

December 16, 2018

Dear Fellow East Siders:

I hope you are enjoying the opportunity to get together with friends and family at the gatherings that accompany the holiday season. This week's letter discusses the teacher's contract, organizing parents of public school students, regulation of student housing and the City Council's vote to override the Mayor's veto of the Hope Point Tower project.

This past Tuesday, the School Department Oversight Committee held a public hearing and voted on the tentative agreement between the City and the Providence Teachers Union. If approved, this agreement will restore labor peace after more than a year of poor teacher morale and a "work to rule" job action. Given this background, any agreement would be welcome, and the one presented to the City Council includes some incremental improvements in return for modest pay increases. The improvements include more flexibility in school day scheduling (which in the current contract locks each school into a specified opening and closing time) and wellness incentives to reduce health care costs. The scheduling reforms will facilitate more autonomy at the school level, and the modest improvements coupled with manageable expense provided a basis for approval by the Committee and ultimately by the City Council. With that said, in my opinion, much more significant changes are needed to advance our City's educational program.

With that in mind, a group of parents are meeting to discuss ways to advocate for improvements in our public schools. These parents first came together in the wake of the school bus driver strike and the Providence Teachers Union's "work to rule" job action. The group is holding its next meeting this **Wednesday, December 19 at 6:00 p.m. at Hope High School Cafeteria**, and they welcome all parents who are interested in joining this effort.

This past Wednesday, a committee of the City Plan Commission completed its review of undergraduate student housing in residential neighborhoods. They voted to recommend a draft ordinance to the full Commission that includes greater co-ordination with colleges, and a three student per residential unit in the R-1 and R-1A zones. As an accommodation to property owners, the draft ordinance treats the student limit as a type of dimensional restriction, which permits easier modification on an individual property basis where conditions are appropriate. If approved, this ordinance would provide a regulatory response to the discovery of a lease that would have moved thirteen undergraduate student tenants into a two-family house with a total of six bedrooms. The Commission will hold public hearings, which hopefully will lead to legislation introduced to the City Council.

On Thursday night, the City Council voted to override the Mayor's veto of the Hope Point Tower project, ending the City's substantive oversight of the project. Now that the City Council vote is over, it is possible to observe two policy ramifications of the process.

The first is that this was approved by a "lame duck" Council. In a procedure where the developer needed every single vote, it is notable that one of those who switched from opponent to supporter was a "lame duck" whose stated his opposition to the project at a candidate forum (as did his successor), but change his mind after Election Day. In the interest of full disclosure, I also am a "lame duck," but my position against the zoning change is consistent with my successor's, as well as the bulk of feedback I received and observed during the recent election for the Ward 2 seat.) Recently, the issue of "lame duck" legislatures has drawn national attention, as the Republican state legislatures in Michigan and Wisconsin have passed bills after the election that would strip the Governor of traditional powers, where in both cases a Republican governor was unseated by a Democrat. Opponents call these bills anti-democratic, as the "lame duck" Republicans are effectively undermining the statewide vote in favor of the new governors. In a recent [Article](#) in POLITICO, Donald Moynihan argues that the best solution is either to bring the new legislature in immediately after the election (which currently happens locally with the East Greenwich Town Council) or to impose supermajority requirements on legislation passed during a "lame duck" session.

The second issue the debate over the Hope Point Tower raised was that of affordable housing. On the first night of debate, Councilwoman LaFortune introduced a proposed amendment that, in addition to creating a modest fund to maintain the park and to prevent "land banking," would have required 15% of the units be constructed for affordable housing or, alternatively, that the developer contributed \$15,000 per unit into an affordable housing fund, which would amount to \$6 million based on the developer's projected 400 units. This \$6 million cost increment would represent 2% beyond the \$300 million budget. Unfortunately, every proponent of the project voted against the amendment. (I voted in favor, as it would improve the project, though not to the point where I could support it as modified.) By taking these two votes, first against any affordable housing benefit and second in support of a zoning change exclusively at a developer's request, the City Council majority undermined a fundamental principle of affordable housing as set forth in the City's comprehensive plan, namely to use development incentives as a way to build affordable housing. This linkage is critical, because it does not require the expenditure of City funds (which can meet resistance from taxpayers) or the alteration of zoning codes (that can affect the character of neighborhoods

and thus generate resistance from affected homeowners). By explicitly rejecting the use of the best affordable housing tool on a big-money, luxury housing project, the City Council's proponents of the project established a precedent that will make it unlikely or perhaps impossible to gain any such benefit from any future developer. It also bears noting that, at least in the short run, the project will not generate additional tax revenue to support affordable housing, as the tax stabilization agreement limits tax payments to \$11,000 for each of the first five years, which likely will be less than the additional costs of providing City services to the 400-800 projected new residents. (It also is worth mentioning that the School Department is projected to sustain a \$37 million accumulated deficit over those five years, and the City's annual pension payments will increase by more than \$15 million over that same period.) In addition to undermining the City's ability to gain affordable housing accommodations from future developers, the two Hope Point Tower votes will alienate taxpayers and property owners who, if asked to pay greater taxes or agree to zoning changes in the name of affordable housing, will ask why they should pay the price for the City Council's curious decision to abandon the more efficient tool of development incentives. In short, the City Council majority's votes against Councilwoman LaFortune's amendment and in favor of the Hope Point Tower project without even a penny of local benefits represent the largest setback for the affordable housing movement in Providence in recent memory. When it comes to affordable housing, the Hope Point Tower's proponents' actions speak much louder than their words.

Sincerely,


