

July 10, 2024

Dear Councilor,

We are residents of Islington Creek asking for your help with a matter of concern to our neighborhood involving 361 Hanover Street, formerly the site of Heinemann Publishing.

We and our neighbors are an eclectic but organized group, ranging from young families recently settled here, to longtime residents who were part of the City's first wave of historic preservation nearly half a century ago. It is also important for you to know who we are not: we are not anti-development, anti-housing or NIMBY naysayers. In a recent private meeting, a City staffer mischaracterized the concern we briefly outline below as just another manifestation of "old Portsmouth vs. new Portsmouth." That is inaccurate.

Instead, we are concerned about promises made and broken by City officials regarding the CD5 Character-based Zoning with the Downtown Overlay designation of 361 Hanover Street. CD5 is the densest designation available and permits, for example, development of a 500-person hotel or a nightclub in the center of our historic neighborhood comprised predominantly by 1-2 story single family homes.

For years, residents of our neighborhood worked with City staff to develop and advance a zoning amendment to align the 361 Hanover property with the City's asserted commitment to transitional character zoning. In January 2020, the Planning Board unanimously voted to hold a public hearing on our requested amendment to rezone 361 Hanover to a more appropriate transitional zoning of CD4-L1 or CD4-L2. When COVID delayed that meeting, City staff assured us that our amendment would be advanced when the moment was right. When City business resumed, the Planning Board stated on the record that our proposal was a top priority. We were persistent; City staff said we should be patient. So, we waited for the public meeting to appear on the Planning Board Meeting Agenda. When it didn't appear on the list after many months, we reached out to ask if it would be on the list soon. City staff told us to wait. We waited and waited.

Then, in April 2024, it was too late. At the April 26 Planning Board meeting, former City planner Nick Cracknell, acting on behalf of Hampshire Development Corp., presented a design plan for development of 361 Hanover. Mr. Cracknell began his presentation by acknowledging that the City got the zoning for that lot "wrong." He then described the proposed development, implying that it was the best our neighborhood can hope for given the CD5/Downtown zoning. The Planning Board accepted the application for design review in May 2024, vesting the zoning.

At that May 2024 Planning Board meeting, we questioned why our request to be heard on our zoning amendment proposal never happened, despite a unanimous vote by the Planning Board for a public meeting. A Planning Board member responded by suggesting that we sat on our right to petition the City Council for a zoning change.

We did not sit on our rights. We relied, to our detriment, on promises made to us by the City. Now, City staff tell us that they are sorry, but “there really isn’t anything more [they] can do regarding this failed zoning amendment.” To be clear: Our zoning amendment did not “fail” -- it never saw the light of day. We were placated and the proposal was buried. And now, our legitimate concerns about this have been mischaracterized as NIMBYism.

We need your help holding the City to its promise of an appropriate transition between historic neighborhoods like ours and the encroaching urban landscape. To that end, we seek your advocacy for our neighborhood, including but not limited to defending our interests in connection with various agreements the City may enter into with the developer such as potential license agreements, land swaps, or easements which could impact the public’s right to access public portions of this property.

Thank you,

Sean Caughran & Marcie Vaughan, 407 Hanover Street

Robin Husslage, 27 Rock Street

Karina Quintans, 51 McDonough Street

Nicole LaPierre, 44 Rock Street