

Somerville Planning Board  
Somerville City Council

August 28, 2019

Dear Planning Board and City Council,

**DavisNow asks the Planning Board to defer any vote on the Davis Square Neighborhood Plan (“the Plan”) as currently written.** The Plan exhibits a number of deficiencies in both content and process that prevent the community from having confidence that it will preserve what the community values about the Davis Square neighborhood (“the Square”). In short, we believe it would be inappropriate to vote on the Plan at this time for the following general reasons:

- The Plan does not accurately represent or advocate the preservation of the myriad neighborhood particulars that make the Square a unique and valued place. Instead, its general theme is that the Square’s buildings should be larger.
- It does not seem to consider the importance of preserving the Square’s small businesses, nor does it propose solutions for how this can be achieved.
- It does not define the development conditions that are needed to sustain the Square’s character and to rectify the City’s ongoing underinvestment in maintenance.
- It does not provide in-depth analysis of the likely consequences on traffic, parking, and municipal infrastructure systems from the proposed increase in development density.
- It prominently features a proposed redesign of the Square’s main intersection that is not supported by the available data, nor by analysis by consultants.
- It does not address on a planning level what is needed to tie the Square together into a stronger whole. Instead, it presents a collection of site-specific speculations and solutions that do not appear to be connected to a strategy.
- Last but not least, it is premature to ask the community to accept any long-term neighborhood plan until the new Somerville Zoning Ordinance-- the latest draft of which was only just released on August 22-- has been ratified and the community has had time to consider what it would allow vs. not allow by right in the Square.

In summary, we believe the proposed Davis Square Neighborhood Plan is not at a point where the community can have confidence that it will adequately preserve and enhance Davis Square, a unique and vital area of our city. **We therefore ask that you take no vote on the Plan until the new Somerville Zoning Ordinance has been ratified and the shortcomings of the Plan have been more fully explored and discussed in public community meetings.**

Thank you,

The DavisNow Steering Committee

Alan Bingham   Rosemary Broome-Bingham   Jack Connolly  
Chris Iwerks   Ulysses Lateiner   Thalia Tringo

## **Davis Square is Unique in Somerville**

Davis Square is unique and has a vibrant culture not replicated in Somerville's other squares. Most cities have a downtown; Somerville does not. Instead it has a number of multi-street intersections that we call squares. But Davis Square comes close to being our 'downtown'.

What makes it different are several aggregating factors not present elsewhere. Davis has a healthy entertainment capacity, anchored by the Somerville Theatre, which plays current and cult movies as well as live entertainment, and supplemented by live theatre at the Rockwell, live music at the Burren and other locations, etc. It is also a self-contained community that has all of its self-sustaining needs in the immediate area, including supermarkets, banks, numerous restaurants, and specialist facilities such as doctors, dentists, and even a shoe repair shop. It is a destination serviced by integrated bus and rail that enables convenient access to the square for both residents and visitors. There are nine places of worship in the immediate Davis Square area, adding to the draw to the square. All of this has made it desirable for such planned activities as Art Beat, Porch Fest, Summer Streets, Honk, and other outdoor activities, which are unique to Davis and enhance the cultural value of the area.

This is accomplished in a residential area that has had little industry but has enjoyed light commercial growth. That it is positioned on a tangent between Tufts and Lesley Universities guarantees an annual new influx of young students seeking the convenient entertainment that is a hallmark feature of Davis Square.

Unlike other squares, Davis has large public areas where people can enjoy the square. Seven Hills, Kenney, and Statue Parks as well as the West Branch Library all are well utilized and often the sites of buskers and other street entertainment. The square is also a venue for political rallies.

The culture of the square is such that people have come to cherish this unique combination of attributes that are not present in any other Somerville squares - though some are available in some other squares, Davis has it all. Davis has long been characterized by a very active civic group that reaches back in time to the original Davis Task Force that was instrumental in bringing the MBTA Red Line to Davis, and such groups have been continually active to this day, such is the civic pride in this neighborhood. The residents strongly desire to keep and enhance Davis, not change it into another Harvard Square full of up-market shops and formula retail. Davis is a square of small boutique businesses that cater to the eclectic needs of the community and thus help sustain the vibrant values of the area.

