

Dorchester Reporter

Published on *Dorchester Reporter* (<https://www.dotnews.com>)

[Home](#) > Neighbors vs. developer debate, zoning rules feed a conflict on River Street

Neighbors vs. developer debate, zoning rules feed a conflict on River Street ^[1]

By Jennifer Smith, News Editor
March 14, 2019
Jennifer Smith, News Editor

Different visions for two parcels along River Street have neighbors and a developer at loggerheads in Mattapan at the inflection point of neighborhood input, idiosyncratic zoning policy, and a still-hot housing market.

Tim Longden, of Northborough, hopes to construct two multi-unit buildings on adjacent lots—52R and 54R River St — near the border of Mattapan and Dorchester in Lower Mills. Where there is currently a single-family home at 52R, he has been permitted to build a four-story, seven-unit condominium with ten parking spaces, eight of them in a first-floor garage. Where there is currently a two-condo house at 54R, he is in the process of applying to build a four-story, thirteen-unit condominium building with a first-floor garage of 21 parking spaces.

Both of these projects are technically “as of right,” meaning they fall within the city’s zoning requirements and do not need to go through a community meeting process. The latter does require review from the Boston Planning and Development Agency as it sits within a specific overlay district.

Neighbors objecting to the proposals have re-opened a debate about how Boston handles zoning like this that is tangled in a city-wide conversation about neighborhood character and the extent to which neighbors should have input into the development of private property.

Susan Lombardi-Verticelli is among roughly a dozen neighbors around the River Street lots who feel this zoning simply does not align with the properties as they have been used until now.

“Our community is so incredible over here, and we would all love to see some housing back there,” Lombardi-Verticelli said. “We’d love to bring in more people, families, into the community, but the scale and scope of these projects is not in line with what the space can handle, in line with the architectural design of Mattapan or Lower Mills, nor is it in line with housing needs of Mattapan and Lower Mills.”

Longden purchased 52R River St. in April of 2016 and submitted his initial application to the city in September 2016, he wrote in an email, adding that he had “spent a substantial amount of time over the next 2+ years navigating the proposed project through the as of right process per the city of Boston zoning and building code.”

Both properties are in a Neighborhood Design Overlay Districts, which means that the city has to review projects in that area if “exterior alteration is visible from a public street or public open space. 52R does not fall under the same overlay district restrictions, the BPDA said, since it is not visible from either. 54R, however, can be seen from the public road of River Street through Taylor Terrace.

That distinction needles residents like Lombardi-Verticelli, a Taylor Terrace abutter. The little street is a private way, so alterations that would impact their view do not mandate BPDA design review.

“We’ve been told, concerning 52, that we have nothing to say,” she told the Reporter, “that because I live on a private way that my view doesn’t count.” She had to go through a full community process to refurbish the inside of her basement, she noted. “I was glad to do it and would do it again if necessary, but that doesn’t seem to be the case for everyone.”

The River Street Civic Association objects to the project and came to the new Greater Mattapan Neighborhood Council for support, which at this point stands in solidarity with the neighbors.

City Council President Andrea Campbell, who represents the district and has been at the front of the debate surrounding as-of-right zoning, sees the River Street dustup as part of a continuing conversation about how the city can grow and still be respectful of those who already live in it.

“Everyone in the community wants parcels that are vacant or not being used to be developed,” she said. “Whether it’s commercial or residential, they want these projects to reflect what [the] community wants and residents want in their neighborhood and they want to have a seat at the table. It’s an example of a larger issue we’re taking on, which is, how do we change current laws, current code to allow communities to have greater input in projects happening in their backyards?”

It would make sense, Campbell said, for developers to at least be required to inform neighbors when they apply for building permits. It’s neighborly when the issue is about noise or visual disruption, but it’s also a safety issue if construction could impact a public way. The 52R project was fined by Inspectional Services for after-hours construction after following up on a report of work being done on the weekend.

At the neighbors’ behest, and after learning about objections to the project in Oct. 2017 when “Logden listed it on Zillow preemptively,” the Mayor’s Office of Neighborhood Services (ONS) coordinated an abutters meeting at Sweet Life in Lower Mills in November 2018 to discuss the 52R project, but made it clear in an email it was not required for the city to do so.

At that meeting, Longden said, “Specific changes were not requested to the 52 River St. project and the neighbors were unaware at the time that a potential project for 54 River St. was in the works because one of the sellers, who was present and vocal at the meeting, requested to me that her neighbors not be told.”

After reaching agreements with both condo owners in October 2018, Longden says he now controls 54R River St. Inspectional services will not approve the building permit requested on Nov. 29, 2018, until the BPDA signs off on the design. The design comment period closed Wed., March 13.

“Those comments will be taken into consideration by the BPDA before they meet with me,” Longden said.

Prior to the review, Old Towne Real Estate Co. listed the 0.37-acre lot for sale, promising “16,260 sq feet of quiet, off street land delivered permit ready... Lots of other high-end developments in the neighborhood are driving buyers to this area and driving condo prices up.”

Asked if he intends to sell the site to someone who would purchase it and continue developing the approved plans, Longden said, “Potentially, if possible.”

Copyright 2019, Boston Neighborhood News, Inc. [About/Contact us](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Advertising](#)

Source URL: <https://www.dotnews.com/2019/neighbors-vs-developer-debate-zoning-rules-feed-conflict-river-street>

Links

[1] <https://www.dotnews.com/2019/neighbors-vs-developer-debate-zoning-rules-feed-conflict-river-street>