

Capacity to Participate: A Case Study of Resident Participation in Somerville, MA

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Christian Brandt

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Adviser: Laurie Goldman

Reader: Penn Loh

Abstract

This thesis aims to better understand residents' capacity to engage in participatory planning processes through a nuanced look at the specific activities residents use and challenges they experience once they are already engaged in participatory processes. This thesis also aims to elaborate the role community groups play in supporting residents' engagement in participatory processes. I explore these challenges in the context of six organized resident groups that have been engaged in decision-making processes in Union Square, Somerville, MA, during the last five years.

This thesis finds that residents experienced numerous challenges when participating in decision-making opportunities, pursued a variety of tasks aimed at contending with these challenges, and gained substantial support for their participation from community groups. However, community groups appeared to experience participation differently whether they were legitimized by the City or by the community. Receiving just a little recognition from the City may be worse than receiving none.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

There are many reasons Somerville, MA should be an ideal setting for community engagement. There are ample opportunities for residents to participate in planning and policy decisions. Many residents are interested in and actively participating in these processes. The City's staff elected officials are uniquely committed to seeking resident input. Nevertheless, the participation experiences of residents have been fraught with struggles.

When Somerville's Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development released their initial 300 page long zoning plan for Union Square, several members of a local community group frantically gathered together and, over the course of a week, read, analyzed, and discussed the proposed changes laid out in the document. After developing significant concerns about the zoning plan's content, they attended public meetings and called, emailed, and wrote letters to their aldermen to express their concerns and advocate for delaying the approval process. Many of these members did this in their spare time, at night or on weekends, sometimes at the expense of their own work, in order to ensure that their feedback might be relevant when they reached out to their aldermen or gave testimony at public meetings.

After many months of research and meetings among residents and with the City, a group of residents submitted a citizen's petition to the City to implement a jobs linkage fee that would support City residents in accessing jobs created by new commercial development. These residents proposed a fee that was higher than what the City had proposed. Their proposal was based in part on research

conducted for the City about the percentage of local residents expected to be employed in jobs resulting from new development. One resident explained that after the petition had been submitted he discovered that the research commissioned by the City included suggested a significantly higher local employment percentage than they used in their calculation. Had he received the nexus study at the right time he would have proposed an even higher fee.

These small victories and sometimes frustrating setbacks were common experiences for myself and other residents who participated in Somerville's public decision-making opportunities in the last five years. We frequently did not have the time to attend the many public meetings the City scheduled. When we did, we often did not understand the technical content of the meeting or the complex context surrounding the decision. Some of us lacked the skills to know what to say and when and where to say it. These difficulties prevented us from effectively engaging in the City's decision-making opportunities.

The panoply of literature addressing resident participation has yet to thoroughly document these experiences and there is a paucity of empirical research about how residents contend with the challenges of meaningful participation in public decision-making. This is surprising, as over the last 50 years an increasing number of planners, public officials, and residents have experimented with public participation in decision-making as a tool to improve planning, policy, and governance (Cooper, Bryer, and Meek 2006; Fainstein 2000; Fung 2015). These experiments have addressed questions about what municipalities and public officials should do to facilitate public participation, as

well as how much influence residents should have, what outcomes are desirable, and how they should function (Healey 1997, 331; Herian et al. 2012; Howlett and Ramesh 2014; Fung 2015; Nabatchi 2010; Sjoberg, Mellon, and Peixoto 2017; Wang and Van Wart 2007). Few scholars have investigated the challenges residents who are already organized encounter when they are participating and how they contend with them. Even fewer have explored the role that community groups play in supporting residents' engagement.

This thesis aims to better understand these challenges through a nuanced look at the specific activities, tasks, and practices that residents engage in while participating. I explore these challenges in the context of six organized resident groups that have been engaged in public decision-making processes in the Union Square neighborhood of Somerville, MA during the last five years. The resulting research addresses a significant lack of empirical investigation in academia specifically of residents' capacity to engage in public participation. The findings also promise to help public officials, professional staff, and participants better understand and address the barriers that prevent residents from participating effectively.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this thesis include:

1. What factors impede or enhance the participation of members of organized resident groups in public decision-making processes in Somerville
2.
 - a. How do members of these groups contend with these challenges?
 - b. How do government officials/staff impede or facilitate residents' capacity to engage effectively?
3. Are there differences between groups that receive their legitimacy from different sources?

To explore these questions, I used a crucial case study model (Eckstein 1979) of the Union Square development process in Somerville, MA that focuses on several different community groups that have been active throughout the last five years of decision-making processes. I interviewed members about their experiences as participants and asked them about what “effective” participation means for them. I also interviewed staff members of the City of Somerville in order to provide a municipal perspective of the challenges identified by residents. I gleaned additional information from my own participant observation during group meetings and public meetings. Finally, I supplemented these interviews with information gleaned from existing documents, including group email listservs and public documents, in order to provide additional context and information for the capacity struggles.

Boundaries of this Research

This thesis is intended specifically to focus on those residents who are members of community groups and are already involved in public decision-making opportunities, the challenges that prevent them from being effective, and the supports that help them contend with those challenges. This thesis will not provide empirical evidence for the adoption of particular types of public participation processes in particular settings; examine the outcomes of processes and whether they are just, efficient, or effective; or explore how best to incentivize individual residents to become more engaged in participation. Though these aspects of participation are all important, and may even have relevance to

participation in Somerville and more generally, they have already been addressed in abundance of research and practice on public participation.

Thesis Structure

This thesis begins with a literature review that explores how resident participation has been described and theorized in the literature. In the following chapter I describe the case setting, focusing specifically on the recent history of public participation in Union Square and why it is an ideal setting for exploring questions of resident participation. I then discuss the methodology used to design this case study and the criteria that I used to select community groups to focus on and members to interview.

I then present my findings where I identify the challenges residents experienced and describe the tasks and activities that residents engaged in as part of their participation. I find that community groups support residents in their ability to be effective participants. I observe that the various community groups and residents experienced participation differently depending on several factors, particularly the impact that difference sources of legitimacy has on community groups and residents' participation experiences. I subsequently discuss how these findings relate to what the extant literature says (or does not say) about resident participation. Finally, I address some important limitations of this research, posit directions for future research, and address the findings' implications for improving public participation for both government staff and community groups.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review draws on existing conceptions of participation to explore how scholars describe and identify resident participation, particularly the struggles that residents experience when actively participating and their capacity to contend with these struggles.¹ I begin by describing how participation is used and valued in public decision-making and provide a brief overview of how the literature situates and defines participation more broadly. I then review how the literature discusses residents' roles and capacities in participation, including several attempts to focus more explicitly on residents. I include a brief review of the role of community groups of secondary associations and identify areas in the literature where resident experiences are not sufficiently explored.

The Value of Participation and its Increasing Pervasiveness

Scholars have long argued that resident participation can support the development of more relevant and effective plans and policies (Burby 2003; Cole 1974; Fung and Wright 2003; Fung 2006; Fung and Wright 2003; Healey 1993; Innes and Booher 1999a; Nabatchi 2010). Resident involvement introduces local knowledge or expertise that would often be inaccessible to professional staff in traditional planning and policy making activities (Bryson et al. 2013; Fischer 1993, 2006a; Fung 2003; Fung and Wright 2003; Nabatchi 2010; Sjoberg,

¹ To identify relevant research for the literature review, I utilized targeted database searches using Web Of Science, JumboSearch, and JSTOR. Keywords included variations of "participation", "collaboration", "deliberation", as well as "capacity", "responsibility", "process", among other keywords. In addition, targeted searches among specific planning and policy related journals, or specific authors, using broader terminology resulted in significant results. Additional sources were identified through scanning bibliographies of relevant articles and through consultation with my advisor, Laurie Goldman. Sources were ultimately chosen based on a combination of relevance, citation frequency, publishing journal, and author.

Mellon, and Peixoto 2017). It can educate participants about the workings of government (Burby 2003; Fung 2003; Healey 1993; Innes and Booher 1999a; Mansbridge 1999; Nabatchi 2010; Pateman 2012; Roberts 2004). Resident participation also builds a variety of skills, including public speaking, rhetoric, critical analysis, and debate, many of which are the activities residents are asked to do as participants (Healey 1993; Fischer 1993, 2006a; Fischer and Forester 1993; Fung 2003; Mansbridge 1999; Nabatchi 2010; Pateman 1970; Quick and Feldman 2011),

As Fainstein (Fainstein 2000) has argued, participation itself is not enough to ensure that decision-making outcomes are effective or just, naming domination by elites as one potential downfall of participation. Nevertheless, there is near consensus among scholars and professional planners alike that resident participation is a valuable, even necessary, tool for effective planning and policymaking (Bryson et al. 2013; Burby 2003; Fung 2015; Hafer and Ran 2016; C. S. King, Feltey, and Susel 1998). Unsurprisingly, resident input in public decision-making is increasingly prevalent. Numerous public agencies require resident participation (Brody, Godschalk, and Burby 2003; Burby 2003; Cooper, Bryer, and Meek 2006; Roberts 2004) and the American Institute of Certified Planners' Code of Ethics states that planners should always give constituents or stakeholders the "opportunity" to participate in any planning processes that might affect them (American Planning Association 2016).

Defining Participation

Despite this consensus, there are very few authors that explicitly define participation in their writing (Roberts 2004). Throughout the literature, many imply that participation involves non-governmental actors, such as residents, community members, and/or other stakeholders, coming into communication and/or interaction with public officials or other authority figures, like NGO officials, about a particular policy, planning problem, or other subject (Arnstein 1969; Bratt and Reardon 2013; Fung and Wright 2003; Hafer and Ran 2016; Pateman 1970). Frequently, these non-governmental actors also engage in communication with other similarly positioned non-governmental actors.

Several authors who have defined participation outright emphasize the importance of influence in resident participation. Arnstein (1969) defines citizen participation as “a categorical term for citizen power” and “the strategy by which the have-nots join in determining how information is shared, goals and policies are set, tax resources are allocated, programs are operated, and benefits like contracts and patronage are parceled out,” (215-6). Roberts (2004) adopts a similar definition, writing that “citizen participation is...the process by which members of a society (those not holding office or administrative position in government) share power with public officials in making substantive decisions and in taking actions related to the community,” (320). Langton (1978) defines participation more broadly, writing that it “refers to purposeful activities in which citizens take part in relation to government,” (17).

Each of these definitions involves non-governmental actors interacting with authority figures, typically to address issues they are experiencing, and occasionally gaining influence over the process and the process' outcome. For the purposes of this thesis, I adopt a definition of participation that corresponds to these definitions while also accommodating the implied definitions discussed earlier. *Participation is the **ability** to meaningfully take part in public decisions that affect one's life through interaction with public officials and authority figures who are also decision-makers, sometimes with the goal of influencing the outcome.* Like Bratt and Reardon (2013), I use word "resident" to refer to participants in place of the more frequently used "citizen" due to its inclusiveness of immigrants are not yet formal citizens or who are undocumented. I use the word "public" to refer to participation that occurs with government officials, staff, and authority figures. This definition does *not* include such things as participatory budgeting, which typically gives residents the ability to make decisions about budgets (Russon Gilman 2012), or voting, which is indirect participation in the sense that voters are essentially delegating decision-making to elected officials (Roberts 2004).

Influence and Participation

Since Arnstein's (1969) seminal "Ladder of Citizen Participation", scholars have paid attention to the extent to which residents and community members have influence over public decision-making processes. The rungs on Arnstein's "Ladder" describe the level of influence residents have in decision-making processes, from "manipulation" at the bottom to "citizen control" at the

top. Arnstein's placement of resident control at the top of her ladder works as an assessment framework that ties effective participation directly to how much influence residents have. It also indicates that resident influence in policy and planning can change if participation is designed and structured effectively (Bratt and Reardon 2013). Though Arnstein advocated for direct resident control, many scholars that have built on her work focus on resident influence that is lower on the ladder and does not involve direct resident control.

