

City Council approves redevelopment of Portland Co. complex

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An exhausted Portland City Council voted 7-2 early Tuesday morning to grant a request to redevelop 10 acres on the city's eastern waterfront.

The vote came shortly before 1:30 a.m., after a two-hour public hearing and an hour and a half of debate on a variety of amendments that would restrict the redevelopment potential of the former Portland Co. complex.

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"This is a project I think will be transformative for the city of Portland," said City Councilor Edward Suslovic said. "Portland really needs this project to be the city we all want it to be."

Councilors David Marshall and Kevin Donoghue voted against the proposal.

The council had voted 5-4 earlier in the night to make the redevelopment at 58 Fore St. subject to any future inclusionary zoning ordinance. Such an ordinance would require a certain number of residential units to be affordable to middle-income residents.

The public hearing pitted residents concerned about losing their views of the ocean and access to the working waterfront against others who see an opportunity to execute a longtime public vision of building a vibrant neighborhood on private property at the city's marine gateway.

The conceptual plans discussed by the developers include residential buildings, offices and a Faneuil Hall-style marketplace.

City staff opened two additional rooms in City Hall to accommodate the overflow crowd that showed up to voice support and opposition to the proposal. Supporters wore green stickers asking the council to vote yes, while opponents wore red and blue stickers.

The public hearing was far-reaching, with references to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's description of Portland as the "city by the sea" to the demolition of Union Station in 1961. It even included a poem written by the city's first poet laureate.

Mayor Michael Brennan and councilors asked the staff to draft several amendments regarding building heights, views and affordable housing.

Developer James Brady, a managing partner of CPB2 LLC, bought the 10-acre Portland Co. site for \$14.1 million in 2013 from Phineas Sprague Jr. Brady's partners are Casey Prentice and Kevin Costello.

Brady said the investment was made after several meetings with city staff about the ways to fulfill the vision laid out in the Eastern Waterfront Master Plan in 2004, which calls for increased heights and a greater diversity of uses, including residences. While some buildings could be 65 feet tall, the height along Fore Street would be limited to 35 feet and no bars or restaurants would be located there.

Brady said after the early-morning vote, "We're thrilled the council stuck with it for a very long evening. We're very excited they followed the Planning Board recommendation."

'PROCESS HAS BEEN THOROUGH'

While opponents contend approving the zone change would undermine the city's planning process, Planning Board Chairman Stuart O'Brien said the proposal is consistent with the comprehensive plan and future planning phases would ensure compatibility with the neighborhood.

"The process has been thorough to date and will continue to be so going forward," O'Brien said.

Supporters of the rezoning outnumbered opponents on Monday night. But regardless of what the council decides, there likely will be appeals by neighbors and possibly a citywide referendum spearheaded by a group calling itself the Soul of Portland.

One resident, Lisa Whited, said Portland needs to attract young people to live and work here. A world-class waterfront development would be a way for Portland to compete with places like Boston, she said.

"This is good change. This is good development. Maine needs this," she said.

Rob Whitten, an architect who has lived at 23 St. Lawrence St. since 1976, is volunteering with the Soul of Portland opposition group, which fears loss of public access to the views and waterfront.

"You're being asked to approve a wall that eliminates a citywide view of the harbor and islands and the working waterfront," he said. "They have not shown a need for the zone change."

Brady, however, said that was untrue.

He said the project would respect four 50-foot wide view corridors at St. Lawrence, Atlantic, Kellogg and Waterville streets. Building heights also have been limited to 35 feet along Fore Street, and would hit that height only in a few locations. The project would enhance access to the Eastern Prom Trails, he said.

PROJECT SUPPORT

To illustrate the heights on Fore Street, Brady offered a photo showing that the existing buildings along Fore Street would be taller than anything the rezoning would allow.

Sprague said he was forced to sell the Portland Co. property because he could never have fulfilled the plan adopted by the community. "I met a lot of idiots," Sprague said, noting one person wanted to build a rugby field on the site.

He chastised neighbors concerned about losing their views.

"The reason they have a view is because I let them cut the trees," Sprague said.

State Street resident Ian Jacob also supported the request. Like others, he said the views of a few residents should not outweigh the benefit the project would bring to the city.

"The day the second house in Portland was built, someone lost a view," Jacob said.

The project was supported by the Portland Community Chamber, Greater Portland Visitors Bureau and the Portland Society for Architects.

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