to support us. The City Manager lives in Melrose, others in Somerville, Cambridge, Wakefield, etc. We want the Board to question the rules and count on the Board to protect us.

Janet Buck, I have lived here for the last 40 years. I object to the idea that we rubber stamp the petitions, it is insulting. We cannot speak about specific projects tonight. I have heard it from people, in letters, etc. We are trying to find balance.

Mark Sideris, Council President, this is an opportunity to thank the Board for their work. We can never please everyone, you all live here and this is a difficult volunteer job.

Jason Cohen, I try not to pay attention to what is said or written.

.....56 Cuba Street, I asking this Board not to approve the petition. I welcome density, I see many empty buildings, I want to see the community grow. There is no basis for this petition, I am also landlord, please recommend denial.

Tony Palomba, City Council, 200 signature petition is a lot. This is not a new concern, both petitions came from the same source, maybe we did not see it sooner. We have Comprehensive Plan and Watertown Square study coming up. Did the Planning Board think about not approving 104 Main Street until both studies are completed?

Gideon Schreiber, tonight's hearing is about request for zoning amendment not about specific project.

Clyde Younger, this is a 2 step process. I did not hear any discussion tonight about density in Watertown Square. An article in the Boston Globe talked about different approach about affordable housing.

Dominique Cohen, 153 Common Street, I have lived here for 23 years. Main Street has not changed, progress is exciting. What would you rather see, we cannot turn everything into green space. I want to see progress, these amendments are not acceptable.

George Skuse, more people signed this petition than any who are interested in comprehensive plan. I would like to see amenities, benches compatible with the path, things that would keep people in the Watertown Square area. Citizens have resentment to projects that were submitted with 4.00 FAR. It needs to be at a level that is agreeable to the community. The Board needs to recommend to the City Council to study this issue further.

....., Rosedale Road, I was born and raised in Watertown. There have been lot of changes, I would like my daughters to stay here. I am opposed to more traffic. There are some good changes but some bad ones as well.

Joan Gumbleton, Cambridge has high density, but the rents are not going down.

Tom, Watertown has the same population for the last 90 years. We refuse to have more people come in. This would prevent people to use their properties. We are less than 2 miles away from Boston outskirts.

Linda Scott, we have added lots of housing, but it is too expensive, we are not depriving anyone.

Janet Buck, I am closing the public testimony section. The Planning Board will discuss the amendment and what to recommend to the City Council. The petition as submitted is out of context without any backup material. My vote will not be to go forward.

Payson Whitney, we need to be definitive. We will deny the request but recommend that the planning department include this in in Comprehensive Plan and Watertown Square Plan. Analyses can be done as part of both Plans.

Jason Cohen, I am against the petition as written now.

Abigail Hammett, I grew up in Watertown, lived in California, the Bay area did not build enough housing, I moved back into this area. I am not in favor of reducing the FAR

Abigail Hammett motioned that the Planning Board recommend to the City Council not to adopt the proposed changes to FAR in the CB district and that the City Council ask the Planning staff to consider form-based code as an option as part of the Watertown Square Plan process.

Payson Whitney seconded the motion.

VOTE: 4-0 In Favor

2. Transition between commercial/industrial districts and residential zoning districts

1. §2.78 'Special permit' be amended by adding the phrase "or designated Special Permit Granting Authority (SPGA)" after "at the discretion of the Board of Appeals."
2. §3.00 'Division of the City into Districts' be amended with a new section, (d), containing the following text: *Parcels adjacent to the boundary of a district may be subject to increased regulations, restrictions, requirements, and conditions as may be necessary to ensure an appropriate transition between the abutting districts.*
3. §4.13 'Transition requirements' be amended with a new section, (c), containing the following text:

Where the boundary of a Business, Industrial, or Special Zoning District abuts, overlaps, runs parallel to, or effectively borders that of a Residence District (as listed in §3.01), approvals for development, including but not limited to site plans, special permits, and Master Plan special permits, on lots located adjacent to that boundary and within that non-Residence District shall be subject to increased restrictions or conditions as might be necessary to limit the impact of said development on, and protect the integrity, character, and quality of life within, the neighborhoods of the bordered or overlapped Residence district. These restrictions and conditions shall be imposed by the approving body (Planning Board, Zoning Board of Appeals, or designated Special Permit Granting Authority (SPGA)) and may include but are not limited to height, dimensions, orientation, setbacks, buffers, open space, facade, screening, and usage.

