

Following bribery scandal, Walsh revamps zoning board policies

Order toughens conflict-of-interest and financial disclosure rules; other changes would need state legislative approval

By [Tim Logan](#) and [Milton J. Valencia](#) Globe Staff, Updated February 24, 2020, 1:09 p.m.



"I want to assure the residents of Boston that they can have confidence in the Zoning Board of Appeal," said Mayor Martin J. Walsh. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF/THE BOSTON GLOBE

Six months after a [bribery scandal](#) rocked Boston's Zoning Board of Appeal, Mayor Martin J. Walsh on Monday detailed changes that he hopes will prevent such an incident from happening again.

At a City Hall news conference, Walsh signed an executive order designed to strengthen conflict-of-interest and financial disclosure rules for the seven-member board, which governs small and midsize development projects across the city. He also promised better online disclosures about projects that are before the ZBA and easier-to-use tools for public comment in the coming months.

More substantial changes — such as adding seats to the board — would require state legislation and probably take months, if not years, to win approval. But Walsh and key City Council members said such measures are crucial to restoring faith in a board that wields enormous influence on the look and feel of Boston’s neighborhoods.

“I want to assure the residents of Boston that they can have confidence in the Zoning Board of Appeal,” Walsh said. “We will protect what we love about our neighborhoods and this city.”

The move comes following the revelation in August that a veteran City Hall aide — then-Planning & Development Agency staffer John Lynch — took bribes from a developer to influence a project before the ZBA. Lynch pleaded guilty and [was sentenced in January to 40 months](#) in federal prison.

While no ZBA members were accused of taking bribes, Dorchester real estate agent Craig Galvin resigned from his post on the board amid [reports he had worked with Lynch](#) on private real estate projects. And William “Buddy” Christopher, a close Walsh ally who served as head of the city’s Inspectional Services Department at the time of the bribes, stepped down from his job at City Hall.

Complaints flooded in alleging improper dealings at the ZBA, which takes sometimes controversial votes on projects ranging from roof decks to apartment buildings. City Council members also called for changes in how the board operates.

Walsh agreed, hiring the law firm Sullivan & Worcester in September to review the ZBA’s operations and promising changes. On Monday, he released the firm’s report, which

recommended everything from physical changes to improved acoustics in the ZBA's hearing room to a revamping of the city's mostly arcane zoning code.

He also unveiled a slate of immediate changes designed to prevent the types of conflicts that the bribery scandal laid bare.

From now on, board members — who include architects, real estate agents, and union officials, all of whom have been either appointed or re-appointed by Walsh during his tenure — will be barred from voting on any project for which they've worked or had any financial interest in during the prior five years. They also will be barred from working on any project for two years after a vote on it. In addition, board members will have to file financial disclosure statements once a year, and undergo regular ethics training. LLCs and other shell companies that own commercial projects will have to disclose their ownership if they seek a variance from the ZBA.

Walsh acknowledged the new rules may make it harder to recruit members to the ZBA — whose members are paid \$600 per meeting for hearings every other Tuesday, plus evening meetings and site visits — but he said they are necessary to clear up concerns about conflicts.

“People need to have confidence in the process. They need to have confidence in this board,” he said. “The more information that we get on people who potentially serve on that board... is good for all of us.”

Council member Lydia Edwards, who has been one of the loudest voices pushing for change, appeared with Walsh at the signing event, and said she supported his changes as a good start.

Edwards has scheduled a City Council hearing Tuesday on other potential reforms, including changes to the makeup of the board itself to include members with expertise in urban planning, environmental issues, and residential displacement, alongside seats

currently mandated for real estate agents, construction contractors and unions, and architects.

“They ask different questions,” Edwards said.

Those reforms would require a vote of the state Legislature, to change the 1960s-era state law that created the ZBA. It wasn’t immediately clear if such proposals could get to Beacon Hill fast enough for a vote during the current legislative session, which ends July 31.

Either way, Edwards said, the ZBA needs reforms quickly to keep up with the rapid pace of development in Boston.

“Something needs to change,” she said. “We are not going to walk away from this moment having the same standard, the same set-up, the same system we’ve always had. That is not going to be acceptable.”

Meanwhile, much remains unknown about how the bribery case itself unfolded.

Federal prosecutors did not name the project at issue, or charge any developers — though people familiar with the case have said the case involved a South Boston condominium project being proposed by veteran builder Steven Turner in 2017. Nor have they said precisely how Lynch — whose post at BPDA had nothing to do with zoning variances — may have influenced the board to revive a project that was essentially dead.

A review for Walsh conducted by formal federal prosecutor Brian Kelly found that none of the three ZBA members who served in 2017 and are still on the board did anything wrong, but it shed little new light on the incident as several key players declined to talk to Kelly. Without answers to how this could have happened, said council member Michelle Wu, it’s difficult to have much confidence in the ZBA.

“Modernizing our systems is important but it’s not newsworthy, especially in a context of a corruption scandal that remains unexplained,” 600

said. “The underlying question of what corruption took place and who enabled it has not been answered in either of these reports or any of the announcements, and we need to resolve that before the public can fully trust the ZBA and our agencies.”

Tim Logan can be reached at timothy.logan@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter at [@bytimlogan](https://twitter.com/bytimlogan). Milton J. Valencia can be reached at milton.valencia@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter [@miltonvalencia](https://twitter.com/miltonvalencia).

 [Show 12 comments](#)
