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Shoma Haque worked at the City of Somerville's Office of Strategic Planning & Community Development, focusing on economic revitalization initiatives for Union Square. Her main project was to act as the project manager for the implementation of the Union Square Main Street (USMS) program. USMS will be a non-profit organization with the goal of commercial district revitalization through historic preservation and economic development. This project required meeting with various stakeholders of Union Square in order to raise awareness about Main Street, organize them into a cohesive group, and begin the process of starting a Main Street program. An additional project was to lay the foundation for a farmers' market in Union Square, to be launched in summer 2005. Ms. Haque met with dozens of farmers and organized community groups, and began the process of planning implementation. Both a farmers' market and Union Square Main Streets will hopefully lead to a more livable and economically healthy Union Square.

MEMORANDUM

To: Ezra Glenn, Director, Planning & Development, City of Somerville
From: Shoma Haque, Rappaport Fellow
Re: Implementation of Union Square Main Streets
Date: August 14, 2004

Project Background

At the turn of the century, Union Square was the most vibrant and commercially successful business district in Somerville. Since then, it has suffered from the consumer and capital flight that many urban districts faced during the latter half of the twentieth century. In order to help Union Square restore its economic vitality, the City of Somerville conducted several studies of the district in the last three years, including the Union Square Neighborhood Revitalization Strategy Area Plan (NRSA) and the Master Plan for Union Square. Both documents recognized several of the challenges that faced Union Square and that prevented it from realizing its full potential. Committed to addressing this issue, the City decided to pursue an idea floated to the new Mayor, Joseph Curtatone, by the Director of Planning & Development, Ezra Glenn. This idea was to explore the implementation of a Main Streets program for Union Square.

The Main Street program has the goal of commercial district revitalization through historic preservation and economic development. The National Main Street Center of the National Trust for Historic Preservation started the Main Street program in the early 1980's, and now boasts over 1600 Main Street organizations in 40 states. Main Street organizations are typically non-profit, public-private partnerships, which take a comprehensive approach to achieve the goal of business district revitalization.

Stakeholders in the community are usually the catalyst behind creating a Main Street in their community, typically business owners, property owners, bankers, city government, and civic

groups. Most Main Streets are governed by a board of directors and are managed by a full-time program manager. Main Street takes a comprehensive four-point approach to revitalization, where volunteer working committees act to implement the goals of the organization. Each of the Main Street committees has specific roles and responsibilities, including promoting the district, creating an attractive public image and design for the district, and establishing a vibrant business mix.

Ideally, a Main Street organization would exist to address the issues that faced Union Square, including:

- A lack of daytime foot traffic
- A poor retail mix, including an overabundance of automotive uses, a lack of comparison shopping and traditional retail, and industrial uses mixed with retail uses
- Competition from nearby business districts with T-access, such as Davis Square, Central Square, and Harvard Square
- Low land values and rents that make new construction economically infeasible
- A lack of identity and visual appeal
- Transportation issues such as lack of parking, confusing traffic patterns, and traffic congestion
- Licensing and permitting regulatory barriers

During the past ten weeks, I have acted as the de facto project manager for the Union Square Main Street initiative. I spent significant time with the various stakeholders of Union Square, including business owners, property owners, residents, and non-profit leaders, in order to raise awareness about Main Street, organize them into a cohesive group, and begin the process of starting a Main Street program.

The people I met with expressed various sentiments with regards to a Union Square Main Street (USMS). Residents tend to have a more positive view of the City and its role in Main Street. They see a lot of potential in Union Square and have been active in the area for a long time, but it has been frustrating for them to see little lasting change in their neighborhood. However, they feel that an organization like USMS, which would bring together both residents and business owners, could address many of Union Square's issues.

Many businesses, on the other hand, are not as welcoming of the Main Street concept. There is significant skepticism towards new initiatives, because they feel that there has been a failure on the part of the City to support economic development. They believe that the City needs to address fundamental issues within Union Square and show faith by investing time and resources into fixing Union Square's problems. Both residents and business owners were adamant that USMS needed to be an action-oriented organization. One resident summed it up with "No more studies and no more talking." USMS needed *to do* something. In addition, both groups felt that an organization like Main Street needed to exist to confront the issues that would face Union Square if and when the Green Line was extended to the neighborhood.

These individual meetings culminated with a preliminary Main Streets stakeholders meeting in mid-July. The vast majority of people I had met with previously attended the meeting. The agenda included more information on Main Streets, a presentation by the Director of Brighton Main Streets, and a show of support from the City. Most of the attendees left with a positive feeling about Main Street, an intent to attend the next meeting in August, and potential interest in becoming a board or committee member.

Project Obstacles

While the initial meeting shows much promise in eventually implementing a Main Street program, there are a number of issues that the City needs to be cognizant of and address if a Main Street program is to be successful in the long-term. The most important obstacles to USMS are demonstrating commitment, building trust, and the role of the City in Union Square.

Demonstrating Commitment

Main Street organizations require a long start-up phase and an even longer period to show commercial district improvements. USMS will not make an impact unless there is both long and short-term commitment from the City.

Every employee in the Planning & Development department in Somerville already has multiple projects competing for his or her time. While USMS is still in its formative months, and after I depart, the City will need to continue to invest staff time to ensure the organization is stabilized or risk not establishing USMS.

