

From: Rand Wilson

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Subject: Somerville housing project leads to union clash (Somerville Neighborhood News/Somerville Journal)

Great job by Ed Halloran!

Somerville housing project leads to union clash

<http://somerville.wickedlocal.com/article/20150508/NEWS/150507582/12581/NEWS>

By Jane Regan, Somerville Neighborhood News, Posted May. 8, 2015 at 7:29 AM

See the SNN video story here: <http://www.scatvsomerville.org/news/housing-project-dividing-progressives/>

SOMERVILLE A new four-story building is dividing city progressives, with the developer creating 35 new affordable units but constructing them mostly without union labor.

Work has already begun at the site of the old Boys & Girls Club at 181 Washington Street, where the Somerville Community Corporation is building an \$11-million dollar building with federal, state and city money in tandem with a private condominium development next door. About a year from now, there will be 35 new affordable apartments within steps of Union Square: 22 two-bedrooms, nine one-bedrooms and four three-bedroom apartments. Eight of the units will be Section 8 housing.

“In other cases, the rent is just brought down to a level, fully paid by the tenant, that’s below what they can find in a market like Somerville’s, which is really expensive,” SCC Executive Director Danny LeBlanc told Somerville Neighborhood News (SNN) in an interview on April 24. “It enables people of more modest means to be able to afford to live here.”

The non-Section 8 units will be available to individuals or families of moderate income levels, earning 60 percent of the Area Median Income. For a one-person household, that would be \$41,400 or less. For a three-person household, \$53,220 or less.

But while advocates of affordable housing are pleased the development will soon break ground, the city’s unions and supporters of union labor are having a different reaction, because the building is mostly being constructed by a non-union contractor.

“We know that SCC wants good jobs, good paying union jobs, and they want to hire local residents, and we share those same philosophies,” Somerville Labor Coalition co-chair Ed Halloran, a member of the city’s Municipal Employees Association, told SNN.

Halloran was referring to the many initiatives spearheaded by SCC that focus on fair wages, transparency, and on community benefits, such as the Union United coalition, the Jobs for Somerville Committee and the First Source Jobs program. But in an April 27 letter to LeBlanc calling for union labor at the site, Halloran and leaders from the city’s police, firefighter, school custodian and 911 operators unions had harsher words.

“It’s time to walk the walk instead of just talking the talk,” the April 27 letter reads. “We cannot stand with you to push Federal Realty, US2 and others to do the right thing while turning a blind eye to SCC’s track record of building with low-road contractors. Doing so cheapens the common cause we’re striving for.

“Isn’t it more than a little ironic that SCC says it wants to help keep Somerville affordable for working families, yet it is ‘too expensive’ to hire local-area residents who are the very people identified as a constituency for occupancy in the housing you plan to build?” the letter asks.

LeBlanc said that the SCC is following “a difficult path.” While some of the subcontractors – electrical and steel – will be union shops, the general contractor is not, due to the cost.

“We very much stand behind local hiring and fair wages for everybody,” LeBlanc said. “The economics of doing affordable housing, which is substantially government subsidized and also limited in terms of the actual budget that you have simply doesn’t allow us to afford the union bids that we get in all cases.”

LeBlanc said that general contractor Dellbrook Construction of Quincy was hired through a “competitive bidding process.”

“Our posture at SCC with the development that we do is: we do the very best we can by way of wages and all other conditions in quality of the project,” he said. “The bottom line is, we are building affordable housing that is critically needed in Somerville and we have to build it within the financial rules that we’re given.”

The SCC has owns 184 affordable apartments and has built several condominium projects. In addition to the 181 Washington Street building, the organization will soon begin work to build 11 condos at 163 Glen Street.

LeBlanc said he did not know how many union hires or local hires will ultimately work on the 181 Washington Street site.

“We are just now finalizing agreements with the subcontractors we’ve selected based on a bidding process,” he told SNN in an April 27 email.

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