In the years since Arnstein's "Ladder", scholars have sought to justify the use and expansion of resident participation, with some emphasizing the value of communicative or deliberative processes in policy and planning decision-making. These scholars reject the dominant "positivist" or "empirical" style of planning, which largely treated resident participation as a nuisance (Glass 1979). Instead, they argue that planners must cultivate and create more space for the deliberative participation of constituents if their decisions are to be truly effective and relevant (Fischer and Forester 1993; Fischer 1993, 2006b; Forester 1993, 1999; Healey 1996; Innes and Booher 1999b). These scholars additionally believe that deliberation can empower, educate, and inform participants, strengthening and democratizing planning decisions (Fischer 1993; Healey 1993).

Others seek to understand the structures and designs that can help encourage and foster effective resident participation in order to provide recommendations or guidelines for professional staff. These scholars argue that effective participation requires not just expanded opportunities but intentional and strategic participation design choices intended to support more effective

participation (Bryson et al. 2013; Burby 2003; Fung 2003, 2006; Howlett and Ramesh 2014). Ensuring inclusivity in decision-making processes, through stakeholder analysis and thorough outreach, is an important aspect of expanding access to participation opportunities (Burby 2003; Brody, Godschalk, and Burby 2003; Feldman and Khademian 2007; Johnston et al. 2011). Likewise, ensuring that the goals of a process and the information involved is clear, accessible, and understandable is important for participants once they are involved (Bryson et al. 2013; Fung 2015; Wang and Van Wart 2007), particularly if the process accommodates different ways of knowing about and understanding the problem being addressed (Bryson et al. 2013; Feldman et al. 2006). When participation is more effective, the processes' decisions have higher levels of legitimacy (Cooper, Bryer, and Meek 2006; Fung 2006; Sjoberg, Mellon, and Peixoto 2017).

In addition to these two approaches to resident participation, numerous scholars have explored alternative paradigms of resident participation in planning, including Advocacy Planning, Empowerment Planning, and Equity Planning (Bratt and Reardon 2013). Of these, advocacy planning is perhaps the most relevant to this thesis. Advocacy Planning aims to enable residents, with the assistance of trained planners, to present their interests to municipalities and developers, submit their own planning proposals, and negotiate policies and plans that reflect their needs (Davidoff 1965).

Dimensions of Effective Resident Participation

Scholars generally consider four dimensions of effective participation when making their recommendations or guidelines: who should be involved,

where processes should take place, what techniques should be used to make the decisions, and what resources are needed to engage effectively (Fung 2006). Stakeholder analysis can identify which residents and community organizations have stakes in the decision and how inclusive the process should be (Bryson et al. 2013; Feldman and Khademian 2007; Fung 2003; Johnston et al. 2011). Scheduling meetings at appropriate times and ensuring that they are open and advertised to the public ensures that processes are accessible (Brody, Godschalk, and Burby 2003). Likewise, enabling digital participation via surveys or other online tools can help engage residents who are not able to attend (Bryson et al. 2013). Allowing time for consideration, responsiveness, and uncertainty enables higher levels of deliberation (Forester 1993; Fischer 2006a; Fung 2003; Herian et al. 2012; Nabatchi 2010; Sjoberg, Mellon, and Peixoto 2017). Synthesizing and presenting objectives and information for participant consumption is also important for effective resident participation (Bryson et al. 2013; Cooper, Bryer, and Meek 2006; Nabatchi 2010).

Some scholars focus on a range of deliberative practices when describing what residents actually do when they participate effectively. Many use a variation of the term “reasoned communication” to describe these activities, which usually includes the consideration of pros and cons and the weighing of alternatives (Fischer and Forester 1993; Fischer 2006b; Forester 1999; Fung 2003). This may involve engaging in consensus building and role playing (Innes and Booher 1999b, 1999a), testing opinions and new ideas against collectively held values (Healey 1993), asking and debating questions (Fischer 2006a), and forming

collective goals (Arnstein 1969; Bryson et al. 2013; Fung 2015). Usually, this allows participants to apply their lived experiences and “local” knowledge to information presented by public officials (Fischer 2006a; Fung and Wright 2003; Healey 1993, 1996) and build relationships with each other (Bryson et al. 2013).

Sometimes, residents read and analyze information provided by professionals, like maps and vision statements, and articulate their preferences about a particular problem (Burby 2003). Residents sometimes participate in more structured neighborhood councils or join working/steering groups to provide feedback or recommendations in more formalized ways (Cooper, Bryer, and Meek 2006; Farrelly and Sullivan 2010; Sjoberg, Mellon, and Peixoto 2017). In less deliberative decision-making processes, residents attend public hearings and give potentially useful comments and recommendations about their needs and desires (Bryson et al. 2013; Burby 2003; Cooper, Bryer, and Meek 2006; Fung 2003; Hafer and Ran 2016; Quick and Feldman 2011).

The description of these activities show three general assumptions in the literature about residents’ capacities to participate effectively: that residents are able to commit the time and effort needed to engage in decision-making processes; that residents already have, or at least are able to develop during the process, the knowledge and skills needed to provide useful feedback or make decisions; that processes are inherently genuine *and* linguistically or intellectually accessible. Though some authors do not elaborate these assumptions, some have acknowledged that residents struggle to engage effectively in decision-making. Residents’ time, existing knowledge levels, and life experiences have been

identified as potential barriers to their ability to effective engagement (Burby 2003; Fischer 2006a, 2006b; Fung 2003, 2015; C. S. King, Feltey, and Susel 1998; Nabatchi 2010; Roberts 2004; Wang and Van Wart 2007). In addition, authors identify conflict among residents (Bryson et al. 2013; Forester 2006), lack of clarity about the goals of the process (Bryson et al. 2013; Fung 2015), and distrust of government as potential barriers to residents' participation (Bryson et al. 2013; Cooper, Bryer, and Meek 2006; Feldman and Khademian 2007; Wang and Van Wart 2007). Nevertheless, few authors explore in depth the nuances of what residents experience when they participate and even fewer examine the challenges residents face.

Designing for Empowerment

Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright, building on Arnstein's "Ladder", suggest type of participation design that they call Empowered Participatory Governance (EPG) (Fung and Wright 2003). Unlike most participation designs, EPG explicitly devolves decision-making authority to local units while building and maintaining accountability relationships with a central authority, which provides training, support, and most importantly, authorization to help participants succeed in making decisions. Fung and Wright explain that EPG must focus on real, tangible problems, that it must involve "ordinary people" that are affected by those problems (and the officials that are involved), and that its participants must create solutions to these problems through deliberation (15).

Conferring authority on residents recognizes their influence, more directly involves residents in the decision-making process, and potentially addresses the

assumptions that residents will be able to participate and that processes will be genuine. The provision of support and training to local units also addresses the assumption that residents understand processes and have the skills to provide feedback. By adopting such a structure, EPG creates new forms institutions that reimagine the predominant state-centric institutions through which participants typically engage in decision-making. EPG also highlights the importance of relationships between participants and authority figures in a way that other authors have avoided.

Despite its promise, it is unclear if EPG fully addresses the context and conditions that create impede residents' capacity in the first place. For example, Fung and Wright acknowledge it is relatively untested and residents may still not have the time, resources, or knowledge to commit to effective engagement (33-9). They also address a slew of criticisms of their model, including that it may "balkanize" politics in the community, that EPG is difficult to maintain over the long term, that processes may fall prey to powerful elites, and that external actors may unduly constrain the process by their influence (33). Though they argue that these are important considerations, they acknowledge that there is not enough information to ascertain how much of a problem these issues present.

Community Groups

By locating EPG in devolved local "units", Fung and Wright tap into the potential for civic associations to strengthen democratic institutions and processes. There are many authors that explore resident participation in community development, community governance and democracy that do not fit

into the narrow focus of this thesis. Many of these authors also discuss community groups in their work, and as such are worth briefly mentioning. For example, Fung (2001, 2004; Fung and Wright 2003) analyzed the work of parent-led school committees in Chicago. Reardon (1997, 1999) explores the collaboration of planners and organized community members in the redevelopment of East St. Louis, Illinois. More recently, Crockett (2018) explores work of a coalition of planners, residents, and activists in their efforts to stop a highway development project in Boston, MA. Briggs (2008) addresses civic associations in his exploration of civic capacity and collective problem solving in democracy. Though community groups are central to these studies, these authors, and many others, have not yet delved into how these groups support residents in engaging effectively in participation.

In addition, numerous scholars of democracy and civic life have explored the role that community groups play in civic life (Cohen and Rogers 1992; Putnam 2001; Skocpol and Fiorina 1999). These authors argue that community associations are valuable tool for facilitating civic involvement by virtue of their ability to educate and inform members, and represent community interests (Cohen and Rogers 1992). Several researchers have observed that civic organizations can facilitate relationships among community members and between community members, civic associations, and public officials or authority figures (Cohen and Rogers 1992; Mandarano 2015; Roberts 2004). These relationships in turn can lead to denser community networks and more effective transfer of knowledge and social capital (Musso et al. 2006). This research suggests that community

organizations may be a natural avenue for facilitating resident participation in decision-making processes. This thesis is an opportunity to better clarify and elaborate the role that community groups play in supporting resident engagement.

Empirical Investigation of Resident Experiences

The existing research on public participation in decision-making is dominated by a professional staff-centric viewpoint and lacks empirical investigation of residents' experiences as participants (Hafer and Ran 2016). When residents are considered, it is usually in terms of their recruitment or speculation about what they might contribute. As a result, few authors explore how residents make use of opportunities to engage and what challenges they experience in doing so. Additionally, there is very little empirical research about whether recommendations and designs in the literature actually support the ability of residents to influence processes (Bratt and Reardon 2013).

There are some authors, across many of the articles cited in this review, that specifically discuss residents' ability to engage in public participation. All call for more empirical research on residents' experiences as participants. Hafer and Ran (2016), in an attempt to elaborate a "citizen perspective" of participation, argue that residents' outward social identities form during participation through their interaction with other groups of participants, public officials, and administrators. They argue that these identity divides potentially contribute to ineffective participation and/or an inability to collaborate across groups (218). Several other authors have addressed the effect of participants' identities on their ability to participate, however these investigations typically lack empirical

evidence to support their conclusions (Fischer 2006a; March and Olsen 1995; Roberts 2004).

Mandarano (2015) examines citizen planning academies, which aim to address systemic lack of knowledge among residents about planning and development topics. She argues that planning academies are a potentially useful way to build relationships and networks among residents, overcome the persistent lack of awareness, information, and knowledge about planning decisions, and increase trust in government. She concludes that more research is necessary in order to better understand whether these outcome lead to long-term improvement in civic engagement. Though not particularly recent, (C. S. King, Feltey, and Susel 1998) identify several barriers to participation, including “the nature of life in contemporary society, administrative processes, and current practices and techniques of participation,” (322). They argue that both residents and administrators must be empowered and educated to change the processes as they currently exist, with a focus on strengthening relationships, teaching residents useful skills like public speaking and research, and making administrative processes more flexible (324).

Bratt and Reardon (2013) explore strategies that residents can use to effectively influence outcomes, paying specific attention to the context in which residents are participating and the level of available resources, the level of support for community development and planning initiatives, and the concentration of power in government (375). They argue that more research should focus on solidifying the links between participation strategies they outline and the desired

outcomes and that better understanding participation's context is crucial to this. In a follow up to his previous work on participation, Fung (2015) notes that insufficient leadership, disagreement about the location and scope of decision-making processes, and limited participant influence over policy issues are factors that impede effective participation of residents. He concludes by calling for more research focusing on these aspects of resident participation.

