
Fwd: Munjoy Hill development discussion - please read.

1 message

Jeff Levine <jlevine@portlandmaine.gov>
To: Jennifer Munson <jmy@portlandmaine.gov>

Wed, Mar 14, 2018 at 1:05 PM

For Munjoy Hill file.

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----- Forwarded message -----

From: **EJ Koch** <ejkoch@gmail.com>
Date: Wed, Mar 14, 2018 at 1:04 PM
Subject: Munjoy Hill development discussion - please read.
To: bsr@portlandmaine.gov, jlevine@portlandmaine.gov, jduson@portlandmaine.gov, kcook@portlandmaine.gov,
nmm@portlandmaine.gov, estrimling@portlandmaine.gov, bbatson@portlandmaine.gov,
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Hello Belinda and others -

Attached is my letter with input on the current conversation about development on the Hill.

I hope you will act decisively to address my concerns which are shared by most Hill residents I speak with. I have written the City about Hill development in the past, and am writing again because I believe the time to address the issue is long overdue.

Thank you.

Erna Koch

79/81 Vesper St.
Portland

 **letter re MH development. Erna Koch.doc**
8484K

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March 14, 2018

Portland City Council members
Planning Staff
Mayor
389 Congress St.
Portland, Maine 04101

RE: The Future of Munjoy Hill

I'm the 30-year owner of a Munjoy Hill triple decker, and I'm writing to share my thoughts and wishes regarding the demolition and/or "redevelopment" of buildings and new construction on Munjoy hill. The thoughtless development on the Hill breaks my heart. With each new ugly building, I feel my neighborhood slips away to be replaced by new bland expensive condo developments. Why have we allowed that?

I am strongly in favor of creating an historic district that encompasses the Hill. By this I do not mean that in the hill must look like it looked in the 1800s, or even in the 1950s. However, the design and mass of most buildings built on lots on which a developer has demolished an existing structure, or "added" to existing buildings are of a mass and design that obviously does not fit with the neighborhood. If designating the Hill as an historic district is what it would take to address this, then I am fully on board with that. There is no reason I can think of that our traditionally working-class neighborhoods should be excluded from the designation of "historic."

Additionally, I believe it imperative that standards be developed and applied to determining what is candidate for demolition or "teardown." Many older buildings that could have feasibly been saved and renovated have been sacrificed for higher density condo housing. Ironically, once "redeveloped," much of this housing is then priced at the high end of the market, and many are bought by people who do not call Portland home for more than 4 months of the year. The developers do not live here, nor do most have any real connection with this community. In some, the quality of the work done to get a development up quickly is shoddy and will deteriorate more quickly over time.

Let's call this trend "predatory redevelopment." The kind of redevelopment I'm addressing has been supported by the planning board, and maybe indirectly by city Council, through the use of variances and other techniques, while cynically calling it "adding to housing stock." I would support regulation that ends "predatory redevelopment." Developers are not thinking about the feasibility of renovation or restoration of a building when they can tear it down and build bigger and more "new units on a site, upon which he can make a larger profit. It is not our neighbors who are driving the teardown/new development wave. And likely, those individuals will never be our neighbors. Developer practices endorsed by the Planning Board have already changed the face of the hill, and if we do not take strong action now, predatory

redevelopment will continue to overtake this part of the city that we (and the many visitors to Portland) love. I want to live in a community I can still recognize.

From City of Portland October 2017 Annual Housing Report:

Outcome:

Since the zones were amended, approximately 65 units of new housing have been permitted or built in the B-1 and B-1 zones, 25 units of new housing in the B-2 zone, and 120 units of new housing in the R-6 zone.

120 units of “new” housing (!) on the Hill may obscure the fact that the vast majority of this is housing that will never be rental or “workforce” housing. Much of it was built without any regard for compatibility with existing structures, and has been sold to people who are not full time residents of Maine. Many of these “new units” stand vacant most months of the year.

Is it feasible to redevelop buildings that developers prefer to tear down? [YES] One of my vocations is rehabilitator of housing. I buy condemned/distressed buildings that need significant renovation, and I restore them as good quality rental housing. My last project was a 1200 square-foot single-family house that needed total replacement of electric and heating/plumbing systems, as well as structural, and significant cosmetic repair. The cost of that 2017 renovation was about \$85,000. While the cost may be somewhat higher here, such an expense is certainly within the range of restoration feasibility. This suggests that most (and likely NO) buildings need be torn down on Munjoy Hill because they cannot be saved. A developer may not see sufficient profit for their purposes by doing thoughtful redevelopment, but many resident owners feel differently. Here are a couple examples of residents renovating buildings with consideration to maintaining consistency with the neighborhood:



Below: “Gut” renovation of two family house underway by owner (next door to upper picture):



These two houses on North Street have been somewhat enlarged and back decks added, yet don't disrupt the look of the area.