In the long-term, the City has already committed Community Development Block Grant money towards partially funding USMS. With a two-year mayoral term in Somerville, the current mayor, who is a strong supporter of Main Streets, may not be in office next year. Thus, the long-term City funding of Main Street could be in jeopardy if a new administration that is unfriendly towards the organization takes office.

Building Trust

There is a serious lack of trust between the various stakeholders in Union Square. Trust will need to be built between businesses, between businesses and the City, and between businesses and residents in order for USMS to have the broad base of volunteer and City support that it needs to be successful.

While the diversity that exists in Union Square businesses is a strong asset to the district, it also acts as a strain on the ability to organize businesses. Language and cultural barriers already exist between Indian, Pakistani, Korean, Brazilian, Latino, and American business owners. In addition, the Main Street organization faces a business district that has little history of cohesion and cooperative action.

The City and business owners also have a long history of antagonism, as evidenced by the distrust that business owners currently feel towards the City. The sense that the City does not support businesses also stems from the fact that the City Aldermen have not traditionally supported business-friendly proposals that could potentially hurt the residential character of Somerville.

This issue has led to a real or perceived lack of trust between residents and business owners. While many of the more progressive residents in the area feel that a strong business district will benefit everyone in the long-run, there are certainly those residents who feel an expanding business district will threaten the ability to find parking, create traffic congestion, and will change the nature of their neighborhood.

The Role of the City

Several of the residents and business owners expressed frustration that the City has not fulfilled its bargain of being a public servant, by investing time and resources to improve Union Square.

Complaints include:

- Departments such as Inspectional Services are unprofessional and inconsistent, making it very difficult for businesses to comply with seemingly haphazard rules and regulations.
- The busy pedestrian crosswalks have not been re-stripped by the Department of Public Works, making it dangerous for pedestrians to conduct their business in the Square.
- Business owners are not being admonished by the City for keeping unclean and unsightly sidewalks in front of their businesses.
- A lack of signs for parking and municipal parking spaces on the west end of Union Square makes the area seem inaccessible to potential customers.
- Stringent zoning regulations that do not provide flexibility around parking requirements and do not allow higher-density uses make it difficult for businesses to open or expand in the Square.

This situation has contributed to businesses and residents assuming that the City does not prioritize Union Square in its plans for city improvements.

Project Recommendations

The City of Somerville could take several substantive steps towards addressing these obstacles, which would significantly improve the likelihood of a sustainable and successful Main Street program.

With regards to showing commitment towards USMS, the City must assign responsibility for supporting the program to a specific staff person within the Strategic Planning & Community Development (SPCD) office. There is currently one staff person who may be assigned to this role, with the hopes that a junior planner will soon be hired that will assume those responsibilities. I have two concerns with this transition plan. One concern is that this junior planner may not be on staff for another six weeks (at least), and if the current staff person is not assigned to take over USMS, there will be a lapse in City support for USMS during a crucial time. The second concern is that USMS could potentially have three different city contacts within the first three months. This variability in City staff support could hinder the stability of the organization in the formative stages of its development. Thus, I would recommend that the City assign a current staff person to USMS, and then transition to the junior planner in about six months, once USMS has stabilized.

In addition, USMS should obtain a written commitment from the SPCD office that it will be funded every year at a certain level for a certain number of years. In addition USMS should make developing relationships with political leaders in Somerville a top priority, particularly the Aldermen. Hopefully, by the time the administration changes again, USMS will have made major positive impacts, and there will be significant political support to keep its funding intact through changes in administration.

The trust issue will require enormous amounts of time and relationship-building. The concept of a Main Street organization itself will go a long way towards helping the various stakeholders in Union Square establish trust. I would recommend that the USMS Board hire a Main Streets Director who can connect with stakeholders at all levels and from all backgrounds. This person needs to reach out to immigrant business owners and residents, inviting them to meetings and making them feel welcome in the planning process. The Director must also be strong and vocal in establishing USMS independence from the City. The stakeholders must not feel that USMS is just another City-run agency. In addition, in the beginning the Board should hold multiple community meetings and inter-

nal meetings to allow the stakeholders to develop a unified vision of what they want their district to become and how they would like to implement that vision. This process will hopefully make clear that a healthy district cannot be established without both strong residents and strong business owners – they need each other and must work cooperatively to achieve their goals.

Finally, in terms of commitment, the City should begin the process of investing time and resources into making improvements to Union Square. While the Mayor prefers to approach district improvements holistically by planning large-scale, comprehensive changes, in the case of Union Square, I would recommend a phased approach. The reason for making incremental changes is that the City does not have large amounts of capital available to make full-scale changes in the Square in a short time-frame. Waiting for funds to become available, or for large-scale design plans to be completed could take months, if not years. Rather than allowing “the good to become the enemy of the perfect,” the City should prioritize 3-4 incremental changes each year to show the community that it is committed to improving Union Square, while still staying within its budget.

There is currently a void in Union Square in terms of a representative, independent organization that will act to voice the needs of the Union Square community. A Union Square Main Streets program is in a perfect position to acquire that role. The City needs an organization with which it can partner and work towards achieving the vision that was put forth in the Union Square Master Plan. However, in order to create a successful partnership, the City needs to address the obstacles of trust, commitment and its own role in the community. I am confident that with the continued support of the City and a committed, forward-thinking board and volunteer base, USMS could make tremendous strides in improving the livability and economic vitality of the district, and I look forward to seeing Union Square achieve its full potential in the coming years.