Defining Capacity

Central to this thesis is whether those participating have the ability, or capacity, to do the tasks and activities that are part of any decision-making opportunity. Though the concept of "capacity" has been written about by political theorists, community organizers, social theorists, public health scientists for many years, there is disagreement about what constitutes capacity and what it can, or should, be used for (Chaskin 2001; Saegert 2006; Wu, Ramesh, and Howlett 2015).

Wu et al. (2015) define capacity as "the set of skills and resources—or competencies and capabilities—necessary to perform policy functions," (166). They specify that these skills or competencies can be divided into three different types, analytical, political, and operational, with each further delineated on the individual, organizational, and systemic levels (167). Mark Moore (1995, 2000) three key points relating to an organization's ability to create public value. These points form a "strategic triangle" and include the organization's *value*, or how it will improve the world or community; the source of the organization's *legitimacy and support* for pursuing that value, which he refers to as it's authorizing

environment; and the organization's *operational capacity*, or its ability to "achieve the desired results" through knowledge and resources (2000, 197-8).

March and Olsen, in their (1995) book *Democratic Governance*, describe four broad types of "political capabilities": rights and authorities, resources, competencies and knowledge, and organizing capacity (92). The first three capabilities include, respectively, things like free speech and the right to vote; money, property, time, and information; existing knowledge, expertise, education, and the ability to perform analysis and interpret information.

These definitions demonstrate several important commonalities. All focus on particular activities, like garnering support and seeking legitimacy and authority, the operational work of doing the tasks and activities that support this work, like research, outreach, and collaboration, and the necessary resources, like money and time, required to accomplish both. Though these definitions provide a useful framework for understanding capacity, they do not explicitly involve 'community' and largely avoid analysis of the relationships between stakeholders, both of which are important aspects of participation.

Robert Chaskin (2001) defines community capacity as "the interaction of human capital, organizational resources, and social capital existing within a given community that can be leveraged to solve collective problems and improve or maintain the well-being of a given community. It may operate through informal social processes and/or organized effort," (Chaskin 2001, 295). Chaskin's definition focuses more explicitly on grassroots, non-institutionalized settings and on the interaction and collaboration between individual stakeholders.

In her analysis of differences between community building and community organizing, Susan Saegert (2006) argues that the benefits of community capacity are harder to harness than many scholars imply. She argues that community capacity requires the “ability to exercise power as well as the ability to work collaboratively within and outside the community” and depends on “using the right approach at the right time, in the right place, and with the right people,” (291).

What is Resident Capacity?

Though these definitions approach capacity somewhat differently, together they provide a framework that captures the conditions needed to engage effectively in policy processes. Based on these existing definitions, and on the definition of participation discussed above, I have defined capacity in the context of resident participation in four parts. Having the capacity to participate means:

1. Being able to know and understand, or at least learn about, **context**
2. Being able to take advantage of existing **resources**, including information, knowledge, money, time, and relationships;
3. Being able to do the **tasks and activities** necessary to achieve a goal or make important decisions, including framing beliefs and values, attending meetings, doing outreach, analyzing information, and claiming rights and authorities.

Conclusion

The contributions of these recent articles are very promising, however questions of how residents participate continue to merit increased empirical study. Over the last 40 years the literature on resident participation has extensively explored different models of participation and the implications that various designs and structures have for effective resident engagement. Considerable

theorizing about the value of resident participation has successfully justified its adoption across world at many levels of government (Fung 2015; Pateman 2012). Despite this attention, empirical research focused on identifying what strategies work better for effective *resident* engagement in public decision-making is remarkably scarce.

Additionally, few authors have examined the challenges that residents encounter when doing the activities required for public decision-making, especially once they are already actively participating. Neither have they thoroughly explored what factors impede or enhance resident participation or the effect that community group membership has on the ability of residents to participate effectively. As a result, the ways in which residents engage effectively and overcome challenges remain relatively unknown. The importance of addressing these challenges can be seen throughout the literature, beginning with in 1969 with Arnstein's emphasis on resident influence in participation. If residents are not able to do the tasks and activities necessary to engage in "reasoned communication" or prepare statements to read at public hearings, how will they be able to influence public decision-making processes?

Challenges to effective participation also have real implications for our understanding of the ways in which existing community institutions, power structures, resident knowledge bases, and other more banal factors, like time and willingness, can help or hinder residents exerting influence in public participation. For example, public officials may be unwittingly impeding resident participation by choosing public meetings over small working groups of charrettes and open

houses. More thoroughly describing residents' capacity to participate may help professional staff understand how to spend their often very limited time and money most effectively. In addition, community groups may advocate for a type of decision-making process that actually impedes their members' ability to participate. With greater knowledge of residents' capacity to participate, community groups may be able to advocate for different and more effective forms of participation.

Chapter 3: Case Context and History

In this chapter, I delve into each of these factors in more detail in order to contextualize the struggles resident participants describe in their interviews with me. First, I provide a brief overview of Somerville's characteristics and history. I then provide a more in depth look at some of the corresponding development processes and engagement opportunities in the City more broadly and in Union Square specifically. Last, I describe the history of resident activism in Somerville and profile each of the six community groups that I focus on for this thesis.

Why Somerville?

Though the questions of resident engagement I explore in this thesis are not unique to Union Square, or even to Somerville, there are several reasons that cause the City to be an opportune setting for a critical case study on resident participation (Eckstein 1975). First certain characteristics of Somerville's residents support a higher-than-expected capacity on the part of residents to engage with the City and advocate for themselves. Second, external pressures, including those created by the Green Line Extension project, have generated a sense of urgency among the City and residents to address existing problems and have led to numerous planning processes. Third, the City of Somerville's elected officials and staff are uniquely committed to engaging residents in planning decisions and have provided numerous opportunities for feedback and participation in planning activities over the years. Fourth, there is a strong tradition of civic activism in Somerville and an extensive network of community organizations that stretches back before the Green Line Extension was a reality.

In the context of these factors, the struggles that residents have faced are especially surprising.

Somerville's Characteristics

Located to the north of Cambridge, Massachusetts and across the Charles River from Boston, Somerville has almost 80,000 residents living in approximately four square miles, making it one of the densest cities in the U.S. ("About Somerville - City of Somerville" n.d.). Historically a working-class city, Somerville now has a higher percentage of residents with a bachelor's degree or higher than the state average (US Census Bureau 2015). The City is in close proximity to some of the most prestigious universities in the world, including MIT, Harvard, and Tufts, all of which have urban planning and architecture programs that are actively engaged with the surrounding communities.

Given the technical nature of many of the decisions residents are asked to weigh in on, being highly educated and having access to support from world-class educational institutions uniquely positions residents to provide feedback to the City. Somerville's density may also play a role in facilitating higher levels of resident engagement. In her 2013 book, *Citizenship and Governance in a Changing City*, Susan Ostrander notes that the density of the City, which makes the visibility of the changes coming to Union Square much more apparent, has been instrumental in keeping residents engaged (57-8).

Impending Development, Community Planning, and the GLX

Much of the last 10 years of planning, development, and community activism in Somerville has focused on dealing with a confluence of economic and

development pressures. In 1990, Massachusetts agreed to extend the Green Line into West Medford through Somerville and into Union Square as part of a mitigation lawsuit stemming from the Big Dig (Eppolito 2017; Ostrander 2013). Over the years, however, the extension has progressed in fits and starts. In 2005, the cities of Somerville and Medford, together with the Conservation Law Foundation, successfully filed suit against the state for delaying the project (Ostrander 2013). After the lawsuit was settled, the State set the deadline for completion of the GLX at December, 2014 (Eppolito 2017). That initial deadline, however was pushed back several times, first to 2018 because of land acquisition and cost control issues and then again to 2021 in 2017 after the initial project was found to be almost a billion dollars over budget (Clauss 2017; Eppolito 2017). As late as 2015, the State was still considering abandoning the GLX project all together (Conway 2015).

In the context of the long-impending GLX project, the city has seen significant increases in the cost of housing that has contributed to anxieties about displacement and gentrification (C. L. King 2014; McLean 2015, 2016; Ostrander 2013). For example, a 2015 study found that 73.8% of renter households paid more than 30% of their income in rent and some neighborhoods saw as much as a 19% increase in rent per square foot between 2013 and 2015 (Sweet 2015). There are also not enough local jobs to support Somerville's existing population, let alone new residents, as most residents must commute outside the City for employment (Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development 2016). Current residents may also not be able to benefit from employment opportunities

created through development if their skills do not those required by the new jobs (Seidman 2017). Low tax revenue, generated primarily from residential taxes, and a lack of larger-scale, revenue producing commercial development like that in Kendall Square, in Cambridge, has caused the City to struggle to mitigate these pressures effectively (City of Somerville 2012).

The City and many residents see the GLX as an opportunity to harness private development to improve Somerville's economy and housing market and expand the City's existing commercial tax base. Others fear that the Green Line is the cause of some of Somerville's existing problems and will only increase gentrification and displacement. In response to these pressures, the City and residents have initiated and completed several overlapping community planning processes intended to prepare the City and its neighborhoods for new development that the GLX is spurring (Ostrander 2013). Each of these community planning processes involved significant community engagement. For a more detailed timeline of the GLX project, the City's development, and the activities of community organizations, please see **Appendix 1**.

The SomerVision Comprehensive Plan, completed in 2012, is the largest and most well-known of the decision making processes the City has completed and involved a 60-person steering committee that met 26 times, nine community meetings, and 15 presentations. The report "identifies the City's shared values, [its] collective vision for the future, and a series of goals and implementation priorities" aimed at achieving that vision (City of Somerville 2012, 11; "Union Square Revitalization Plan" 2012, 96–97). SomerVision has greatly influenced

the plans and decisions that have come after, acting as a guide for the City as it seeks to further develop neighborhoods and prepare for large scale developments. Some of SomerVision's goals include facilitating transit-oriented, mixed-use development, reducing the City's dependence on State aid and residential taxes, creating high-quality jobs, expanding the City's open space, and increasing the City's stock of affordable housing (City of Somerville 2012, 18–22). The work required to design and implement processes like SomerVision has been challenging for the city as there is little precedent for the type of planning or for the high levels of community engagement that the City has sought to facilitate.

More recently, the City and the Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development have identified the City's outdated zoning code as a significant barrier to achieving the goals espoused in SomerVision ("Zoning Overhaul – Somerville Zoning" n.d.). In 2015, the OSPCD submitted their first draft of a complete overhaul of the zoning code and have subsequently revised the proposal numerous times. Some of the proposed changes to the code include reducing the required parking spaces for most types of new development, particularly within a half mile of transit stops, requiring more open space contributions from new development, and streamlining the language used throughout the code to prevent wide interpretation and confusion ("Zoning Overhaul – Somerville Zoning" n.d.). The City has held at least 7 public meetings and hearings regarding the zoning proposal, including with the Board of Aldermen and the Planning Board. Throughout this process, the City has encouraged residents to provide feedback both at meetings and online.

In addition to the City’s planning processes, numerous community groups have engaged in parallel planning processes and submitted their own zoning and planning legislation to the Board of Aldermen on a number of occasions. Community Corridor Planning, a coalition of several Somerville-based community organizations which formed in 2009, around the same time that the City started SomerVision, aimed to build awareness about the GLX project and create a community vision for the GLX-related development (Community Corridor Planning 2010; Ostrander 2013). Unlike many of the city-run processes, the Community Corridor Planning coalition aimed to put control of the process into the hands of resident participants and reflected the ideals of Advocacy Planning.

