

R-6 zoning on Munjoy Hill

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Posted in group: **Planning Board**

Dear Jeff, Planning Board members & City Councilors:

I was originally optimistic about the zoning changes introduced in 2015 because so many lots on Munjoy Hill were non-conforming, making it difficult for residents to make improvements to their property, and also so that smaller infill projects could be contemplated. The changes appeared to be a step in the right direction towards keeping the Hill a dynamic, growing community

But like many residents, I have become dismayed at the direction that development on the Hill seems to be taking since the new zoning was approved. While some projects have utilized the changes in a sensitive and thoughtful manner, other developments have aggressively maximized and exploited lot coverage, setback and other zoning changes, exploitations that seem to be driven largely by a profit motive. I think we are seeing the proverbial “unintended consequences”.

This is giving us structures that don't integrate very well into the existing neighborhoods. Structures that present to the street a cold and aloof personality, with just garage doors and anonymous facades. Structures that take up as much volume of space as they can, crowding up to the adjacent buildings and overpowering them.

Not only that, much of the new development is targeted towards a luxury demographic with pricing that excludes the workforce population; a demographic that tends towards seasonal occupancy leaving us with dark windows during the dark months. This doesn't jibe with the city's goals of affordable housing and of ensuring that development integrates well into existing neighborhoods.

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Specifically, I think that many of the recommendations in the IPOD should be kept intact. Some may argue that they are too restrictive, but given the experience of the past 3 years, I'd venture that it's far better to be more restrictive than permissive. Let's try them out for a few years and see how well developers and residents cope with them. If all development stops or slows to a crawl – which I highly doubt – the city can relatively easily readjust to compensate.

For instance, the height specs in the IPOD are a good compromise between the desires of developers and residents. While a multi-unit building on a larger lot should be allowed to have the greater height of 45 feet in order to increase density, a single or two-family residence height restriction of 35 feet will help to minimize the impacts of light and air on adjacent properties.

Also, it just makes sense to keep rooftop appurtenances within the same height allowances. While some may suggest that stepbacks will keep those items hidden from the street, surrounding neighbors in upper floors will be disadvantaged by appurtenances that will not only block their views, but also present an unattractive view of ugly mechanicals and stair towers.

I am ambivalent regarding the roof types in the IPOD. Perhaps that is a little too prescriptive and unnecessary. And regarding the juxtaposition of contemporary and existing architecture, I believe that even some ultra-modern design concepts and materials would work well on the Hill, adding to the variety and rhythm of the existing structures. That's part of what makes Munjoy Hill such an interesting place.

But a lot of what is going up now will likely be ridiculed in the future, as our children and grandchildren will ask, “What were they thinking back in those days? How could they allow those things to be built?”

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I am also feeling a little ambivalent about how to proceed regarding teardowns. While it's true that some of the buildings on the Hill are in bad enough condition to make it financially unfeasible to upgrade them, I find it sad that some sturdy buildings that were still in great shape have been torn down, and there are more of them on the chopping block. I'm not sure how something like this can be managed from a planning perspective given the existing development pressures.

I think that the time is fast approaching that an historic district designation makes sense for Munjoy Hill, and I am in favor of such a designation. Not to lock down and "bell jar" the Hill, but to ensure that future development is done with a sensitivity towards the existing neighborhoods, to ensure compatibility and to prevent unwarranted demolition of properties that contribute to the historical fabric of our community. I think there is already a large amount of community support for such a district, and once people become comfortable with how urban planning processes work within an historic district, there will be even more support. I hope that Greater Portland Landmarks can take the lead here.

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In closing, I'd like to express my appreciation for the good-faith efforts being made by all of the city staff, elected officials and the wide number of stakeholders in this process. I know it will be difficult to strike a good balance between diverse opinions and desires, and I look forward to seeing what recommendations the planning department puts forward.

Sincerely,
Peter Macomber
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