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## City to seek 'exceptional' public benefits for development exceeding zoning rules along S. Huntington

Posted by Matt Rocheleau April 1, 2013 05:12 PM

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By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

Developers who want to build projects that would exceed city zoning requirements along South Huntington Avenue in Jamaica Plain would be asked to include extraordinary community benefits and public improvements, according to guidelines proposed by city officials.

Concluding a nearly four-month-long study, the Boston Redevelopment Authority late last week released a draft version, or "framework," of guidelines for future development along the S. Huntington Ave. corridor, an area that has drawn concern from residents because of a series of recent changes and more expected in the near future.

The report says that along with the standard level of mitigation measures required from developers, the city will seek "exceptional public benefits, which are above and beyond typical mitigation measures" for projects that would exceed certain zoning rules and guidelines for development height, density and footprint.

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(See the next part of this story for details on the new development dimension guidelines)

“The draft framework identifies many public realm improvements and ideas that would beautify and activate the corridor,” the redevelopment authority said in a statement.

“The framework is intended to provide guidance to public agencies and private developers who wish to invest in and improve the corridor,” the statement added. “The framework is not an amendment to the underlying zoning, but is a set of development and design guidelines intended to shape future projects according to the vision of neighborhood stakeholders.”

The study focused on a three-quarter mile stretch of South Huntington, from its intersection with Huntington Avenue to where it meets Perkins Street, and details a range of suggestions for the area’s future that could be explored and implemented over the next 10 to 15 years, timed, in part, on the pace of development.

Developments should aim to retain and integrate important historic structures and should be designed to match surrounding historic buildings – for example, using brick instead of metal along exteriors, the report says.

The guidelines call for increasing the supply of workforce and affordable housing and both affordable and market-rate homeownership opportunities, while regulating the amount of residential space available to undergraduate students living off-campus.

Commercial and retail should be affordable and designed to attract local businesses and to discourage big box retail, according to the guidelines.

Throughout its history, S. Huntington Avenue, which was built about a century ago, has been lined with nonprofit institutional buildings. But in recent years it has been increasingly eyed by developers looking to build housing and stores.

The guidelines recommend that S. Huntington include a mix of institutional, residential, commercial, and mixed-use buildings with ground-floor commercial space.

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Exploring ways to transform some areas of streetscape into “gateways” – by creating squares, plazas, parks and active ground-floor spaces – should be considered as large projects are reviewed, the report says.

Review of future projects should include a comprehensive analysis of all potential transit impacts, the guidelines say. The city, in partnership with the MBTA, should study ways to improve traffic, particularly at the busy intersection of Huntington and S. Huntington avenues.

Developments should attempt to minimize parking through car-sharing, promoting other forms of transportation, and sharing parking spaces with other properties. Parking should be located on the side of or behind buildings, according to the report. Bicycle parking should be included in new projects.

Future development should aim to link with the nearby Emerald Necklace, through a mix of visual, pedestrian and bicycle connections, the report says. Projects should encourage and introduce art along public ways as well as on privately-owned, but publicly-accessible property.

New trees should be planted along certain areas of S. Huntington’s sidewalk and signage should be installed to point out where nearby places of cultural and historic significance are, the guidelines say.

The report also outlines a number of steps that can be taken or explored that do not necessarily need to coincide with new development:

Some ongoing efforts include: replacing traditional lighting with energy-saving LEDs; promoting clean-up of private property; improving road signs and pavement markings; and studying and implementing upgrades to “bike sharrows” and bike lanes, the report says.

The report also labels some “short-term” suggestions that could happen between now and 2017; some “mid-term” recommendations for 2018 and 2021; and “long-term” efforts, which would likely not happen until sometime after 2021.

One short-term effort would be to consider a resident parking permit program for side streets off S. Huntington.

A short- to mid-term effort would be to study the impact of potential new

regulations for on-street parking along S. Huntington, including: making the curbside spaces metered; limited to 2 hours at a time, except for residents; or removing the parking altogether and using the space for bicycle lanes, larger sidewalks, improved bus access and traffic flow, or, along some parts of S. Huntington, to build waiting areas for trolley passengers.

The report says another mid-term effort would be to recommend a maximum amount of parking for the corridor and to consider using pedestrian- and bike-only signaling at intersections, particularly S. Huntington at Huntington.

Long-term efforts include: recommending that the MSPCA Angell Animal Medical Center remove the wall surrounding its property; and that the city and the T should study ways to improve trolley service, particularly by exploring what it would take to extend the E branch of the Green Line to Hyde Square, according to the report.

The E branch used to run to Forest Hills. Since 1985, trolleys have ended service at Heath Street, and the Route 39 bus carries passengers to Forest Hills.

The 51-page report is available online, [here](#). Hard copies of the report are available at the Connolly and Parker Hill branch libraries, city officials said.

The redevelopment authority will hold a fourth and [final meeting](#) about the study on Tuesday, April 2 at 6:30 p.m. in the Hennigan Elementary School cafeteria on Heath Street.

For those who cannot attend, feedback can be provided by e-mailing Marie Mercurio at [marie.mercurio.bra@cityofboston.gov](mailto:marie.mercurio.bra@cityofboston.gov).