Process	Duration	Number of Meetings
SomerVision	2009-2012	26 monthly steering committee meetings, four public workshops, four information showcases, presentations at community organizations and other public meetings
Community Corridor Planning	2009-2010	Two main meetings, numerous smaller meetings in between.
Comprehensive Zoning Overhaul	2015-present	At least seven public hearings and meetings. Based on resident input from SomerVision process.

Resident Activism and Organized Community Groups

If the CCP process is any indication, Somerville’s residents are very active in planning and development. Ostrander (2013) details the myriad ways in which Somerville’s numerous community groups, which she refers to as “voluntary associations” and which include many of the same organizations that I focus on in

this thesis, have shaped these decisions, particularly around planning and development in Somerville. She also notes that the predominance of highly engaged community groups in the City springs in part from a long history of ineffective and corrupt government (38). In the 60s residents across the City organized to defeat a corrupt local government, electing a new Mayor and replacing nine out of 11 aldermen (Ostrander 2013). Resident organizing, specifically around the City's elected officials, is still prominent in Somerville. For example, 2017 saw one of the most contentious elections in recent history, with four incumbent Aldermen losing in significant margins to newcomers pushing an aggressive affordable housing agenda affiliated with Our Revolution, a relatively new activist group, (Bowler 2017b). Ostrander's observations about community activism in Somerville continue to ring true, as numerous community groups, representing many different neighborhoods and perspectives, are active in the ongoing development processes.

City's Commitment to Engagement

Throughout these processes, the City of Somerville, particularly the staff of OSPCD, have been committed to supporting resident engagement. Using Bratt and Reardon's (2013) framework for assessing the context of community development and planning processes discussed in Chapter 2, it is possible to conclude that Somerville is a supportive environment. The City has spent many resources on the processes discussed earlier and residents often have additional resources available to them through the network of community organizations and universities. In addition, the City and community organizations have worked to

facilitate and encourage resident engagement in a variety of ways throughout the course of planning and development processes. Lastly, while the City still holds most of the power to make planning decisions, there are several ways, such as the citizen's petitions, that residents have successfully implemented their own planning proposals or otherwise influenced decisions. Therefore, Somerville is where one would expect the least amount of challenges to resident participation. The fact that residents regularly struggle to participate, however, indicates that Somerville is a critical case for understanding resident participation (Eckstein 1975).

Union Square

All of the factors that make Somerville an opportune place for this research are present in Union Square as well. Since the Green Line extension was first announced, Union Square, which will be the location of one of the new stops, has experienced rapid changes characterized by significant economic development and infrastructure investment (Ostrander 2013). Because of this, the planning and engagement in Union Square has been the site of significant work by the City and activism by residents with important implications for the rest of Somerville. Residents and City staff both feel that planning in Union Square will set a precedent for the rest of the City. As one municipal staff member noted,

“...Union Square is not [just] about developing a plan for Union Square...What SomerVision and the Green Line challenged us on is that we are going to have to replicate a substantial multiple-building planning process in Union Square to other areas. What I see as the challenge of Union is that it is the first of these that we are doing. It's also the most integrated in a neighborhood...We need to use Union to build a template of how we do this everywhere else.”

Processes in Union Square

In addition to the broader, city-wide planning processes discussed above, there have been numerous processes devoted specifically to Union Square, most of which aim to transform the area with transit oriented development. The Union Square Revitalization Plan, approved in 2012, officially setting in motion many of the processes this thesis discusses (“Union Square Revitalization Plan” 2012, 7). Though the Revitalization Plan itself only involved one public meeting, the content of the plan was based on several prior planning processes with extensive community engagement, including SomerVision, the 2006-2009 Union Square rezoning initiative, and a transportation plan completed in 2009. Approval of the plan designated the redevelopment parcels in Union Square and authorized the City to secure the land that will be used for the future Green Line station. In addition, the plan also initiated the selection process for the Union Square master developer (Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development 2016, 38).

The Union Square Neighborhood Plan was completed in May, 2016 following several other smaller neighborhood plans. The plan sets forth specific development goals intended to guide the City and US2, the master developer, through the implementation process. The plan involved significant resident input throughout, including a kick-off event attended by over 150 residents, “one of the City’s largest public meetings ever”, as well as two additional visioning meetings, one of which was presented in five different languages, a three day charrette, and two open houses (Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development 2016, 52–54). The Union Square Neighborhood Plan has influenced several

recent important decisions, including the passage of the Union Square Zoning Amendment and approval of US2’s Coordinated Development Special Permit (CDSP), one of the last steps in the Square’s development process (City of Somerville 2012; Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development 2016; “Union Square Revitalization Plan” 2012). The zoning amendment altered the zoning of Union Square to prepare the area for development prior to the expected completion of the City’s zoning overhaul, discussed earlier. The zoning amendment aimed to address many of the concerns shared by residents and the City regarding affordable housing, open space, and commercial development . The CDSP, which was a part of the zoning amendment, granted US2 official permission to commence development activities in the Square and tacitly approved their development plans.

Process	Duration	Number of Meetings
Union Square Revitalization Plan	2012	One required public hearing, otherwise resident in put gathered from previous processes
Union Square Neighborhood Plan	2015-2016	One 150-person kick-off meeting, two 60+-person visioning meetings, one three-day charrette, two open houses
Union Square Zoning Amendment	2015-2017	At least 10 public meetings and charrettes. Input largely drawn on input from the Neighborhood Plan
Coordinated Development Special Permit for US2	2017	Two meetings run by US2, Three Planning Board hearings.

Resident Activism in Planning and Organized Community Groups

While not specific to Union Square, there have also been several processes initiated by resident community groups and developers that have heightened the repercussions of the City's planning efforts in the area. First, in 2015, a community group called the Affordable Housing Organizing Committee submitted a citizen's petition, which was ultimately adopted by the Board of Aldermen, to increase the inclusionary zoning set aside percentage in the city from 12.5% to 20% ("Somerville's Inclusionary Zoning Law Leads Nation" n.d.). The passage of the ordinance ensured that any future residential development in Union Square would result in nearly twice as much affordable housing. In 2017, a major developer in the Assembly Square neighborhood, Federal Realty Investment Trust (FRIT), applied for a waiver of the new ordinance, threatening to abandon their development plans should they be required to build the higher number of affordable units. Despite significant community opposition, FRIT was granted the waiver by the Planning Board in a move that many residents felt would compromise the ability of the City to enforce the updated inclusionary zoning ordinance in the future and conceded significant numbers of affordable units (Bowler 2017a).

Later in 2017, a group of residents submitted a citizen's petition to increase the housing linkage fee in the city and implement a new jobs linkage fee ("Citizen's Petition to Implement a Jobs Linkage Fee" n.d.). This petition was adopted by the Board of Aldermen in 2018 ("Citizen's Petition to Implement a Jobs Linkage Fee" n.d.). The passage of the linkage fees ensured that future

commercial development in Union Square would produce money dedicated to addressing some of the City's most pressing needs: building affordable housing and funding job training for its residents.

The community groups that are active in Union Square reflect the diversity in groups that are active in Somerville more broadly. This is particularly true regarding where they receive their legitimacy as a group. Some of these groups were formed by the City to make recommendations, while others were formed by community members and residents concerned about the impact of ongoing development on the neighborhood or on specific areas of concern.

Community Groups

In the last five years there have been many community groups, individuals, nonprofits, committees, and coalitions that have been engaged in participatory processes in Somerville since the advent of the GLX development (Ostrander 2013). In order to identify relevant community groups to examine in this case study, while limiting analysis to a manageable selection, I used five criteria to identify which groups to study (see Table 1 for selection results for each group by each criteria). This criteria aimed to select groups that represented the different types of groups and sources of legitimacy present in Union Square.

Selection Criteria

(1) The first and most important criterion was that the community group must have a membership that consists mostly of stakeholders who are also *not* public officials or administrative staff. This criterion aims to mirror Fung and Wright's (and many others') emphasis on bottom-up participation (Fung and

Wright 2003). They distinguish participants in bottom-up decision-making as “ordinary citizens” and “officials in the field”, or non-government experts, non-profit workers, or local level government operatives who are not responsible for policy making or planning, as opposed to trained experts and bureaucrats such as consultants, technical experts, and/or policy and planning staff who have direct responsibility to the municipality.

(2) Groups were then selected in order to achieve a diverse representation of where they received their legitimacy. Several groups receive their legitimacy from the community and were formed by residents or non-governmental professionals while two were committees for residents formed by the City which provided them their legitimacy. One group received some legitimacy from the City and some from the community. (3) The resulting pool of groups was narrowed based on their involvement in recent (5 years) discussions or decision-making processes about the ongoing GLX-spurred development in Union Square. So, if a group had been involved in discussions early on in the process but was no longer relevant or involved in processes, they were excluded from the case study.

(4) Groups were further evaluated for this study in order to achieve a diverse representation of the type of group and diversity of participants, in terms of demographic characteristics, experiences, and individual’s expertise. This criterion reflects the need to capture as many experiences of the “capacity gap” as possible in order to more effectively generalize. (5) Finally, groups were categorized based on their relevance to exploring capacity struggles using preliminary evidence from anecdotal sources. These groups have all experienced

a wide range of capacity struggles, such as leadership turnover, members with time constraints or insufficient knowledge about particular problems, inability to juggle multiple meetings, etc. Groups that fit all five of these criteria were included in the case study.

Description of Groups

While none of the six community groups that I focus on have the ability to make decisions that the City will follow, three were empowered by the City to provide recommendations about specific decisions. The other three groups were empowered by the needs of their members and the broader communities. Their relationships with the City and with the Community legitimated their activities in the City's decision-making opportunities. Whether a group received its legitimacy from the community, the City, or somewhere in between corresponded to their experiences of the City's decision-making processes and the tactics they used to exert influence.

Groups with community-conferred legitimacy

Union United is a grassroots coalition of community members, businesses, and local non-profit organizations that has utilized protests public meetings, petitions, and involvement in other decision-making processes as a means of influencing decision-making. Formed in 2014 to advocate for "development without displacement" during the GLX development and for a Community Benefits Agreement with the Union Square developer, Union United is a mission-driven organization ("About Union United" 2017). Union United has aimed to claim direct resident influence over some of the City's decision-making

opportunities, often positioning itself adversarially to US2 and sometimes the City and adopting more confrontational tactics. According to one Union United member that I interviewed, the organization evolved from another coalition called Link Somerville, which in turn evolved from the Community Corridor Planning coalition discussed earlier. While not officially affiliated with the Somerville Community Corporation (SCC), Union United has received significant support from SCC. Several of SCC's organizing staff are the organizers of Union United and can occasionally use SCC's office space for smaller meetings.

Membership is open to anybody who is interested in joining, however individuals are asked to sign a membership pledge if they wish to be considered active members. The organization's membership is the most racially and economically diverse of the groups I focus on and includes a large number of immigrant members, some of whom are on the group's steering committee. Union United also has members who are both professional planners, local community organization staff (particularly SCC), and non-policy professional staff. Union United has lost some members due primarily to their displacement from Somerville. In addition, many Union United members are full-time workers, which limits their ability to consistently attend meetings.

Union Square Neighbors (USN), formed in 2006 in opposition to a proposal to raise the height of buildings in Union Square (Ostrander 2013), today describes itself as an "independent neighborhood association dedicated to helping residents and stakeholders of Union Square shape the future of their community," ("About Union Square Neighbors" n.d.). Though not as clearly mission driven as

Union United, USN is an organization aimed at advocating the type of development preferred by its members. USN's membership generally consists of non-City-staff policy and planning professionals who happen to also be Union Square residents. For example, of its eight current steering committee members, two are architects and two are former professional planners and one of the newly elected Aldermen was a steering committee member. USN relies on its members and their experiences and knowledge for its legitimacy as a community groups. In particular, USN relies on the professional backgrounds of its members to engage effectively with the City, often relying on members' relationships with City officials and choosing to submit letters directly to City staff or the Board of Aldermen instead of adopting the more confrontational tactics of Union United.