Around the corner from these, on Walnut Street, is one of the earlier egregious examples of predatory development blight – An enormous condo development. Although not fully pictured, the outsize mass of it is visible from the highway and below. It entirely blocks its neighbors' light and view, and is nothing like anything in that neighborhood.





Another “early” example of massive for profit development, dwarfing the observatory on Congress St.



What is the standard for determining a building is a “teardown?” After the first listening meeting, I took a walk on Montreal Street, and through that neighborhood. I was looking for the two “tear downs” on Montreal St. a developer was talking about at the meeting. He was fearful that he would not be allowed to tear them down and build on those lots. I looked hard and could find no houses on that street that would meet my description of a teardown.

While walking to and from Montreal Street, I was shocked at the numbers of massive and uncomplimentary buildings that already exist and that are now under construction. I took pictures of a few.

This building has nothing in common with its neighbors, and has shut out the light that could have entered one of them.





This one, on a corner lot, towers over its neighbors.





And another in process. It too will dwarf its neighbors.:

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UNIT #1 UNIT #2 UNIT #3



The following are in my neighborhood.

A formerly normal sized house that has been turned into a behemoth:



Across the street from it – condos still for sale. While this is not as huge as most, unlike the first part of the Adams School redevelopment, there apparently was no requirement that this building fit with its neighbors.

Boxes like this are cheaper to build.



Condominiums. Since I moved to my hill neighborhood, I've seen three waves of gentrification. The most recent has been conversion to condominiums of the majority of the three family buildings on my block – and probably the majority on the street. These condos have then been sold at a premium, most of them to people who don't live here, but occupy them 3 to 4 months of the year. When I go out on a winter evening, 50% or more of what were formerly fully occupied apartments are dark. Initially (in the late 70s, when I moved to my street), these buildings were occupied by large families, and later used for mostly owner-occupied rental housing.

If we are really serious about the "housing shortage," we should not be facilitating redevelopment for developer profit, but supporting residents and prospective residents to maintain the character of their buildings, and provide incentives to maintain and even expand the precious little rental housing we have left. If we had an inclusionary zoning ordinance with more juice, at least some of the necessary resources would be at our disposal.

Historic District composition. I want to echo the comments of other residents you've heard from, both at the listening session, and through other communication channels regarding specific actions to be taken to protect the character of our Hill neighborhoods. Despite the fact that Munjoy Hill was never a rich area – it provided “workforce housing” for many working class families working in the factories, city government, and industry in Portland, its character should be considered as important to preserve as that of the always-wealthy West End.

I think we should seriously consider a designated Munjoy Hill historic district board or association. I prefer that the definition of "qualified member" for the Board should mean that the Board or panel would include local construction professionals who are not condo developers, at least two historical experts, current Hill residents - and if we can recruit them, at least one individual who grew up on the hill. This group of people is largely unhappy with the trend here, but most have moved out and feel powerless to do anything to address it. That being said, in my experience these folks are realistic about change.

Standards The [Historic or Permitting] Board should set standards *based on feasibility of repair/renovation* for determination of a permissible “teardown,” and reasonable design standards that balance the desires of the homeowner with the character of the neighborhood. Mass, appearance, and scale should be critical - far more important than they are now. Consideration of light, greenspace, and the burden on neighbors should be included (ensure that 10,000 sf lots and not smaller are eligible). The assumption should be that predatory development is not welcome on the Hill. We’ve already taken our fair share.

Yours Truly,

/ Erna /

Erna Koch

PS:

Another, related topic:

These are awful, particularly the side yard setbacks, parking, and tiny lot size permitted.

Potential R-6 Amendments to Dimensional Requirements		
<i>Residential Dimensional Requirements</i>	<i>Existing</i>	<i>Proposed</i>
Lot Size	4,500 sf	2,500 sf
Min. Lot Area/Dwelling Unit	1,000-1,200 sf	725 sf
Lot Area/Lodging House Rooming Unit	250 s.f	250 s.f
Street Frontage	40 feet	30 feet
Front Yard Setback	10 feet, or no more than average depths of adjacent front yards	5 feet, or no more than average depths of adjacent front yards
Rear Yard Setback	20 feet	10 feet
Side Yard Setback	10-15 feet, variable by height	5 feet
Side Yard on Side Street	10 feet	0 feet
Maximum Lot Coverage	40-50%, variable by # of dwelling units/lot	60%
Minimum Lot Width	40 feet	30 feet
Maximum Height	45 feet	45 feet
Landscaped Open Space	20-30%, variable by # of dwelling units/lot	20%
Parking	1 space/unit	1 space/unit, except none required for first 3 units

Neighborhood livability is enhanced when there remain lots or spaces that are NOT occupied by housing - and that actually contribute to greenspace. To allow building on lots of 2500 sf as now appears to be allowed is not my idea of smart or wise development. Similarly, not requiring parking on these, on MUNJOY HILL (!?!?) for the “first 3 units” seems foolish and counterproductive, given the lack of adequate street parking on the Hill.