
City launches Dorchester Avenue zoning update

Posted by Cara Bayles

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By Cara Bayles, Town Correspondent

Call it a "zoning update," not "re-zoning."

During the first meeting of a 17-member advisory group which will shape new sub-districts along more than five miles of Dorchester Avenue, city planners made it clear that they were amending a bizarre historical footnote in the city's zoning code.

"We have a quirky situation," said Ted Schwartzberg, one of the city's planners for the project, during Wednesday night's meeting. "As far as the zoning code is concerned, Dot Ave is considered its own neighborhood, which doesn't really make sense."

Boston zoning code—a document that determines what can be built where, and originally dates back to the 1960s—has been updated piecemeal over the last 20 years. In 1992, the city updated the code for Dorchester Avenue alone. Then, in 2002, the city rezoned the six-square mile neighborhood of Dorchester. As a result, the Dorchester Neighborhood District does not include a long strip of land that runs through it. The zoning update would enable the larger neighborhood to inform the code for Dorchester Avenue, and fold the street into the neighborhood's district.

Hyde Park and South Boston's First Street corridor are also last holdouts of the old code that are currently being updated by the city.

Eleven of the Dorchester Avenue Update's advisory group members are already intimately familiar with the quirks of the major thoroughfare, since they also served on the Dorchester Avenue Taskforce, which recommended streetscape and transportation guidelines that dictated infrastructure repairs that are currently underway. That project, which includes signal improvements at intersections, repaving portions of the road, and installing bike lanes, was allocated \$15 million in federal stimulus funding, and is slotted for completion at the end of the year.

"It's a major public investment," said Schwartzberg. "It's going to be a much more beautiful street after this project is done, and that's going to draw investment."

That investment struck a sense of urgency for the need to look at zoning along the avenue. The advisory group, made of up neighborhood representatives from Savin Hill to Lower Mills, will consider concerns such as design, height, density, use, signage and parking.

"We're looking at a dark pink strip on a pink area," said Ed Crowley, an advisory group member from Fields Corner, pointing at the existing zoning map. "We can talk about business areas, or groups of areas, and how parking affects those, or we've got to go through and segment how much everybody can bite off in a meeting. Because to talk about five and a half miles with people from each different section ... by nature, people aren't interested in the entire avenue as a whole, as much as interested in their block."

The group will meet monthly, and Jeremy Rosenberger, project manager for the update, said he hopes to finish the process within 18 months.

"Really, the image and the context of Dorchester Avenue is two- and three-story buildings. I don't anticipate a lot of changes through this zoning process. That doesn't mean we won't get into some discussions," said Rosenberger. "There have been issues that arose where things have been approved or permitted that probably shouldn't have been, because the zoning is older and in 1992, we didn't have as good sense of how zoning could be utilized as a tool as we do today."

E-mail Cara Bayles at carabayles@gmail.com.