The **Affordable Housing Organizing Committee (AHOC)** was formed in 2001 as a grassroots resident committee of SCC (Ostrander 2013). AHOC's mission is to educate residents about the need for affordable housing and advocate policy and planning decisions relating to affordable housing. Though its membership has declined in numbers in recent years, AHOC's membership tends to be a combination of residents who have experience displacement, or the threat of displacement, and those with professional experience advocating for affordable housing. As a result, AHOC receives its legitimacy from the community, particularly from those members who have experienced displacement first hand.

Compared to Union United, AHOC has sought a more collaborative approach to working with the City, often inviting City staff to meetings to discuss zoning changes. Still, AHOC has relied on traditional community organizing

campaigns to exert influence over the City's decisions. Some recent campaigns have included a successful citizen's petition to increase the inclusionary zoning set aside percentage to twenty percent and an increase in the affordable housing linkage fee requirement ("Affordable Housing Organizing Committee (AHOC)" n.d.). Like USN and Union United, AHOC is not empowered by the City. The strategies that they rely on, however, indicate a challenging environment for their relationship.

Groups with City-conferred legitimacy

The **Civic Advisory Committee**, formed in 2014 and expanded in 2015, was created by the Mayor's office to represent the community's interests in the Union Square development process. ("New Members Sought for Union Sq Civic Advisory Committee" 2015; "Get Involved - Union Square Somerville" n.d.). Members for the CAC were selected by the Mayor and represent his attempt to achieve diversity of perspectives and skills. All of the community-legitimated groups were represented on the CAC, though a member Union United was not included until after the CAC was expanded in 2015. The CAC was facilitated by the City and occasionally had meeting that were facilitated by member-experts and outside experts. It was initially asked to provide recommendations on a variety of development questions, including the terms of the Master Land Disposition Agreement and which master developer to choose. In this sense, the CAC received its legitimacy as a group from the City, although it was not given the ability to make final decisions

After Union Square Associates (US2), a development firm from Chicago, was selected by the Somerville Redevelopment Authority against the CAC's recommendations, they became a public sounding board during the subsequent development process. Considering the change in their responsibilities and the fact that the SRA ignored their recommendation, their legitimacy they received from the City seemed to have been compromised. The CAC eventually joined with the related LOCUS process, a program of Smart Growth America brought in by the City, to more directly facilitate the creation of community benefits recommendations for the development process.

In 2015, **LOCUS: Responsible Real Estate Developers and Investors**, a program of Smart Growth America, and the City gathered 30 appointed volunteers from the community to “establish a formal method” for deciding what public benefits the community would want to obtain from development in Union Square. (City of Somerville 2015a, 2015b; Smart Growth America n.d.). The group later identified the creation of a place-management organization (PMO) as one tool to gain benefits. The group was referred to variably as the LOCUS Public Benefits Process, later as the PMO Working Group (though typically this referred more specifically to a subcommittee), or sometimes just as LOCUS. The members were referred to as LOCUS Strategy Leaders. For convenience's sake, I use LOCUS throughout the thesis.

During its existence, LOCUS was facilitated by a representative of Smart Growth America and City staff and was intended to build on and complement the CAC's work regarding the ongoing development processes. Many of the

members of LOCUS were also members of the CAC. Most of the Strategy Leaders were appointed directly from the CAC but also included additional members who were appointed to represent perspectives that were absent from the CAC (Smart Growth America n.d.). In addition, LOCUS included several ex-officio members from the City, the Somerville Redevelopment Authority, and the Board of Aldermen. LOCUS unofficially disbanded when the Strategy Leaders voted to form a Neighborhood Council. LOCUS was supported both financially by the City, through a grant from the Barr Foundation, and materially through its facilitation. In that sense LOCUS's relationship with the City can be described as supportive. Because of its responsibility conferred by the City to establish a public benefits process, LOCUS was empowered in a similar way as the CAC.

The **Union Square Neighborhood Council Working (USNCWG)** was formed in December 2016 and grew out of a decision in LOCUS to form a Place Management Organization that would be responsible for managing and distributing any benefits obtained from the development. The USNCWG was originally charged with designing a Neighborhood Council that would negotiate a Community Benefits Agreement (CBA) with the square's developer, Union Square Associates (US2). This included designing a board and bylaws and running an election. Many of the decisions related forming the council were delegated to smaller sub-committees, including for structuring elections and engaging in outreach. These sub-committees met outside regularly scheduled meetings later presented their conclusions and discussions to the broader group.

The role of the USNCWG in selecting the Neighborhood Council was referenced in a clause in the development covenant the City signed with US2 in June, 2017, stipulating that US2 would negotiate a CBA “in good faith” with a “Union Square Neighborhood Council” once it was formed (“Master Developer US2 Agrees to GLX Contribution and Community Benefits for Union Square” 2017). At the time, it was not entirely clear what this clause meant or whether the work of the USNCWG would be ultimately recognized by the City. Many members, however, felt that if they did not attempt to form a Neighborhood Council then there would either not be an entity for the developer to negotiate with *or* the mayor would appoint a council.

The City had originally indicated that they would provide certain resources to the USNCWG, such as money and outreach support like printing flyers or robo-calling, but decided not to after the Working Group voted to become a private organization, citing legal restrictions regarding municipal financing of non-public organizations. Through conversations with the City and with legal professionals, members of the USNCWG discovered that a public organization would not be able to accept money from the developer of Union Square. Though the nuances of this information were complex and not entirely clear, many members felt that was enough of a reason to become a private, non-profit organization.

Ultimately, the USNCWG convened three Union Square-wide votes to move forward its proposals, the first two to approve the proposed bylaws and the third to elect board members. The first bylaw vote, which occurred over the

course of two days in June, 2017, failed to secure the approval of 2/3 of the community members who voted. The USNCWG made revisions to the proposed bylaws and held a second approval where nearly 90% of voters approved the new bylaws. The Working Group officially disbanded in December 2017 after more than 700 Union Square residents voted to elect board members for the Union Square Neighborhood Council. While it was in existence, the Working Group membership was fairly diverse and consisted of many different community members, including business people, local activists, and non-City policy and planning professionals, many of whom are also members of the other groups included in this study.

Table 3: Summary of Community Groups

Community Groups	Variety of group and participants	Sources of Legitimacy	Involvement during last 5 years	Experiences with capacity struggles
Union United	Large, broad, and diverse membership of local community residents, a number of local business and non-profits, and a handful of non-English speakers. Members tend to be less economically advantaged	Draws legitimacy from membership.	Formed in 2014, building on several earlier groups, actively engaged in several processes in USQ including the IZ, Linkage Fee, and US2 processes	Has lost a number of members due to displacement, many work full time, leadership is turning over, numerous members who speak English as second language.
Union Square Neighbors	Mid-sized, broad membership which skews towards non-staff policy and planning professionals and homeowners. More homogenous than the other groups.	Draws legitimacy from its membership, their professional expertise, and their relationship with the City.	Formed in 2006, has engaged in SomerVision and many other processes.	Many members work full time and/or have families and cannot sustain activity necessary for engagement
AHOC	Smaller membership which is demographically diverse. Several active housing advocates, lawyers, and researchers.	A committee of SCC, draws additional legitimacy from membership expertise and lived experience.	Formed in 2001. Lead the process to increase IZ percentage by filing a citizen petition.	Has dwindling membership, potentially due to time commitments, less distinctly organized and lacks strong existing membership
CAC²	Membership selected by Mayor based on his notion of diversity. New members were added after original was formed to make it more diverse. Has many members from other community groups	Formed by the City and given responsibility to make recommendations about USQ development, particularly USQ developer.	Formed in 2014 as sounding board for public during USQ development process. No longer active.	Decisions sometimes ignored by City (i.e. did not choose US2), membership dwindled during active period.
LOCUS	30 members appointed by Mayor, including representatives of UU, USN, and the CAC. Included business owners, residents, planning experts, and City officials.	Formed by the City, given responsibility for identifying a method for gaining public benefits. Proposed, and later approved, the creation of the USNCWG.	Initiated in 2015 by the City and Smart Growth America to identify a strategy for obtaining public benefits from USQ development. No longer active.	Process was rife with divisiveness and conflict, goal was unclear.
USNCWG	Large variety of members, many of whom were active in the other five groups. Members tended to be long-time resident activists and professionals. Is less skewed that way than USN.	Supported, in principle, by the City. City tacitly gave USNCWG responsibility to form a neighborhood council that will negotiate a CBA with developer	Formed in 2016 after USQ developer agreed to negotiate with “in good faith” with a neighborhood council. No longer active.	Intra-group disagreements, many members worked full time and couldn’t commit to necessary tasks. No money to support elections and limited material support from city.

² Though no longer in existence, the CAC and LOCUS were heavily involved in the beginning of the current process and preceded the USNCWG. For that reason it is currently included in this thesis

Chapter 4: Methods

This thesis uses Eckstein's (1975) crucial case study model to describe resident capacity struggles in depth. Eckstein defines a crucial case study as one where a theory that fits the case in question is strongly supported and one that does not is strongly questioned (118). As will be discussed in the following chapter, Union Square is brimming with the participatory processes, designs, and intentions that the literature suggests are crucial for effective decision-making *and* its residents struggle to participate effectively. For this reason, this case is conducive to producing a richly varied account of capacity struggles. It is thus useful for generating hypotheses about what residents need to be able to participate effectively in a variety of participatory venues and processes.

Data Collection

To collect information about experiences with capacity struggles, I conducted interviews with a range community members and municipal officials. Because I am a member of several of the community groups in this thesis, I also utilized participant observation to collect information about capacity struggles. To build more detailed context for my interviews, I analyzed documents such as the email listservs of the USNCWG and CAC, AHOC's citizen petitions, organization meeting minutes, and other public documents filed by the community groups and City staff.

Interviews

Interviews helped clarify the capacity struggles that groups and individuals within each community group perceive as relevant to their own

participation and the group's effectiveness as well as provide some context for their participation. Interview questions focused on residents' participation in decision-making processes, including what activities they do as part of their participation, what they identify as impeding or facilitating their own participation and the group's participation, and what they think would help improve their participation. Interview questions for municipal actors focused on what they believe the objective of resident engagement is, what they do to prepare to facilitate participation and/or design decision-making processes, what challenges they face to doing this, and what they think would help. All interviews were confidential and, with the participant's permission, recorded for back-up. See Appendices 2 and 3 for interview questions.

Selection of Participants

Resident interview participants were selected based on a set of three different criteria based in part on the values represented in the group selection criteria discussed earlier and on my experiences with organization members and potential subjects through my involvement in several of these groups and participatory processes. First, individuals needed to have been members of at least one of the selected groups during its active involvement in participatory decision-making processes in Somerville during the past 5 years. Within this criterion, I aimed to interview individuals with diverse roles and levels of responsibility in their groups. Second, I selected interview subjects who attended or were involved in any of the participatory process discussed in Chapter 3. I also sought to interview members who were interested in participating but were not

able to or who had to reduce their participation for one reason or another. Third, I selected interview subjects who represent a diverse selection of group members in terms of demographics, knowledge and education levels, relevant experience, and employment status. Additional residents were identified through snowball sampling. City staff were selected using the same criteria excepting the criterion that they be a member of a community group.