### DavisNow's Detailed Comments on the Proposed Davis Square Neighborhood Plan

The citizens engaged with DavisNow are very dissatisfied with the Davis Square Neighborhood Plan as it has been presented. Our concerns include, but are not limited to:

- 1) The proposed plan does not address the Quality of Life issues intrinsic to the culture of the Davis Square as experienced by residents, workers, and visitors. Instead, it reads like a developer guide document. Underlying the plan is the notion of bigger, taller buildings without regard as to what their impact would be on the square and its culture. There is a decided 'blind spot' surrounding small businesses.
- 2) It is lacking in an overall strategy with a linked outcome as to what is to happen over time, and why this is important to the community. Rather it reads like a set of tactics in search of a strategy.
  - a. In this respect it lacks a framework of public facility. It does not indicate how the public infrastructure would enhance the private enterprise of the area in a cohesive way and enhance it in a way consistent with the culture of the area.
  - b. It does not address, nor appreciate, the essential culture of Davis Square and why this is special in the city. This is of critical importance to the community as there is no desire whatsoever to see Davis morph into another Harvard Square.
  - c. It does not define a plan of how to maintain and enhance that special culture.
  - d. It does not address formula business or the preference for locally owned businesses
  - e. It does not address the types of business and commercial activity that would be compatible with the culture and nature of the square and the community in general.
- 3) It lacks a vision that it purports to define, and is rather, a series of speculations based on assumptions that are not clear. There is no indication of how this fits with (or does not) the proposed new zoning ordinance.
- 4) It fails to identify what steps the city would be prepared to take to accommodate and encourage a thriving small business community. Davis Square is a collage of small businesses. Small businesses are recognized as the largest job hiring organizations nation-wide. The plan does not address any steps to provide affordable small business rentals or other activities that would enhance small business opportunities and thereby create jobs in the area. The city talks about affordable housing but not affordable business and talks about job creation but there is nothing in the plan to that effect which is a stated goal to which the city is committed.
- 5) There is no height detail on structures in the plan and how this is slotted with the proposed new zoning. Also, there is no indication of the types of business and commercial opportunities envisioned. Building heights vary depending on use (residential/ business/ technical/laboratory). Until a clear pathway as to the preferred use case that is consistent with the values, culture and mores of the square this is indeterminate and needs resolution.

The character of Davis Square is also defined by its older buildings: Hobbes Building (Somerville Theater), residential blocks across the street, Mike's Pizza building, and the structures that line

Elm and Highland. These buildings set height and scale that people identify as the spatial core of Davis Square.

This section of the proposed plan also lacks critical perspective. The taller, large floorplate buildings cited and erected after the subway arrived are not successful prototypes for future buildings. These buildings do not fit the scale or texture of the square – they lack sensitivity in scale, detail and street-level programming. Cases in point - 212 Elm is not regarded as a successful urban building – no street life, it terminates the square at the end of Elm Street and the scale is monumental. 40 Holland is better at the street level, but is still a massive block, way out of scale with the character of Davis Square. As such they are not good examples of planning and do not enhance the streetscape, which receives little mention as to desirability.

The 1984-88 MBTA Davis station, and modifications of the Davis streetscape, totally transformed the square. There is no mention of how dramatic and effective this was, which is a knock-on design effect of the new brick sidewalks, trees, lighting, landscape and hardscape. This set a standard and has been almost completely ignored in the text. This needs to be stated clearly and used as a standard benchmark. This is what DavisNOW is fighting to restore with the Punch List scope.

6) Center Types as referenced on p19-20

We do not agree with the pigeon-holing of Davis Square as a ‘type’ for convenient assignment of job and housing numbers. It is not a typical ‘cookie-cutter’ place that fits the description of a ‘Local Center’, a term it seems used to justify denser, larger floor plates and taller buildings. Davis Square is not comprised of 3-6 story buildings but rather 1-2 stories building with some 3 and 4 structures. In this point the plan is factually incorrect.

