

# **[IN-PROGRESS] Frequently Asked Questions about the 90 Washington St Redevelopment project**

Author: Daniel Wong, Somerville Ward 2 resident

## **Related resources**

- [Google Maps: 90 Washington St](#)
- Official city website [90 Washington St Project - City Website](#)

## **What is the 90 Washington St Redevelopment Project?**

- The city plans to build a new police headquarters, to build a new fire station, and enable mixed-use development across 4 acres on 90 Washington St.
- While the project is still in the design phase, the most recent designs from September 2021
  - Cost \$102 million
  - Included a ~64,000 square feet for a new police station
  - Included a ~5,600 square feet for a new fire house & station (meaning the main administrative offices and a spot for “Engine #3”)
  - Included a multi-story parking garage, mostly for police cars, but also for public use
  - Occupied around ~1/3 of the 3.99 acres at 90 Washington St. Most city designs propose using the remaining space for green space or mixed development
- As recent as June 2022, the Mayor has said she is considering other designs.

## **What’s the process for funding this project?**

- To get money for this project, the Mayor will need to sell municipal bonds.
- To sell municipal bonds, the Mayor needs approval from 8 out of our 11 city councilors.

## **What’s the current status of the project?**

- Stalled.
- While the mayor continues to support the project, a few key city councilors have expressed their disapproval of the existing plan.
  - Councilor At-Large Jake Wilson is on the “Public Safety” Building committee. He has said he does not support the plan, because it is too costly and he would prefer the police station to be elsewhere.
  - 90 Washington St is in Ward 1. Ward 2 Councilor Matt McLaughlin has expressed disapproval of the plan.

- Rumor has it that Ballantyne wants to ask for an official vote for funding by the end of the year (2022).

## Abbreviated history of the project:

- 2011
  - The police headquarters and fire department for Engine #3 at 220 Washington St properties floods frequently and severely. It has significant mold.
  - In their Somerville Facilities Master Plan, The Cecil Group, Inc, reviewed many city buildings and needs. They recommended (among many other things) that the city move and replace the police department at 220 Washington St.
- 2014
  - In preparation for mixed-use development, Cobble Hill Center, LLC evicted businesses from 90 Washington St, including a laundromat, Andrea's House of Pizza, Sophia's Beauty Salon, a Tedeschi's, and a Dunkin' Donuts.
  - [See Google Maps Street view](#)
- 2016
  - Due to in-fighting, Cobble Hill Center, LLC, fails to develop 90 Washington St, and their permits expire
    - [COBBLE HILL CENTER LLC vs. SOMERVILLE REDEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY, 487 Mass. 249](#)
- 2018
  - Then-mayor Joe Curtatone's administration determined that 90 Washington St is the best out of 6 locations for a new police station and fire station. because the site is easily accessible by car and transit, it's large, lacks existing tenants, and has a low predicted cost. ([PDF](#))
- 2019
  - The Somerville City Council voted for taking 90 Washington St via eminent domain from Corcoran Jennison and building a “public safety building”.
    - <https://www.thesomervilletimes.com/archives/89961>
- 2021
  - The Curtatone administration’s “Public Safety Building Committee” starts meeting monthly and holds a few community engagement meetings.
  - August
    - The Committee starts showing initial designs and updates their estimated cost from \$50 million to ~\$102 million ([PDF](#))
  - November
    - Evelyn Ortiz, Property Administrator for Cobble Hill Apartments, publishes a letter in a personal [blog](#) run by property owner and former candidate for mayor, Billy Tauro. The letter describes how many Cobble Hill Residents dislike the plans. The residents are concerned about the sound and the loss of green space, among other concerns
  - Fall-Winter
    - Due to the high cost and lack of consensus, the committee extends their design phase. Curtatone asks the committee to engage with the community more.
- 2022

- “Public Safety Building Committee” continues to hold meetings, assuming the plan will continue.
- [Residents Raise Concerns About Plans For Public Safety Building](#) February 8, 2022 By Shira Laucharoen, Boston Institute for Nonprofit Journalism
- May
  - Cobble Hill residents invite Ballantyne to speak at Cobble Hill.
  - Wednesday, May 25th
    - Ballantyne, several committee members, defend the development to Cobble Hill residents. ([YouTube](#), [BINJ article](#))

## **Why is the City proposing to build a new police station?**

- Reason 1
  - The current police headquarters and fire station at 220 Washington St regularly floods, might have black mold (unclear on how extensive this is) and can be expensive to maintain.
  - This proposed new “Public Safety” Building is intended to replace that headquarters and station.
- Reason 2
  - The city plans on eventually giving 220 Washington St to Union Square Station Associates

## **Why is the City proposing to build a new fire station?**

- Reason 1
  - Same as above.
  - Additionally, when any fire station closes for repairs or other needs, the fire department lacks space to store the fire engines or to house fire department employees during their shifts. They need more space.
- Reason 2
  - Same as above.

## **Why is the City proposing to build the proposed police station at 90 Washington St, rather than elsewhere?**

- The city conducted a study of 6 sites in 2018. ([Google maps](#))
- 90 Washington St had the highest score according to their rubric.
- This rubric largely considered the cost of buying land, size and shape of the parcel, and predicted response times for the fire department.

## **What are the benefits of putting the police at 90 Washington street, as opposed to elsewhere?**

- According to Melissa Woods and SPD during public meetings in early 2021, police do not specifically need to be at this site.

- SPD has patrols in each of the 7 wards consistently so unless a major call happens, there is no reason for officers to be dispatched directly from the station.

## **Why is the City proposing to build the proposed fire station at 90 Washington St?**

- As above, the city conducted a study of 6 sites in 2018. 90 Washington St had the highest score according to their rubric.
- Importantly, 90 Washington can fit the fire engine #3 and the city predicted the department could respond to 92% of all calls within 5 minutes..

## **Is \$102 million for a new police station and fire station typical in our area?**

- Medford completed their smaller police station for less than \$25 million in December 2021.
- A project manager for Somerville said that Medford's police department is much "simpler" than ours.
  - She also noted that Somerville is using the same architect as Medford and that the Mayor's team has visited the Medford station.

## **The city got the land by eminent domain. The original owner sued the city to get it back, but lost in court. Is the city required to build a police station?**

- Unclear, but they are likely required to do something with the land related to "public safety". The definition of a public safety building probably varies depending on who you talk to. The court may have its own definition.
- Related research
  - [Somerville Urban Renewal Taking Survives Challenge](#)

## **What are the Cobble Hill apartments? What do Cobble Hill Residents think about the project?**

- Cobble Hill is an affordable housing project for the elderly, owned and managed by Corcoran Jennison, located at 84 Washington St (i.e. right next to 90 Washington).
- Corcoran Jennison is effectively the same company that tried and failed to build mixed development on 90 Washington St, in 2016 (but under a different legal entity, called "Cobble Hill Center")
- There are around 300 Cobble Hill residents each with their own opinion on the project.
- I spoke to several residents and have reviewed letters they sent to the Mayor. Several are concerned about
  - the potential noise from sirens,
  - the loss of their trees and green space,
  - the lack of community input in the plan.