The individuals who I interviewed largely satisfied these three criteria. The resulting pool consisted of 17 men and 12 women. 24 interviewees were residents, community organization staff, or other City officials and 5 were staff in the City's Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development. Including municipal staff, 15 interviewees had professional experience in planning and policy while 14 interviewees did not. The vast majority of interviewees, or 26, were white; only 3 interviewees were people of color, all of whom were also immigrants and did not speak English as their first language. The most common group affiliation was the USNCWG, with 18 interviewees, 5 of whom were not affiliated with any other community group. Among community groups independent of the City, the sample skews towards Union United. This is potentially due to differences in the size of groups or because of capacity struggles, like limited time. The number of interviewees affiliated with the remaining community groups ranged from 3 members of USN to 8 members of LOCUS. It is important to note that two City staff members that I interviewed were also participants in a community group.

Perspectives of Municipal Actors

Though not the focus of this thesis, understanding how municipal actors in Somerville enable and are responsible for resident participation is nonetheless integral to understanding how residents struggle to participate effectively. To accomplish this, it will be necessary to include perspectives of municipal officials, specifically relating to the tasks and responsibilities they have to facilitate participation and design processes. The need to consider this perspective reflects a predominant argument in the literature that the abilities and constraints of municipal officials have significant influence over participatory process (Dunn and Legge 2001; Newman et al. 2004; Sjoberg, Mellon, and Peixoto 2017).

Table 4: Interview Pool	
Characteristic	Number
Total Interviews	29
Men	17
Women	12
Professional Experience	15
No Professional Experience	14
Non-white	3
White	26
UU	11
USN	3
USNCWG	18
AHOC	6
CAC	5
LOCUS	8
Municipal Staff	5
Other City Official	3
Community Organization Staff	4
Total Interviews	29

Interview Analysis

Using NVivo, interviews were recorded and coded for common themes regarding capacity struggles as well as for information about the context of processes that may be missing from other sources. While some of these themes were identified in my literature review, others became apparent after of analysis. Interviews were also coded based on demographic descriptors for each interviewee. They were then compared across the various codes which facilitated analysis of differences between types of participants and experiences.

Participant Observation

My participation in several of the community groups I focus on pre-dates the commencement of this research and as such was not pursued specifically for this thesis. I first became involved in decision-making opportunities by joining the Affordable Housing Organizing Committee in June, 2014. At the time, AHOC was in the midst of attempting to get an updated inclusionary zoning ordinance passed. Through AHOC I attended some of my first hearings at City Hall and participated in some of my first strategizing sessions about upcoming decisions. During the summer of 2017 I became involved with the Union Square Neighborhood Council Working Group and briefly with Union United. My experiences as a participant enabled me to gain insight into group dynamics and form relationships with members, which I used when interviewing individuals. Because of observations gained through my own participation, I was able to elaborate on several of the experiences that interviewees discussed in their interviews with me.

Document Analysis

Documents were analyzed in a similar fashion to the resident interviews. Document analysis will supplement the results of interview and survey analysis by enabling me in detail the context and historical information about each community groups, their participation in decision-making processes, and the decision-making processes themselves.

Chapter 5: Findings

“People need to speak the same language, have time to attend, be able to get to the meeting, understand the issues and context in order to weigh in, frame personal issues and concerns so that people will listen to you and do that as succinctly as possible so that your fellow participants don’t get mad at you, know how to make a good case for your personal issues, and lastly have a decent attitude going into the process.”

-USNCWG and AHOC member.

This chapter presents findings from the interviews that I conducted with community members and municipal staff, my own observations from during public meetings, and gleanings from organization websites. The interviews revealed that resident participants experienced a range of challenges when attempting to engage in decision-making opportunities. To contend with these challenges, residents utilized a variety of activities and tasks that helped facilitate their contribution to a decision-making processes and opportunities.³ The interviews also revealed that residents relied heavily on their community groups for the support they needed to contend with these challenges. Though municipal staff shared many of the same experiences of these challenges with residents, they encountered their own challenges that impacted their ability to facilitate resident engagement. Lastly, these findings indicate that community groups that received legitimacy from the City experienced participation differently than those that received legitimacy directly from the community. Members of these groups also experienced participation differently based on certain individual and group characteristics. Residents points to several decisions and decision-making

³ Throughout the chapter I use the word “opportunity” to refer to a stand-alone participation event, such as a meeting, a charrette, a block party, etc. I use the word “process” to refer to a series of meetings that discuss the same problem or decision or that are otherwise related to each other. There may be multiple “opportunities” within one “process.”

processes consistently throughout the findings to illustrate their experiences.

Table 5, located on page 54, provides a quick overview of these.

I start this chapter by describing what participation means to residents, particularly what they feel effective participation is. I then describe what tasks or activities they engaged in and what challenges they experienced when they were participating in decision-making processes or attempting to influence decisions. I follow this by discussing how community groups supported residents' capacity to participate, particularly what tasks and activities members engaged in that they felt supported their effective participation. This section includes a summary table of the capacities, challenges, and tasks of effective resident participation. Lastly, I observe several differences in the experiences of community groups that received legitimacy from the City and those that received legitimacy directly from the community as well as differences between different kinds of participants.

What is Participation?

Almost every resident and City staff member that I interviewed described participation primarily as attending public meetings, public hearings, open houses, design charrettes, and other City-sponsored public engagement initiatives, such as block parties. Some of these engagement opportunities were venues for influencing specific decisions, like the approval of US2's Coordinated Development Special Permit which gave US2 permission to build on the parcels of land in Union Square that they owned. Some of these opportunities, like the design charrettes and open houses, were part of an ongoing process, like

Table 5: Description of Processes and Decisions from the Findings	
Decision/Process	Description
FRIT Waiver	In 2017, Federal Realty Investment Trust, the main developer in another area of Somerville, applied for a waiver of the updated inclusionary zoning ordinance affordable housing requirements. The Planning Board approved the waiver in the face of community opposition.
Union Square Zoning Amendment	Submitted originally in 2015, then resubmitted, revised, and ultimately passed in 2017. Pre-empted the City-wide zoning overhaul.
Inclusionary Zoning Citizen's Petition	Submitted in 2016 by AHOC. Increased the affordable housing production requirement in Somerville to 20% the units in new development over 18 units and 17.5% in new development between 8 and 17 units.
Linkage Fee Citizen's Petition	Submitted by coalition of residents in 2017 and based on research included in the City's Linkage Fee Nexus Study. Increased the linkage fee paid by commercial developers in support of funding job training for Somerville Residents.
USNCWG By-Law Approval Votes	First by-law vote in June, 2017, second in December, 2017. Votes were open to residents of Union Square and business owners and workers in Union Square (the first vote was also open to those with a "stake" in Union Square). First vote failed to pass the 2/3 majority threshold; second vote passed with nearly 90% approval.
Selection of Union Square Developer	In 2015, the CAC provided recommendations to the City and the Somerville Redevelopment Authority (SRA) regarding three possible developers. The SRA selected the CAC's third choice of developer, Union Square Associates (US2).
USNCWG Public vs. Private Decision	The USNCWG was considering whether to be a private, non-profit organization or a public entity directly associated with the City. The City indicated that it likely could not legally provide financial assistance to a private organization. Additional research indicated that a public organization would not be able to receive money from the Union Square developer. But, a public organization would be required to abide by the public meeting laws and be more transparent. Ultimately, the USNCWG decided to become a private entity so that it could negotiate for money.

SomerVision, a comprehensive community planning process that created a vision for the future of Union Square. The City utilized the latter opportunities primarily to solicit input from residents, which was key to setting the agenda for future development and transformation of Union Square. It is important to note that a number of residents included attending meetings of community groups that received their legitimacy from the City, like the CAC, LOCUS, and the USNCWG, under their description of participation. Residents typically did *not* describe attending meetings for community groups that received their legitimacy from the community as ‘participation’ in decision-making processes. The nuances of this difference and of the CAC, LOCUS, and USNCWG as both participation opportunities and community groups will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

City Staff and Officials at Public Decision-Making Opportunities

The activities that City staff engaged in during these decision-making opportunities reflected both what they felt effective resident participation was and what the existing structures for resident engagement allowed. Several staff indicated that residents participated effectively in decision-making opportunities when they provided well thought out feedback and shared their opinions and experiences. One staff member indicated that effective participation included sharing potential solutions as opposed to just stating problems. In addition, several City staff felt that a crucial aspect of effective participation was when residents were able to recognize the City’s limitations or willing to compromise between their demands and those of other residents. Once staff member

explained, “We’re not implementing everybody’s thoughts, but we try to get to some sort of consensus that people can live with and support. We’re not going to get all people to agree—effective participation does not mean universal agreement.” Most of the City staff I interviewed also felt that an important aspect of effective participation was that residents become involved early and continued to participate through the duration of a particular process or decision.

City Activities at Decision-Making Opportunities

At public meetings and hearings, the decision-making body opened the opportunity with an overview of the agenda, which typically was accessible via the City’s website. City staff then often presented their proposals or plans to the decision-making body, which included the Board of Aldermen and any of its committees, the Somerville Redevelopment Authority, the Planning Board, and the Zoning Board of Appeals. During these meetings, members of the decision-making body asked questions which the staff presenter was obligated to answer, gave comments about what had been presented, and sometimes suggested revisions. Though these presentations were typically made directly to the particular decision-making body, City staff also intended for them to be useful to residents as well. During public meetings, City staff typically interacted with residents only when they were both in the audience by engaging in informal conversation. At certain meetings, public officials voted on a proposal or a plan. The activities that staff and officials engaged in at public meetings and hearings was dictated by State and municipal legal requirements relating to the decisions being discussed.

At design charrettes or open houses, City staff were able to engage in a much wider range of activities than at public meetings. Typically, these activities were intended to provide information directly to residents in ways that facilitated their understanding of various concepts or solicited feedback about proposals. This included setting up information stations asking about particular components of plans, like where open space should be located or what building facades should look like. One staff member indicated that the City sometimes used more interactive methods to help residents understand particular changes or plans, including drawing traffic pattern changes on tracing paper that was laid over a map of Union Square. City used these activities to engage residents in informal conversations, which several thought helped facilitate sharing information with residents or addressing particular concerns they might have.

Residents at Decision-Making Opportunities

The activities that residents engaged in during these decision-making opportunities were also informed by what they regarded to be effective participation. There were two overarching aspects to interviewees' explanation of effective participation. First, similarly to City staff, most interviewees felt that effective participation required having a base level of awareness about the City's prior and impending decisions. This included knowing their context, and the associated development projects, a cursory understanding of relevant planning and policy concepts, and access to information about the various proposals and decision-making processes. As one participant described, "Effective participation

is being informed...understanding the context, the vocabulary, the implications. That's sort of step one: having some degree literacy of the process.”

Second, many residents indicated that effective participation meant that they were able to provide feedback or contribute knowledge to a decision-making opportunity. Several residents explained that this part of effective participation included understanding how to present information differently depending on the audience and being able to speak in front of large groups. This aspect of effective participation was highly related to the first. As one participant explained,

I think effective participation, for me, means that you or [your] group have an opportunity to provide meaningful feedback on a process [even though it] sometimes gets confusing because of the terminology or depends on the schedule of the public meetings and access in terms of language.

Many shared the sentiment that if they did not have basic comprehension of relevant information and context about a decision they would not be able to provide relevant feedback that was useful for the City in its decision-making processes.

Several residents explained that an important part of this aspect of effective participation was being able to discern whether and how their feedback would be considered by the decision-makers. Multiple interviewees felt that one way they could determine if this happened was if they observed that their feedback changed the outcome of the decision or had influenced it in some way. Most interviewees, however, felt that simply knowing or believing that their input could influence decisions was as important for their effective participation as observing any changes in the actual outcome of a decision-making process. As one resident explained, “I feel that effective participation is when I’m able to

contribute to a decision through my perspective, my ideology, or my voice...
Failing [to influence the decision], is ok, but I at least need the chance.”

