

# East Side MONTHLY

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## The Gilbane Project Moves Forward

Several community groups express concern for the project as proposed

BARRY FAIN



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Rendering of the proposed development at 257 Thayer

Round one of the proposal by the [Gilbane Development Company](#) to bring a block long, high density, upscale apartment building (or dormitory, depending on whom you talk to) to Thayer Street has begun. And based on the overflow crowds that have attended both the College Hill information presentation and the recent [City Plan Commission](#) (CPC) meetings, it is a project that is stirring some strong passions on both sides.

The project is being fast tracked, so any decisions to advance the project will undoubtedly occur over the next few months since a full change of the recently approved City Comprehensive Plan as well as the zoning classifications for the area will be required to allow it to proceed as currently proposed. Any zoning or City Plan Commission changes require the approval of the full City Council.

Here's where we are in the process so far.

With the departure of Thom Deller for Hartford, Bob Azar has assumed the title of Acting Director of Planning and Development for the City. At last month's CPC meeting, he and his staff recommended the conceptual approval of the Gilbane project. At last night's (May 15th) public meeting, the CPC voted 3-1 to move the project off into the City Council loop, specifically the ordinance committee headed by Fox Point City Councilman Seth Yurdin. Traditionally, that committee had deferred to the local councilman, in this case Sam Zurier, given that any large-scale projects would most obviously impact their constituency.

Councilman Zurier has already hosted one neighborhood meeting and attended several others. He

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has also enlisted the services of former Head of Planning Sam Shamoan, although he has said publicly that while he seeks the counsel and planning expertise of Mr. Shamoan, he will make his ultimate decision based on the input of the neighborhood and his sense of what will be best for the city. A lawyer by profession, Zurier has been sending out well-organized weekly mailings on the status of things in the City Council, including an updated log on events concerning the Thayer Street proposal. It's easy to follow since the events are organized chronologically. His website is [www.samzurier.com](http://www.samzurier.com).

In its recommendation for the CPC to approve the project, the City planning department also attached five requirements for the project to move forward. Several asked the developer to produce some additional data: a utility and storm water management plan, a full traffic study of the impact of the project and a survey of homes in the area to determine the impact of the new project on the existing structures. The two more complicated issues involve refining the current building plan to "respond architecturally to its site and to address the large massing" of the building. In addition, the approval would be "dependent on gaining full City Council approval on all requested comprehensive city and zoning changes needed for the proposal to go forward as presented." If this did not happen, the Gilbane plan would need to be modified to conform to current statutes.

Several neighborhood groups have already weighed in on the project. While both the [Providence Preservation Society](#) (PPS) and the [College Hill Neighborhood Association](#) (CHNA) stopped short of taking a straight up or down vote on the project, both have concerns about the project as presented, in particular about the potential loss of so many historic homes in the area and the need to view the project in the context of other possible projects that have been suggested but have not been formally presented.

Specifically, PPS suggested that decision-makers "must factor in the strong likelihood of the development of a hotel and another Brown University student housing project" in the adjoining two blocks, which would extend the combined development area up to Bowen Street and could require the demolition of up to 20 historic homes. PPS also felt that the project's timetable "be adjusted to allow for additional planning and input." PPS stressed the importance of using a local architect with "a demonstrated record of design excellence within the context of this type of historical and residential residences build environment." To this end, Gilbane has already engaged a well-respected local architect, Donald Powers, who has had experience with historic projects.

In addition, the CHNA suggested the consideration of the design review process by the [Providence Historic District Commission](#) or a City Council appointed board of experts, the issuance of a completion bond (to insure the neighbors not be left with an uncompleted construction site), the guarantee that the project remain on the tax roll in the event of a future sale and assurance of the proper abatement of hazardous materials during what could be a potentially long period of demolition.

In an interesting footnote to this increasingly passionate back and forth, the [Brown Daily Herald](#) actually came out against the project in a recent editorial. While concerned about the size and massing of the new project, their major reservation was over the underlying concept behind the Gilbane project: the creation of a large, amenity-oriented student housing project, complete with bike racks, faster-than-average internet hook-ups and underground parking for up to 85 cars, as something that would accelerate the creation of two classes of students at Brown: the haves vs. the have nots. Rents at the proposed new building would be significantly higher than existing off-campus housing and would also provide dramatically better amenities than existing Brown dorms. The result, they felt, is antithetical to the purpose behind a Brown education.

For supporters of the Gilbane project, there is a sense that the area is already institutional in nature, that a mix of student housing and retail is appropriate for the area and that the houses in question have already been allowed to deteriorate. In addition, given the current fragile state of the local economy, many jobs would be created by the project. The current members of the CPC are Steve Durkee (chairman), Harry Bilodeau (mayoral designee), Ina Anderson, Andrew Cortez, Meredyth Church, Joann Ryan and Christine West.

The current members of the [Providence Zoning Board](#) are Myrth York (chairman), Mark Greenfield, Arthur Strother, Daniel Varin, Scott Wolf and Enrique Martinez (auxiliary member). This group would not be involved with actually changing any of the zoning laws, since that can only be done by the full City Council. As if this weren't enough, two other changes are coming that will affect residents of the East Side. The recent and long-awaited agreement between Brown University and the City will bring a much-needed financial shot in the arm to our beleaguered capital. Part of the deal, however, will effectively cede to Brown 250 parking spots through a resident sticker program. The areas affected will be adjacent to the heart of the campus, though the actual spots

have not been identified as we go to press.

The second and more pervasive issue will be the City’s decision to roll out its overnight parking plan. It ultimately will apply to the entire East Side, though individual streets will have the opportunity to opt out if 75% of the residents of the street so choose. There are several organizations planning to hold public meetings to explain the details. One will be at [Books on the Square](#) as part of Wayland Square discussion group on June 5 at 7pm. The College Hill Neighborhood Association will host a larger venue at the [First Unitarian Church](#) at Benefit and Benevolent Streets on June 7 at 6:30pm. Both events are open to the public and will provide residents the opportunity to question Leo Perrotta, the city’s parking administrator.

Changes are coming to the East Side. Stay tuned for how it will all play out.

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