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June 20, 2019

Planning Board
City of Somerville
93 Highland Avenue
Somerville, MA 02143

Dear Members of the Planning Board,

Union Square Main Streets is dedicated to preserving and enhancing the vitality of Union Square through supporting small businesses and generating community activity. We support the interests of over 200 businesses in Union Square, and maintain a mailing list of over 4,000 subscribers.

We strongly advocate, following a vote of our full Board of Directors, that the Planning Board and the City Council take all necessary steps to accelerate construction on the so-called D2 Block in Union Square in order to complete the initial phase of this transformative project.

Instead of further delay, we would like to see strong collaboration with the developer, US2, to continue recent promising improvements to their current design. As a once-in-a-lifetime project, every practical opportunity to improve the public realm design should be investigated and implemented wherever possible--setting the bar higher for transit-oriented design in the Boston area. We emphasize attention to the following design details:

- Connectivity between the development and Union Square as a whole, and any newly proposed open space
- The character of landscape architecture in the civic space abutting Prospect Street
- The connectivity and ADA access between the Prospect Street bridge and the station entrance
- The garage facade on the service alley
- Opportunities for public art

Each of these can be pursued without significant scheduling or cost implications.

We do not believe that pursuing a complete redesign for the block is practical or desirable at this point. After more than five years of community process, imperfect though that process may have been, the time to execute has come.

We believe the unique business and cultural environment in Union Square has given the square its current character and broad appeal, an environment for which our organization is a major advocate. Additional delay, we fear, could have damaging effects on these local businesses, which our organization represents, with no clear compensating gain in terms of improved design.

Creation of new local jobs, vital to generating daytime business traffic, will be postponed, perhaps indefinitely, if we miss the current economic cycle. At the same time a number of property owners are already raising rents in anticipation of such revenue boosters, creating a harrowing circumstance for many businesses.

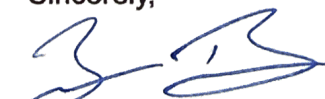
Additionally, funding for executing the redesign of Union Square Plaza, essential to sustaining our unique sense of place, business environment, and community-building endeavors such as the Fluff Festival, organized by Main Streets and the Somerville Arts Council, and our Farmers Market, will be jeopardized. With major delays in essential City revenue streams, the City's fiscal health will also be at risk.

We also support the newly proposed design alternative that would cluster green space, affordable housing, and a health center on Charlestown Street. This change would create additional vibrancy in Union Square by encouraging a variety of uses throughout the day.

We are concerned about the delays in increasing the supply of affordable housing in Somerville and we continue to support organizations whose focus is on housing affordability. We also recognize the urgent need to rebalance the City's tax base by fostering commercial development. Central to our mission, USMS' focus is on small business displacement, which has already started and will certainly accelerate as we move closer to the Green line opening and new development activity. Only last week, another long-time Union Square business, Third Life Studio – emblematic of the type of business that gives Union Square its beloved character – has been forced to close its doors.

While we agree a thorough evaluation of the feasibility of the redesign effort was necessary and meaningful, we strongly recommend that the Planning Board approve US2's current general design, while recommending further work on design details worthy of a prominent gateway to our unique and spirited district.

Sincerely,



Zach Baum, Board President


Jessica Eshleman, Executive Director