Resident Activities During Participation Opportunities

These beliefs about effective participation reflected the variety of activities and tasks in which residents engaged during decision-making opportunities. These were intended to support and enhance their ability to provide feedback that was informed and useful for the City. The three most common activities that residents felt supported effective engagement were submitting testimony or comments, asking questions of decision makers and other participants, and having informal conversations about the topic of the meeting. These activities, which each involved more specific tasks, often varied in usage based on what type of engagement opportunity residents attended.

Presenting Testimony

At public meetings and other settings that allowed comments from members of the public, residents presented testimony or submitted written comments aimed at conveying their opinions and concerns, and advocated for particular policies and plans to whichever municipal body was holding the meeting. Many of the resident participants that I interviewed felt that testimony and written comments were effective because it provided them an opportunity to formally give their feedback to the City or request changes be made to whatever was being proposed.

Asking Questions

Asking questions was an additional activity that many residents engaged in while attending public meetings, charrettes, and open houses. Several interviewees indicated that asking questions was a particularly important task during the public meeting or decision-making opportunity, as their question would be recorded and would be visible or audible to other participants in the meeting. Others indicated that they asked questions directly of City staff and other officials before the meeting had officially started or after the public testimony portion of the meeting had concluded. One interviewee explained that this was one way to ensure that their feedback would be considered: “For me, there’s a clear trajectory from going to a meeting, staying after to ask questions, and seeing those inform public commentary.”

Having Conversations

During many of the different participation settings, residents engaged in informal conversations among themselves and with City staff. Conversation sometimes included asking questions and other times involved giving less formal feedback directly to a decision-maker. Many interviewees actively pursued informal conversations immediately before, during, and right after public meetings or hearings as part of their efforts to provide feedback and become more aware of what was happening in Union Square. Several residents indicated that they used informal conversations because they offered them the opportunity to have more in depth conversations about particular concerns or questions, gather specific information, and follow up about others’ testimony in a less public way.

At design charrettes and other opportunities like block parties, informal conversations were the most common activity that residents engaged in. In these settings, informal conversations with decision-makers and other participants helped residents to learn about the information, understand the perspective of the City or, in some cases, the developer. During these conversations, residents sometimes engaged in debate about the information and designs being presented at the charrette, which further helped them understand what was being proposed.

Challenges of Effective Participation

Participating effectively at public meetings by engaging in these activities and tasks was not without difficulty, however. Residents experienced a range of challenges to their effective participation, including lengthy and protracted meetings, confusing, insufficient, and/or abstruse information, confusion about whether and how their input would be considered, and limited opportunities to interact with decision-makers.

Long Meetings

Several residents reported that public meetings sometimes took much longer than initially advertised by the City. In these instances, residents felt ineffective because they had to leave the meeting before they were able to provide their input and before any decisions were made. Residents also reported that decisions often occurred over the course several months of different meetings, sometimes with different municipal bodies. In several instances, residents reported that a decision was delayed to a following meeting due to a lack of time.

Often residents missed meetings or had to leave early because of other obligations, like work or family.

If a resident was unable to attend all the relevant meetings or stay until the end, they risked missing important information, context, and even the actual decision itself. Several residents mentioned this challenge in relation to a waiver of the new inclusionary zoning ordinance provisions filed by Federal Realty Investment Trust (FRIT), the developer of the Assembly Square neighborhood. The Board of Aldermen and Planning Board held a series of meetings by that discussed the waiver and eventually formulated a compromise with the help of the City staff. One meeting regarding the FIRT waiver did not conclude until after midnight and the final compromise was approved at a public hearing, which did not allow for resident input. As a result, several residents indicated that they did not find out about the details of the compromise until it was too late for them to provide any meaningful input.

Complex and Inadequate Information

Often times, residents felt that public meetings, hearings, and charrettes contained information that was difficult to understand. Residents attributed this to the technical nature of much of the information and the usage of complex and jargon-laden language used to present the information. As one Union United member explained, “In addition to the baseline knowledge that you need, there’s the lingo you need to know in order to follow along. You can be at the meeting, but that doesn’t mean that you’ll understand what’s happening.” For example, during the Union Square Zoning Amendment process, several residents indicated

that they had trouble understanding the many elements of the amendment because of dense and technical language. In addition, participants who did not speak much English generally found public meetings to be frustrating, even when they involved translation. Many residents felt ineffective when they could not understand the information that being discussed in the meeting because this hampered their ability to ask questions about the information and prevented them from incorporating it in to their testimony. In addition, several residents explained that sometimes they did not have time to examine the information prior to the meeting because they had not had access to it early enough. Other times, the information residents needed to know to provide feedback was simply missing.

Ability to Influence Decisions Unclear

Some residents felt that they often had little real ability to influence decisions and that it was difficult to discern whether the City would consider their input. One member of USN stated, “Open houses and charrettes have always felt like dog and pony shows. For the redevelopment parcels [in Union Square] in particular it almost felt like a foregone conclusion... It didn’t matter what anybody said, it never changed.” A USCNWG member suggested that sometimes it seemed like the City had already made decisions and that their participation had little real chance of influencing an outcome: “we go to public meetings, but are decisions already made? Are the meetings a charade? Are the issues resolved by those in power? ...The reality is really unclear, which begs the question: are we empowered or is it just lip service?” Several interviewees used Planning Board

hearings as an example of instances where they were not able to discern whether their input would be considered, with one interviewee describing them as “a black box.” In these instances it was difficult for residents to formulate appropriate feedback or ask relevant questions when it was unclear whether their input would be even considered.

Limited Ability to Interact with Decision Makers

Lastly, not being able to interact with decision makers, informally or through public comment and testimony, was almost universally seen as a barrier to effective participation. Sometimes this occurred because residents did not have the appropriate information to field questions or because the type of decision-making opportunity residents attended did not allow for interaction. Several residents indicated that Planning Board were particularly frustrating for participants because they were structured without the opportunity to provide input or have any official interaction between residents and the Board. One resident felt that the City used Planning Board meetings to intentionally push through controversial development decisions, like waiving the updated inclusionary zoning ordinance requirements for FRIT, without having to allow residents the ability to interact with the Board. Finally, sometimes public hearings and meetings were scheduled at the same time as other City meetings or community groups meetings. As a result, residents had to choose which meeting to attend, sacrificing their ability to interact with decision makers when they did not attend the City’s meetings.

The Role of Community Groups

Community groups were instrumental in helping residents contend with these challenges. Groups engaged in a variety of tasks aimed at increasing their members' effectiveness and preparing them to provide meaningful feedback at public hearings and other opportunities. These included reaching out to the broader community to inform and recruit new members and keeping members updated about decisions and progress during planning processes. Community groups also helped residents to prepare to provide feedback at public meetings by setting goals for their participation, including creating talking points and practicing public testimony; gathering and sharing new information; collectively researching, analyzing, and reviewing existing information and public documents; and helping members frame the results of their feedback for the appropriate audience.

Community Outreach

One of the major activities that community groups engaged in was coordinated outreach to Union Square residents. Community groups engaged in outreach for two main reasons. The first was to spread information about and awareness of impending decisions or ongoing processes. The second was to motivate community members to attend public meetings or join a particular community groups. Interviewees often indicated that outreach was a crucial way in which their group encouraged effective participation. One USNCWG member remarked that they simply had not done enough outreach about the June 2017 by-law approval sessions. This resulted in low attendance and low awareness of the

USNCWG's work among those community members who did attend. Several interviewees felt this contributed to the vote failing, as community members who attended the voting sessions did not understand the context surrounding the USNCWG, what the purpose of the bylaws were, or even how they originated.

Many interviewees felt that outreach ensured that those residents who were interested in providing feedback or becoming involved had access to the updated information, such as when meetings were scheduled or details regarding the proposals and concepts involved in the development decisions. For example, some residents may know that changes are coming to Union Square, through word of mouth or through personal observation, but may not be aware of the particulars of the development plan or understand how best to give their feedback or voice any concerns.

Interviewees engaged in a variety of outreach tasks, such as canvassing neighborhoods, leaving flyers in mailboxes and posting them in store windows and in other public places, door-knocking, and phone calling. Most of these tasks were coordinated by the community group of which they were members. For example, one member of the UNSCWG divided the neighborhood into smaller outreach sections which they then assigned to other members to distribute flyers, canvass residents. Several interviewees indicated that coordination helped their outreach efforts be more efficient by spreading the burden across multiple members. Residents also sent letters signed by their group members and called aldermen and city staff in an effort to ensure that their feedback was received.

Several residents indicated that one important outcome of successful community outreach was a diversity of participants in community groups and at public meetings, which many felt would lead to a more inclusive decision-making process. To achieve this, several community groups ensured that meetings were not overly technical in their language and had translation when needed. The reason why this was described as important frequently related to feeling comfortable in a group, learning from other members, and having access to different thoughts and opinions. Many felt that inclusive meetings enabled feedback and conversations to have a wider array of perspectives and opinions. Several interviewees mentioned that this diversity enabled them to learn more and different information than they would have otherwise.

Staying Up To Date

Once members had become involved in a community group, community groups spent a significant amount of time ensuring that they were as updated as possible regarding a decision-making process. Community groups accomplished this in several ways. Often, community group meetings started with an overview of the most recent public and community group meetings, including the content of decisions if any had been made, and a reminder about upcoming meetings or decisions. Community groups also regularly sent out meeting minutes and quick recaps in order to update members who were not at a particular meeting.

Preparing for Public Meetings

Community group members viewed the plethora of preparation activities they engaged in as essential to effective participation. These activities were

primarily intended to support the ability of residents to provide feedback that was useful to decision-makers and included identifying common ground among participants, setting goals, gathering and sharing information, researching new information as well as formulating opinions about decisions and proposals and forming relationships that residents would rely on when they were participating.

Finding Common Ground

One important activity in community group meetings was finding common ground among members with different opinions about plans, goals, or activities. Sometimes described as “building consensus” or “compromising,” many members of every community group felt that being able to find common ground was essential for many of the groups’ other activities, including setting community group goals and identifying talking points to bring up at meetings.

Residents typically accomplished finding common ground by discussing their values in relation to particular concepts, like affordable housing, and identifying where they agreed or disagreed. Several residents indicated that it was important to be willing to compromise in order to move beyond instances of strong disagreement. For example, there were many different proposals addressing the Neighborhood Councils’ board structure put forth during USNCWG meetings. Members of the USNCWG spent multiple meetings discussing what values they wanted the structure of the board to represent and how each proposal might reflect those. Some members wanted the board to represent the top vote-getters in the election, others wanted there to be specific slots for different types of Union Square residents (i.e. renters, homeowners,

business owners, employees, etc). Originally, members submitted various proposals, discussed them and formed preferences, and then ranked which proposals they preferred, however this did not result in a decisive conclusion or a compromise. Eventually, after several members observed that the various categories could potentially overlap (i.e. a renter might also be a business owner), members agreed to a compromise allowed board candidates to declare in advance what categories they fulfilled so that voters could choose accordingly.

Setting Goals

During community group meetings, members set goals for their participation in particular public meetings and the direction they wanted the City to pursue for planning and development in Union Square more generally. Goals for members' participation in public meetings helped guide community groups' meetings and often dictated the activities and tasks residents engaged in during these meetings. Setting goals for participation in public meetings ensured that community group members generally agreed about what they intended to accomplish by providing feedback or testimony. For example, prior to a public meeting on receiving community benefits from US2, Union United members collectively decided that they wanted to advocate for a negotiated Community Benefits Agreement between themselves and US2, as opposed to between the City and US2. They then practiced giving public testimony so that they could ensure that their goal was communicated effectively and uniformly to the City.

