

Squares + Streets dominates talk at BHIA meeting

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Staff Reporter

Residents gathered last week at Emmanuel Episcopal Church for the semi-annual Bellevue Hill Improvement Association (BHIA) meeting, where the City of Boston Planning Department (CBPD) Squares + Streets (S+S) dominated the discussion.

Laurie Radwin, founder of the Roslindale Coalition, spoke fervently about S+S and said that West Roxbury would soon experience the effects of the new zoning plan, which is aimed at increasing allowable density to create more housing by creating prefabricated zoning districts that could be dropped on areas with certain qualities. The plan also appeals to developers because the new zones are also designed to give areas where more projects could be as-of-right and not need Zoning Board of Appeal (ZBA) approval and public meetings.

Currently, Roslindale is the furthest along in the endeavor.

"We strongly believe in affordable housing and the decision-making about those who will be affected, and one of the things we are most concerned about is displacement," Radwin

said, warning she believes this zoning will increase the risk of displacement of small businesses and low-income people.

Radwin handed out a fact sheet which showed the unfair representation in her community, with white people making up 80 percent of the attendees at these S+S meetings, which does not accurately represent Roslindale's community. "The numbers are discouraging," she said. To emphasize her point, Radwin interviewed numerous people of color at food pantries and she said not one had heard of the rezoning effort. "Clearly, we are advocating for more outreach."

The CBPD has stated to The Bulletin in the past that many minority residents are usually working when the regular meetings are taking place, and that the department has a lot more interaction and feedback with them during pop-ups. However, representatives said they do not always take demographic and ethnicity information for those interactions.

"In July, the City of Boston dropped 35 recommendations for Roslindale, and for those who attended every single meeting, the suggestions seemed to come out of the blue," Radwin said. To make matters worse, a high stakes

survey on the 35 recommendations was held at a meeting where over 300 responded, but Radwin said it was unclear how many were Roslindale residents.

Radwin said she felt that S+S meetings are not a place to have voices heard, which has made some participants give up. She has three asks of the

city: more outreach, a redo of the survey, which she said was at a college reading level that took her two hours to complete, and finally, anti-displacement policies.

Mimi Turchinets of the Hyde Park Neighborhood Association (HPNA) also spoke

BHIA

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The Bellevue Hill Improvement Association meets twice a year and discusses issues related to West Roxbury.

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about S+S through its Boston Zoning Code designation of Article 26, which codified the districts that could be placed in neighborhoods after an S+S public process (<https://tinyurl.com/ysux39cc>).

In Hyde Park, Turchinetz and her peers have formed a citizens' petition to address the confusion of Article 26. "The aim is to have fewer units in developments, less height, less density."

Turchinetz advocated for everyone to get involved, understand Article 26 and engage city councilors. She also spoke about trying to save the Crane Ledge Woods, which is an unprotected wooded urban wild at the crossroads of Hyde Park, Mattapan and Roslindale.

District 6 City Councilor Ben Weber gave his input on S+S, as well as an update for the district. He said the timeline of S+S for West Roxbury is to have four or five central zones near transportation figured out, and then there should be a six-to-nine-month stretch for meetings and discussions.

"Stuff is happening and on a much larger timeline than originally described," Weber said.

Weber also informed the BHIA of the city's updates to the CBPD Article 80 process, which has to do with procedures of structures with 15 or more units and/or more than 20,000 square feet. He said a positive outcome of the process is the CBPD moving away from using impact advisory groups during the Article 80 process

and instead using community advisory groups which would be long term.

He also mentioned "community benefits" which impact areas with large developments. Weber said he has not been in office long enough to affect specific changes, but agrees with Radwin on a need for more transparency.

Addressing boosting numbers and traffic concerns were Jeanne Black and Kerry Castor on behalf of the West Roxbury Civic and Improvement Association. "COVID-19 really did a number on our group. Some of the original members were quite elderly and have passed on," she said. As a result, they want to engage new people in the neighborhood, from the Caribbean and Africa, as well as Irish, Italian and Middle Eastern people.

"Of particular concern right now is the traffic on upper Washington Street at speeds of 70-90 mph at all hours blasting through the streets," Castor said. She encouraged participation and then looked around the room and said, "Let's face it: we are all of a certain age. We are parents, grandparents. Get the young people involved. If we don't get new blood in these groups not only are they just gonna go away but we are going to be at the whim of anyone who wants to come in and do anything."

Some of the leaders offered some hope. Carolyn Breen, head of the Highland Civic Neighborhood Association, said numbers from her group

The Bulletin

dwindled in the 2010s but galvanized during a proposed development at 1905-1911 Centre St., which is marked as approved by the CBPD. However, according to Breen, the project is currently in limbo due to violations, this according to ISD (Inspectional Services Department).

District 5 City Councilor Enrique Pepen arrived late as he was coming from a meeting in Allston/Brighton and said he is fighting for local business owners to be more informed about proposed developments that impact their businesses. An auto body shop in West Roxbury is under pressure due to their landlord selling the property without notifying the affected businesses, he said. Located on Belgrade Avenue since 2000, the business owner only just found out his landlord is going to sell from an abutters' meeting notice, brought to his attention by Radwin.

Since then, Pepen said he got them an attorney, and now no longer pay rent as the landlord was collecting without a receipt. "We want to make sure things like that are avoided." He said small businesses are the heart of the city and he is going to work closely with CBPD to make sure things are planned in a fair way.

Adding levity to the evening was Stephen Smith, who heads the Charles River/Spring Valley Neighborhood Association. He said his group is freewheeling and minus bylaws. Their Facebook page asks one question: what street do you live on? If you're within the neighborhood, you're welcome. He said

he uses his Facebook page as a bulletin board and would do so with this meeting where he encouraged people to attend a fundraiser for Rosie's Place at the Irish Social Club, November 3. He implored members for even half an hour of service for a food pantry on Stratford Street, in West Roxbury. "We need help. November is the busiest month."

Smith expressed dismay at the fact zoom meetings are held for important meetings such as 5 Redlands Rd. He said there was no reason that meeting could not have been held in person so all the people could attend it. Weber said it was a great suggestion and he is

working on it.

At the start of the meeting, guest speaker Sandy Serkess from the West Roxbury Historical Society added some lightness and introspection by asking questions like the origin of West Roxbury's name and testing people's geographic knowledge on streets. Senator Mike Rush and Representative Bill MacGregor also attended the meeting and offered encouraging words.



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"Wake at Gormley's, funeral from St. Theresa's." This phrase characterizes the deaths of so many from the southern part of West Roxbury. And it was fitting coda for West Roxbury resident and highly acclaimed Holy Cross star as well as legendary Catholic Memorial coach Ron Perry, Sr. Originally from Somerville, Ron Perry led Somerville High School to two Tech Tournay victories in basketball at the Garden before matriculating from the famed Jesuit college in Worcester, where he led them to an NIT (National Invitational Tournament) championship — the NIT in the 50's, 60's, and 70's was equivalent



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South Cove Community Health Center in Chinatown, before moving on to the East Boston Neighborhood Health Center in the area