

# 2007 Report of the Symmes Neighborhood Advisory Committee

The five-member Symmes Neighborhood Advisory Committee (SNAC) was formed by Town Meeting in 1994 "in order to facilitate two-way communication regarding the development of the [former Symmes Hospital] site." Membership on the committee is drawn from precincts 11 and 15, which are in direct proximity to the hospital site.

The last year saw the departure of two original committee members, Paul Morrison and Elaine Duffy, upon the expiration of their terms. The committee thanks them for their service. We also welcomed three new members, Joseph Curro, Alfonso Sira, and Lisa Lazarczyk. SNAC continues to seek one additional member.

SNAC members participated in a number of activities over the past year.

Upon being notified of imminent tree clearing in the vicinity of the proposed new medical office building at Symmes, SNAC helped to organize a briefing for neighbors where Symmes Redevelopment Associates (SRA) -- led by E.A. Fish -- presented construction project plans. SNAC members also conducted a guided walk-through of the woods prior to tree removal.

Since the construction of a model unit on one of the parking pads on the property, SNAC has continued to monitor conditions at the site, reporting such issues as damaged construction fencing and broken signage.

SNAC members provided feedback on various drawing submissions by SRA. In particular, SNAC members voiced great concern over the size, construction materials, and illumination of proposed signage for the development. Documentary evidence -- including photographs and measurements -- was gathered and presented to the Arlington Redevelopment Board (ARB) to demonstrate that signs planned for the Summer Street entrance to the property were much larger than those for various commercial parks along the Route 2 and 128 corridors in Lexington and Waltham. Although dimensions of planned signs were eventually reduced by a small amount, SNAC continues to be concerned about how well these will fit into the character of the Summer Street surroundings.

A priority for SNAC has been the hiring of a Designated Town Representative (DTR), who will serve as a central communication and coordination point between the Town, the developer, and the surrounding neighborhood. This role is outlined in the Neighborhood Protection Plan (NPP), which is an amendment to the Land Disposition Agreement (LDA) between the ARB and SRA and included by reference in special permits granted for redevelopment of the Symmes site. Successive SNAC chairs have worked with representatives of the Town and SRA to evaluate prospective DTR candidates and to negotiate financial terms and service levels. The goal is to have a DTR in place around the time of closing on the Symmes property in May or June 2007, such that the DTR might have time to organize a required demolition and construction information session and monitor pre-demolition engineering surveys of nearby homes.

SNAC has followed with concern some of the latest developments with the project. In particular, SRA has sought to dilute its interest in the Symmes project by selling off a major equity stake to Texas-based JPI, a joint venture partner of GE Capital Services. As part of this proposed deal, SRA has proposed that some or all of the Symmes project will start out as rental units with a planned condo conversion at some undefined time in the future.

One worry is that a shift away from more local control will result in less responsiveness when issues arise during and after construction. SNAC has had some success over the past years in maintaining open paths of communication with SRA and Fish, and we would hope to see such practices continue. In particular, over the last year SRA has had a representative at virtually every SNAC meeting, allowing for direct queries about project progress.

Also of concern is the shift away from an owner-occupied model, which is more in concert with the surrounding neighborhood than a pure rental configuration. There are a number of activities -- such as

stewardship of surrounding conservation land -- that were originally envisioned as partnerships between members of an eventual condominium association and existing neighbors. Part of the success of such efforts was predicated on the long-term investment commitment of new homeowners within the development.

SNAC urges the ARB and SRA to reject a pure rental model. An owner-occupied model is of greater benefit than a rental approach -- not only to the neighborhood -- but to the fiscal interests of the Town. However, if a single-stage ownership model is financially infeasible, SNAC prefers staged construction of owner-occupied units; this approach is consistent with SRA's stated intention in the event that their requested financing changes are not approved by the ARB. Barring the above, we strongly urge the parties to map out contractual milestones to ensure eventual and expeditious condo conversion and to serve as a counterbalance to the tax disincentives that such conversion otherwise presents to the developer.

SNAC continues to monitor progress around the marketing of medical office space at the site. At this date, there is no activity in this area to report on, as we have been informed by SRA that prospective agreements in this area have fallen through.

SNAC expects an increase in activity as the two to three year demolition and construction period at the Symmes project begins and the committee assumes its role as a key link in the communication chain between neighbors, DTR, Town, developer, and others.

Respectfully submitted by:

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Greg Jackmauh  
Lisa Lazarczyk  
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