7) The Intersection. Several pages throughout the plan

Everyone, we believe, would like to see the intersection improved for cars, cycles and pedestrians as well as enhanced for leisure activity. However, the proposal to change the intersection we believe to be unworkable and would not achieve any of the stated city planner goals nor prove acceptable to the community.

The intersection analysis is superficial – the preconceived conclusion is obvious and the critique of the existing conditions seems biased. Closing Dover makes no sense as it would not provide useful space for the community in a canyon between two large buildings with blank walls and service doors on each side.

Specifically, but not exhaustively:

- a. We understand that the focus is to shift to people and bikes, but that does not mean that traffic flow can just be ignored. There are consequences to poor traffic flow. We do not accept the simple dichotomy put forth of an either-or choice.
- b. We believe that even with reduced traffic volumes (which have never been proposed), that the simple single lane-in configuration is unrealistic.
- c. The plan states that this “works.” We have challenged this in meetings and received unsatisfactory responses.

- d. We have had the intersection configuration and traffic counts evaluated by a professional (PE) traffic engineer colleague. He concurs that the intersection as shown in the plan is unworkable.
  - e. OSPCD has not provided a shred of explanation to how it might “work” nor provided any supportive data.
  - f. We contacted Tool Design, a consultant on traffic calming contracted by the city, and they declined to confirm that the intersection plan works, even though the plan states clearly that Tool Design says it works. This leads us to believe that the plan is overstating feasibility and in not credible.
  - g. There is no support for the data suggested that fewer people stick around Davis than other squares, though this is not surprising for a subway station destination. However, the data is not supportive of any insight on this matter.
  - h. There is no evidence of notion of public seating versus restaurant and bar seating. This is an assumption not supported by data or investigation.
  - i. The introductory section for this intersection is factually inaccurate – it is an arbitrary description of supposed shortcomings and not supported.
  - j. This section of the DSNP is unacceptable and needs to be restudied with the goal of illustrating a workable prototype. This has to include where traffic would be re-routed around this intersection if it were not passing through the square itself – something that is not part of the plan as presented.
  - k. Cyclists and pedestrians p54 - People first is fine, but not if traffic is snarled, angry and cutting through side streets. Double parked cars are an ongoing issue for all and no provision (except in front of Citizens Bank) has been made for drop -off and pick up – i.e. very short term stopping.
  - l. Better transit p56 - To describe “pretty great transit options” as an objective term does not set up ways it can be further improved. There should be consideration in the plan for this including goals, execution and anticipated outcomes.
  - m. Solve parking (p57)
    - a. Why is the graphic of the City of Boston relevant to Davis? It is not, this is padding to attempt to compare two dissimilar cities and their dissimilar parking issues.
    - b. Suggestions are not matched with any planning, they just stay “consider”. The DSNP should include plans on how this would be achieved and what the anticipated outcome would be.
  - n. Rationalize streets (p59) - should be in the traffic / intersection section. The very term ‘rationalize’ implies that the streets are irrational and in need of some remedy.
  - o. Curbside loading (p58) - is another section that should be in the traffic section. Currently, businesses receive goods continually through the day with large trucks double parking and blocking traffic and pedestrian flow. There is not ral solution to this proposed in the plan.
- 8) Seating Issues (p42)
- a. Fails to document public seating that exists in Davis, leads the reader to believe that there is minimal seating, which is false. We counted public seating in Davis and found over 650 linear feet of benches, chairs and low seating walls, as well as 15 tables; the DSNP ignores existing conditions except when they support some preconceived observation.

- b. The chairs added to Seven Hills Park over the last few years were well used but began to be stolen or were broken after a short period of time. The park needs more fixed benches, not disposable plastic chairs. The plan needs to have a thorough policy on this which is not based on subjective assumptions.
- c. States: “public spaces are too well utilized” - this is a false assertion - it is not a problem.
- d. Use of terms: “jam-packed” is pejorative to paint a negative impression.
- e. Why are food trucks suddenly in this section? Are these really viable for Davis except on an occasional basis to accommodate special events?
- f. False assertion that crowds discourage people from coming out. As residents of the area we know this assumption in the plan to also be incorrect.

