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LOCAL NEWS

Which Green Line?

By Brock Parker / bparker@cnc.com

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New plan trains sights on Trum, Tufts stops for MBTA

Joe Lynch's train might be coming, and he's trying to get everyone on board.

Lynch, a Magoun Square activist, is one of several locals who have their own ideas about where the MBTA should create new Green Line MBTA stops in Somerville.

Last month, the MBTA chose a Watertown-based firm, Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, to study potential Green Line routes through Somerville for an rail line extension the state has committed to build by 2011. Stopping the train in Union Square is considered a must to many residents and city officials.

But stopping the Green Line in Union Square alone won't be enough, Lynch said.

"The intent of the Green Line extension is to serve all of Somerville and West Medford," Lynch said. "The intent was never to bring it into Union Square and stop it."

So Lynch is advocating for the MBTA to extend the Green Line to Union Square, and then run it all of the way through the city along the already existing Lowell Line. Green Line stops, Lynch said, could be located along the Lowell Line near Innerbelt Road and Washington Street, behind Somerville High School at the Homans building on Medford Street and onto Tufts, with stops along the way at Magoun Square near the Cedar Street Bridge or Ball Square.

"It's an excellent jump-start for the entire city if the Green Line runs through the entire city," Lynch said.

But for Wig Zamore, a member of the grassroots group Somerville Transit Equity Partnership, said the spots Lynch has targeted for Green Line stops might be better served by a commuter rail stops.

There might not be enough funding to run the Green Line all of the way through Somerville, Zamore said, and even if there was, residents in Ball Square and Magoun Square might not want it.

"I really don't think the residents in Magoun and Ball squares really want a lot more development," Zamore said.

Putting commuter train stops along the Lowell Line might be more affordable, Zamore said, and then the Green Line could run from Lechmere up McGrath Highway and Somerville Avenue into the heart of Union Square.

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Joe Lynch points out where the trains go, but don't stop. - PHoto by Michael Manning

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While Lynch said a Union Square stop could serve up to 17,000 riders a day, stopping the train there wouldn't be serving the other 21,000 residents along the Lowell Line.

"Will the other 21,000 residents of Somerville be happy with a commuter rail stop?" Lynch said. "The answer is no."

One way to bridge both ideas, said Chamber of Commerce President Steve Mackey, is to create branches of the Green Line in Somerville much like the other end of the Green Line branches into the B, C, D and E lines into west Boston and the suburbs.

Mackey said one branch of the Green Line could run into Union Square, while the other branch could stretch along the Lowell Line towards Tufts.

Another alternative would be to run the Green Line in Union Square and then tunnel through Prospect Hill to get back to the Lowell Line and on toward Medford. But Mackey, Zamore and Lynch all said it would be too expensive.

"That is just a dream," Mackey said.

"I think branching is far more economical than going to Union Square and then tunneling through Prospect Hill," Zamore said.

No matter what, Mackey said "Union Square has to be a priority because it's a central business district."

If the funding could be found to branch the Green Line into Union Square and run another branch toward Tufts, Zamore said he would support it.

"If the state and federal government are willing to spend the money, boy, I wouldn't have a problem with that," Zamore said.

Mayor Joe Curtatone said he would support a Green Line extension toward Ball Square, but the train would have to stop in Union Square. Curtatone said a Green Line stop for Union Square is essential because it would revitalize the central business district much like the Red Line MBTA stop did for Davis Square in the 1980s.

"I'm supportive of the Green Line expanding north toward Medford, but it can't skip Union Square," Curtatone said.

Aldermen at Large Denise Provost and Bill White both stressed the need for an MBTA stop in Union Square.

But White said he his top choice for a Green Line route will depend on whether or not there will be funding to build the rail line.

"I guess I would favor the one that has the most realistic chance of being passed by the state," White said.

Provost said before she makes a decision, she wants to see a three-dimensional map of the city to see how a Green Line extension would work with other transportation routes in the city, such as McGrath Highway.

Lynch said a Green Line route along the Lowell Line would give the MBTA with opportunities to avoid the expense of taking land by eminent domain. Extending the line into the heart of Union Square would cause the MBTA to spend a lot of money in eminent domain land takings, and the construction of the stop could take a while and severely affect the businesses in Union Square. If the city still wants a train stop in the middle of Union Square, Lynch said a commuter train stop could be built along the Fitchburg Line, which runs through Union Square and onto Porter Square in Cambridge.

Extending the Green Line along the Lowell line tracks would be cheaper and make more sense, Lynch said.

"There's a logical [route] that would not negatively affect the businesses in Union Square and it also happens to be the most financially viable [alternative]," Lynch said.