4. *§9.09 'Limited approval of special permit' be amended such that the existing first paragraph will read as follows: In approving a special permit, the Board of Appeals or designated Special Permit Granting Authority (SPGA) shall consider and attach such conditions and safeguards as are deemed necessary to protect the district, neighborhoods in adjacent districts, and the City.*
5. *§9.09(b) be amended by adding the phrase "or designated Special Permit Granting Authority (SPGA)" after "as specified by the Board of Appeals."*
6. *Or to take any other action relative thereto."*

Janet Buck, we recognize the areas in the Zoning Ordinance, this proposal would make it more subjective. We now have setbacks and open space. I am concerned about impact of new development, our job is to find a balance.

Larry Field, staff recommends unfavorable vote, Planning Board should recommend denial. Recommendations were made in a February Comprehensive Plan draft. \$50,000 were appropriated in the FY'24 budget specifically for this zoning review. It will be a professional public process. Changes were made in 2015 & 2016, Pleasant Street, etc. Last Comprehensive Plan process suggested these changes. The proposed amendments are not necessary. The City is moving toward zoning review. Neighborhood impacts will be addressed.

Abigail Hammett, these changes will not have any impact on how I will vote. I will be inclined to deny this petition, we already have this as part of our Zoning Ordinance. Areas are separated by street, residential and commercial.

Jason Cohen, these proposed amendments do not have specific impact, they are just asking for something different. We have tools to perform our duties. This will open the door for more confusion. I see some benefits to form based code.

Payson Whitney, there is transition between development and residential area. I live between Arsenal Yards, Arsenal on the Charles and Watertown Mall. Watertown was built like that so that people could work and live nearby. Some things in the proposal have merit, they can be added to the Comprehensive Plan study.

Janet Buck, when Watertown was industrial town, it was called Crossroads on the Charles. Railroad went through the town, big industry was here. Housing came after, now we are trying to find a balance. This proposal is not going to help us, we have to be more specific. Quality of life is not applicable, I will vote against the petition.

Elodia Thomas, 67 Marion Road, you can be more specific, diagrams are very helpful. What is also frustrating, when mechanical equipment is added on the roof and it increases the height.

George Skuse, the difference between across the street is major. Parking lot is transition space, large buildings change privacy, etc. Green space towards the residences would be preferable. We do not have transitional zone now, development should benefit the City and the districts.

Jamie, 84 Fitchburg, the Planning Board has to look at the petition as a whole. We have tried to purchase housing nearcommercial area but could not do it. I saw that the developer made some changes based on the resident comments.

Joan Gumbleton, I submitted the petition, I should have received notification of the hearing. It started based on the Canistraro site. Maybe some changes could be made. This is another project that seems to be growing, it is hard to picture it. We do not have all the answers. 10 years ago we did not imagine the explosion of Lab space in the Town. We want to maintain this community, we need to hold developers to higher standards. We appreciate the work of the Planning Board.

Janet Buck closed the public testimony at 10:25 pm. The language in this petition is not clear. We already have these tools in the Zoning Ordinance.

Payson Whitney, we need better guidelines, I recommend to add the request to future plans

Abigail Hammett, it should be added to the \$50,000 study. The staff can look at other cities.

Jason Cohen, maybe we are here because people do not understand that we already have the tools in the existing Zoning Ordinance.

Payson Whitney motioned that the Planning Board recommends to the City Council not to adopt the proposed zoning amendment with additional recommendation that the City Council ask the Planning staff to ensure that the zoning review include consideration of transition requirements and public engagement around proposed projects.

Abigail Hammett seconded the motion.

VOTE: 4-0 In favor

Janet Buck adjourned the meeting at 10:35 pm.