

Somerville

Not all prescribe big drugstore plans

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In an unusual partnership between real estate developers and city government, Somerville plans to approve construction of a CVS in Magoun Square in return for promises that the pharmacy will build a public plaza, and pay for the maintenance of a municipal parking lot next door.

The proposal has won the support of the mayor and board of alderman. But the plans are upsetting local residents, who complain that the construction could jeopardize a \$275,000 state grant to revitalize Somerville's forgotten square which they lobbied the city to obtain.

"It's an extremely frustrating process," said Joe Lynch, who helped create the Magoun Square Revitalization Group in 1998. "It can't be the developer making a pocketful of money and then walking away."

In response to residents' concerns, the city is requiring the developer to construct a public plaza, install an ATM machine, and maintain the city lot. These are generous concessions, according to Gerald Cohen, president of SF Properties, Inc., which will lease city land to build a sprawling, 10,000-square-foot CVS complex.

Renovations to the deteriorating parking lot alone will cost \$400,000, Cohen said, and annual maintenance \$35,000. And instead of reducing the size of the cement lot — as the city had pre-



Sketch of the CVS pharmacy complex proposed for Magoun Square.

viously planned — Cohen said he might increase the number of spaces, as well as repair the cavernous pot holes that now lay covered by wind-swept debris.

"The city gets a huge win," he said.

City officials have praised the \$3.5 million construction plan, anticipating over \$30,000 a year in property taxes and eager to see businesses invest in Magoun Square.

The neighborhood, located off Broadway past Ball Square, has been plagued by vacancies and a sense that it is overshadowed by Davis and Union Squares.

"The commercial district isn't thriving the way it could be," said Steve Post, director of Somerville's Office of Housing and Community Development. "People need a reason to go to Magoun Square, and CVS will be a draw."

The residents' association welcomes the chain store, but not at the expense of the state grant, Lynch said. Years of lobbying resulted in a revitalization plan that included acorn lighting and brick sidewalks. Now, Lynch worries,

that could be lost.

Residents say the developers have already reneged on a promise to supplement any funds the state withholds due to the construction project. Money supposedly pledged to help five displaced businesses relocate has also been withdrawn, they say.

The developers deny offering to pay businesses' moving expenses, or for the lighting and sidewalk enhancements. The state grant has not yet been amended, they say, and it is not clear whether eventual changes will result in a delay or cancellation of the funds.

Criticism of the project is also vehement among displaced businesses owners, who include the proprietors of a computer supply shop and a convenience store. Their landlords have sold their property to Cohen's company, and their stores will soon be demolished to make room for the CVS.

"They didn't help me out, they didn't even talk to me," said Syed Saqlain, whose K-2 Market is closing after seven years. "This is going to be very bad."

"I'd prefer they go somewhere

else," said Kevin Haggerty, leaving White Spot Pizza for perhaps the last time before the building is razed. "It'd be a shame to lose all these stores." Other business owners, however, were more sanguine about the side effects of promised economic development. Daniel Maher, who operates a stained glass shop in Magoun Square, said CVS will bring foot traffic, prestige, and stability to a neighborhood where stores open and close on a monthly basis.

Walking past an overturned shopping cart near scattered beer bottles on the property last week, developers said their project represents a "shot in the arm" for the struggling district.

And after dozens of community meetings, they say most residents now support CVS, which pending city approval could begin construction as early as December. "The neighborhood said, 'We want to do something down here,'" said Post. "I don't want to lose good businesses," he said, then added, "There are always going to be some people who are unhappy."