### **Details on dimension guidelines for new development**

The report outlines new recommendations for the height, density and footprint of future projects along S. Huntington.

The report divides the study area into three “precincts.” Precinct 1 has a more urban feel and begins at Huntington Ave and extends to Heath Street; precinct 2 is primarily comprised on institutional use and runs from Heath Street to 201 S. Huntington Ave.; precinct 3 has a mix of institutional and residential use runs from 201 S. Huntington to Perkins Street.

The guidelines recommend maximum levels for three building characteristics of new projects: their footprint, floor to area ratio and height.

A project's footprint is essentially a ratio of much of the property is covered by either buildings and parking. For precincts 1 and 3, the guidelines suggest a maximum footprint of 80 percent. Within precinct 2, a maximum footprint of 60 percent is recommended for the western side of S. Huntington and 80 percent for the eastern side.

The floor to area ratio, or FAR, calculates the total amount of building floor space compared to the property's size – or essentially the density of the development. For precinct 1, projects should have up to a 3.0 FAR; for precinct 2, projects should not exceed a 2.0; and for precinct 3, developments should have up to a 1.0, the guidelines say.

Within precinct 1, projects can stand up to five stories with no front yard setback and a rear setback of 25 feet.

Within precinct 2, on the western side, developments can rise up to six stories with a 30-foot front yard setback and 45-foot rear setback, according to the guidelines. On the eastern side of precinct 2, projects should have a 10-foot setback and should be no more than four stories tall for within 60 feet of setback; beyond 60 feet of setback, they can climb up to eight stories.

On the western side of precinct 3, projects should stand no more than three stories with a 10-foot setback, the guidelines say. On the eastern side, development should have a 10-foot setback and can be built up to four stories within 60 feet of setback and up to six stories tall beyond 60 feet of setback.

The guidelines also identify four “special height zones,” where “heights above and beyond typical precinct heights may be appropriate.” The guidelines do not specify those heights, and instead recommend that the height maximum be determined as projects are proposed and reviewed within each of the four areas

Those areas are: the gas station at the corner of Huntington and S. Huntington; the Veterans Affairs hospital property; the Back of the Hill apartments property and the undeveloped site at 105A S. Huntington, the report says.

The strip of South Huntington Avenue is part of a broad section of Jamaica

Plain that was last rezoned nearly two decades ago. The city formally adopted the current zoning on Sept. 7, 1993.

“Existing conditions are, in concert with zoning, the baseline to be used in future development review within the corridor,” the report says. “These guidelines are neither a substitute, nor an amendment to the underlying zoning.”

“While typical mitigation measures will need to occur with any Article 80 Small or Large Project, a project that exceeds underlying zoning and is at the upper threshold of the recommended guidelines or in a special height zone will be expected to return exceptional public benefits, which are above and beyond typical mitigation measures,” the report adds.

### **Background on recent, ongoing development on S. Huntington**

Some residents have said they are wary of significant development proposed, underway and recently completed along a quarter-mile stretch of South Huntington near where Jamaica Plain and Mission Hill meet.

Most opposition to the projects has come from Jamaica Plain residents, while most support has come from residents of Mission Hill.

In November, the city gave final approval for a project at 161 South Huntington to demolish a 98-year-old special education school building to construct a residential building with about 196 units and around 156 parking spaces. The Home for Little Wanderers, which operated its well-known [Knight Children’s Center](#) on that a 3.5-acre property, [recently relocated](#) some programming and services from the center to a larger campus it owns in Walpole.

In December, the Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Council filed a lawsuit against the city’s Zoning Board of Appeals and the project’s developer in an attempt to overturn the board’s approval of the plans. A motion to dismiss the lawsuit is [scheduled to be heard April 10](#).

City regulators are reviewing another housing proposal nearby at [105A S. Huntington](#), that would clear a 1.1-acre wooded lot for a 12-story, 195-unit building, with a parking garage and retail.

At 201 South Huntington, next door to the former Little Wanderers site, sits an 85-year-old building that housed the [Goddard House](#) nursing home until early September when it [abruptly closed](#). Goddard's nonprofit board put the two-acre property on the market in [March](#). Some expect it will be redeveloped.

Across the street at 150 S. Huntington, a five-story, 500-space parking garage is [under construction](#) on the Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center campus.

At 81 South Huntington, a 39-room boutique hotel opened last summer abutting 105A S. Huntington. Construction of that building began about two years before at the site of the former Pond View Nursing Home, which closed in 2008, according to the [Jamaica Plain Gazette](#).

At 125 South Huntington is the 47,000 square-foot AstraZeneca Hope Lodge Center, which [opened](#) in fall 2008. The facility offers free temporary homes in 40 suites to cancer patients and their families. It is directly south of the [North American Indian Center of Boston](#), which is abutted to the north by 105A S. Huntington Ave.

And, about a half-mile away, the redevelopment of the former Blessed Sacrament church campus on Centre Street [has drawn criticism recently](#) because revised proposals would build a higher mix of market-rate housing than originally planned for the site.

Residents of Jamaica Plain have clashed in recent years over concerns about gentrification in the neighborhood.

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