9) City lots (p 60)

- a. Market building at Day and Hebert
  - i. The city can ill afford to construct new public works that they will not be able to maintain. Evidence is substantial that the city has major issues in maintaining any of its public spaces.
  - ii. There is no real need behind this suggestion, and money would be far better spent on other initiatives. The city already has major construction expenses and this is not a useful use of taxpayer monies as it would not add a value to justify its return.
- b. Cutter plaza
  - i. This was illustrated with two options in the HSH traffic calming study of 2012. This exercise did not discover this solution though a charrette process and ignored the second HSH concept.

10) Buildings (p74)

- a. The notion that Davis is evolving and wants to be a local center is a subjective assumption and not based on any factual research that is in evidence. Buildings are not routinely overlooked as is stated.
- b. 45 College – the church purchased by the city with a suggested plan to enable commercial use? The citizens of the community desperately need community space and this is what was originally proposed with the purchase of this property.
- c. West Branch Library – an existing resource under renovation and expansion will be a welcome addition to the neighborhood.
- d. T headhouses and surrounds – The MBTA will be adding new elevators at Davis and it is not likely they will add +/- \$20M to rebuild the headhouses in glass.
- e. There is no indication in the plan of any discussion between MBTA and the city on the future disposition of the head houses such that they might become glass boxes and thus increase transparency. This is merely a what-if observation, not a plan component.

11) Local center responsibilities (p80)

- a. The community does not have aspirations for higher density buildings – this is a suggestion from the city planners and is inconsistent with the wishes of the community.
- b. Suitability index -The evaluation criteria that went into this list is unknown and not described in the plan. It should be supported by objective data but is not.

12) Sketches of various sites (p83)

- a. All of these illustrations show buildings in isolation as “object buildings”
- b. Urban design looks at building massing more holistically, with particular emphasis on the exterior spaces and streets created by buildings
- c. The plan is completely lacking in this type of planning – we don’t see any urban design analysis in this part of the plan
- d. There is no consideration for harmonious and contiguous streetscape.

13) Development Objectives (p87)

- a. policy 3.07 – what is the fabrication district? We have never heard of such a district for Davis Square.
- b. 3.08 – all the streets are pedestrian streets, not just these 4. It makes no sense to single out any street in the square as such – all of them are (no streets are unimportant for pedestrians).
- c. 3.16 permit based on site plan submission does not seem to be a sensible notion.

14) Design Guidelines (p89)

- a. Pedestrian focused (212 Elm being held up as a good example - it is not)
- b. Active streetscape - what does this mean? This needs a written definition.
- c. Context sensitive (is the CVS building being held up as a good example?)
- d. Applying standards – example (p95)
  - i. Giant block overwhelms neighbors (p96) – this is exactly what ruined Harvard Square.
  - ii. Huge blue block dominates Elm (p98) (now Scape property) – this is larger even than 212 Elm, which effectively terminates the square with overscaled buildings

15) Maintenance

- a. Any plan for redevelopment should include a plan for the continuing maintenance of the square. Somerville suffers from a neglect of appropriate maintenance by the city and this has ongoing social and economic consequences. Currently, the square has a safety issue for slips/trip and falls resulting from the lack of maintenance on side and crosswalks.
- b. Maintaining the assets of the citizens/ taxpayers is a city responsibility that falls short continually and the plan for Davis Square has scarce detail on any maintenance plan.
- c. Creating a Community Benefits District (CBD) is an attempt by the city to transfer its responsibility to local businesses and thereby increase the financial burden on them while obviating their responsibility. The city receives a significant portion of its taxes from the Davis Square area and needs to live up to its obligations of maintaining the property of the citizens held in public trust.
- d. Maintenance needs include a plan to provide ongoing infrastructure maintenance, trash removal, cleansing of all public spaces, cleansing of easement spaces from the MBTA including Seven Hills Park, Statue Park, T headhouse surrounds, etc.: graffiti and temporary sign removal, sidewalk and crosswalk maintenance, street sweeping, lighting maintenance, snow and ice removal (especially focused on intersections and crosswalks where ice/ snow/ water accumulates and not just plowing streets) and enforcing current regulations on property owners.