Another particularly common example of setting goals was developing group talking points which members would agree to mention during public

testimony or in conversations with other residents and with City officials. This was a tactic that Union United, Union Square Neighbors, and AHOC frequently utilized, both when they attended public meetings but also when members of these groups joined the other community organizations like the CAC, LOCUS and the USNCWG. For example, Union United meetings sometimes included strategizing about what individuals wanted to happen during the next USNCWG meeting. When the Board of Aldermen was considering revising the inclusionary zoning ordinance, AHOC members attended public meetings in large numbers specifically to support the revisions the group was endorsing.

Several residents also indicated that setting goals about their participation helped provide members with a reason to attend often challenging public meetings. One member of Union United said,

“[Members] were frustrated that we weren’t influencing the process, but we did have a clear goal that people could follow. There was a larger purpose, there was a reason to participate. It wasn’t just that we’re going to the meetings just because, but because we have a reason to go. The goal was a great motivator for participation.”

Several residents also felt that the goals community groups set for their participation in public meetings helped provide direction preparing to give feedback at a decision-making opportunity. For example, when AHOC set a goal to advocate for an inclusionary zoning ordinance that designated a higher percentage of new residential development as affordable, members agreed to focus their efforts on gathering information about other ordinances from around the country. As a result, they could discuss the research in their meeting,

collectively decide what the group would advocate for, and develop a common explanation for their advocacy.

Many community group members also indicated that having broader goals about the direction of planning and development in Union Square was helpful for guiding them in their participation efforts. For example, Union United's overarching goal is to ensure that development does not displace residents. Knowing this goal enabled group members to interpret conversations and decisions at public meeting based on whether they would result in displacement. Often, these goals were codified in a group's mission statement. For example, Union United's overarching goal is listed in its mission statement as is AHOC's desire to advocate for greater affordable housing in Somerville.

Conversely, when community groups did not have clear goals or a mission statement, members felt that their ability to participate, both in the community group's meetings and in general, suffered. Some of the interviewees felt that a lack of clear goals prevented them from knowing how to present their feedback appropriately, or even what they were supposed to be providing feedback on. This was particularly true for groups that received legitimacy from the City. For example, several interviewees felt that the CAC's goals to be a "sounding board" for the community was vague, which left members without a clear understanding of their role in the group or the group's role in larger decision-making opportunities.

Lacking clarity about the goals for a community group lead to participants developing divergent understandings of what groups aimed to accomplish.

Several participants in LOCUS felt that the City and the consultant facilitator had different overarching goals for the group that were unclear and conflicted with the participants' goals. Several interviewees indicated that this generated conflict over participation efforts during meetings and caused some members to distrust the City and the consultant. One participant explained that members sometimes felt that they "were really just pawns, we didn't have any say in the process."

Gathering Information

Several interviewees noted that the act of gathering existing information that they could later analyze helped inform them about the details related to each decision or document. Gathering information helped residents become more aware about other relevant decisions and policies from outside of Somerville. For example, members identified other Neighborhood Councils (NCs) from around the country and collected the bylaws associated with each council so that they could use them as models for the NC's by-laws. Gathering together the appropriate information not only helped participants form opinions but also helped identify where they lacked information or needed clarification or assistance to fully understand the topic at hand. As one interviewee explained, "Going into a meeting about a concrete thing without the full information will lead to ineffective participation. It is incumbent on the participant to learn as much as is necessary to provide input on the decisions happening in a meeting."

Sharing Information and Knowledge

Many interviewees particularly stressed the importance of sharing information that members had gathered. One member of USN stated, "I felt

supported in the sense that there were people who were more educated than I was who shared information, perspectives, linked to either policy papers or meeting notifications.” This interviewee, who stressed that he did not have expertise in planning or development, explained that the information and knowledge his group members shared with him enabled him to read through zoning and development documents, understand and form opinions about the content, and then provide feedback that addresses any concerns. A member of Union United stated, “If you have a group, some of the benefits of being in the room can be transferred to some of the individuals who aren’t able to be in the room. Institutional knowledge. People can share information with their group. You can share your knowledge, analysis, etc. Everybody benefits.”

Reviewing Information Together

Sometimes residents did not have enough time to read the information provided to them by the City and form opinions about it because it was either too dense or too voluminous. Reviewing information individually and in small groups and subsequently educating the larger group about the results was an important way to account for the overabundance and inadequate quality of information accessible to groups. Interviewees stated that doing this was necessary to catch important but easy to miss details or gather new information to understand the situation more completely.

Several individuals from USN and Union United pointed out that had they not reviewed zoning documents “cover to cover,” some of which are close to 300 pages long and filled with dense and technical jargon, they would not have been

able to effectively provide feedback during decision-making opportunities. During several Union United and USNCWG meetings, members used large sticky pads to collectively review the information they had gathered about processes. In one instance, an interviewee found a small loophole in US2's coordinated development special permit proposal that could have consolidated and moved the affordable housing production requirements to a much later stage of the development process. This loophole would have gone unnoticed had she not read through the whole document with other group members. After bringing it to the attention of her alderman, the loophole was addressed so that affordable housing production remained one of the developer's first responsibilities.

Research and Analysis

Perhaps the most time-consuming and common type of preparation was research about and analysis of the numerous proposals, public documents, and planning decisions relevant to Union Square that residents had gathered and shared among themselves. Research and analysis that supported effective engagement relied on gathering and sharing *enough* of the *right* information, understanding how input might be used, and being educated about the information that is available and the decision's context. To do this, residents scrutinized zoning documents, development proposals, synthesized data gathered or published by the City, and researched information about specific policies and programs and the process itself, including its timeline, context, and information about the decision-makers.

Many residents felt that examining these documents was vital for providing useful feedback at public meetings because otherwise they would not be able to understand the content of meetings or know the context for decisions. AHOC's research into different inclusionary housing ordinance enabled them to more effectively advocate for specific components of the ordinance. Occasionally, a group submitted an alternative proposal based on the research they had completed. After the City proposed the dollar amount of the jobs linkage fee, a group of residents proposed a higher alternative fee based on their own analysis of the City's linkage fee nexus study. After the City submitted the initial Union Square zoning plan in 2017, USN members proposed dozens of significant edits to the zoning proposals to after having reviewed it in its entirety.

Gaining Technical Knowledge

Interviewees noted that the available technical information is frequently diffuse, dense, and confusing. In order to overcome this challenge, interviewees researched specific technical issues, such as off-site housing production in inclusionary zoning or the legal limits of municipal financing, among many others, and then discussed these with other residents, their community groups, and City staff. One very important benefit of this aspect of analysis and research was that residents became better able to understand the technical details and trade-offs of planning decisions, such as the consequences of a residential-commercial split in the zoning, so that they can begin think about feedback in the first place. AHOC's inclusionary zoning research, for example, helped group members unfamiliar with inclusionary zoning or with the housing market understand the

effects of a 20% affordability requirement versus a 30% affordability requirement.

Some groups also pursued training that enabled them to become more familiar with important concepts and gain technical knowledge. For example, two members of Union United, one of whom was a professional organizer, attended a conference in Chicago to learn more about Community Benefits Agreements. In addition, through support from the Somerville Community Corporation, Union United was able to access legal training and assistance from the Sugar Law Center. Union United was also able to bring John Goldstein, a professional organizer and trainer on Community Benefits Agreements, to Somerville to train them and the Board of Aldermen on CBAs.

Framing Feedback

Several interviewees felt that framing feedback, or understanding how to present research, proposals, or concerns to the City so that that they were as relevant and useful as possible, was extremely important, but very difficult to achieve. One interviewee stated, “There’s a lot of resources out there about [how to give] public testimony, but it’s not easy. You have to know enough about the issues and what their decision-making process is. You have to be empathetic about how the decision is challenging [for decision-makers] while also making suggestions.” Understanding who the decisions-makers are and knowing their goals, opinions, and motivations was crucial background information for formulating relevant input. For example, the community organizers that supported Union United occasionally engaged in power analyses of stakeholders

involved in each decision which helped inform members about what feedback might be most effective for a specific stakeholder. It does not appear that this type of analysis occurred in groups that did not have professional organizers leading the group.

Forming Relationships and Accessing Emotional Support

The relationships that residents formed with fellow group members during community group meetings facilitated many of these tasks and activities they engaged in throughout their participation. For example, one member of the USNCWG formed a relationship with another participant after she approached him to learn more about his opinions and feedback regarding building height. This relationship helped her understand the perspectives of other participants regarding tall buildings in Union Square. One resident summed up many of the feelings that the participants I interviewed had about their relationships with other participants:

“We all have different answers and expertise and questions. We’ll be stronger if we’re all learning together. If you’re preparing for something, you likely have to do research. If you’re with a group, you can break that down...and process it together. By the time you get to the larger meeting...you’ll likely feel a lot more confident, especially if you’re in a room and see all your peers who you know and have been working with. If you’re alone, it’s really hard to say what you feel, especially if you feel like nobody agrees with you.”

Relationships also provided important emotional support for participation. For example, several interviewees said that they felt more comfortable testifying in front of people if other members of their group were in attendance. Knowing that they were not alone, in either their thoughts or their work, was really important. Community groups facilitated forming relationships by allowing for

time to social prior to meetings and having non-meeting gatherings, like potlucks. On several occasions the USNCWG held potlucks to help members get to know each other better and Union United have 30 minutes of communal dinner time immediately prior to the start of meetings. Interviewees also identified other behaviors that supported their engagement, such as encouraging people to share their stories or attend meetings, listening to people, and allowing for “venting” and debriefing.

Table 6: Capacities, Tasks, and Challenges of Effective Participation

Capacities of Effective Participation	Tasks and Activities of Effective Participation	Challenges of Effective Participation	Group Activities that Address Challenges
Provide useful feedback to decision-makers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> giving testimony sharing experiences and opinions advocating for particular policies proposing solutions compromising on values and opinions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> unclear whether feedback will be considered unclear what feedback will be most useful unable to provide feedback due to meeting's structure confusion about how to frame feedback lack of confidence to speak limited English ability lack of specific or relevant knowledge and information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> practicing giving feedback creating group talking points giving encouragement and emotional support facilitating the formation of strong relationships between members attending public meetings together setting goals for meetings discussing values, identifying differences using power and stakeholder analysis to understand motivations providing translation for members that do not speak English using other strategies, like protest, petitions, and letter writing
Access to information relevant to processes, contexts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> asking questions attending a decision-making opportunity having side/informal conversations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> poor access to decision-makers information is hard to find information is received too late or not at all 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> inviting decision-makers to meetings gathering and sharing information and knowledge meeting with City staff
Understanding planning concepts, processes, and other relevant information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> attending a decision-making opportunity asking questions at meetings doing own research to become informed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> limited planning knowledge information is confusing, complex, and highly technical language is filled with jargon processes are confusing limited English ability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> having conversations with other group members pursuing relevant trainings asking City staff for clarification researching and analyzing the City's data and specific technical ideas examining information and documents together sharing technical expertise and educating other members
Awareness of development, decisions, and processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> attending meetings asking questions at meetings having informal conversation at meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> development, decisions, and processes are complex and confusing Information about development is hard to access have not heard about development/decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> recapping recent decisions/meetings sending out meeting minutes recruiting more members spreading flyers knocking on doors canvassing neighborhood
Time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> attending all the meetings in a process staying until the end of a meeting preparing for participation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> have to work lack of childcare meetings take a long time decisions are protracted over multiple meetings preparing for participation takes a long time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> providing childcare during group meetings sharing task burden of participation

Challenges to the Work of Community Groups

Though residents benefited immensely from being members of community groups, they experienced significant challenges to the tasks and activities that supported their engagement.

Staying Up to Date

Community groups struggled to update members because of a lack of time during community group meetings, inconsistent attendance among members, and clarity about a decision-making process' next steps. For example, having many other agenda items to address during a community group meeting in a limited amount of time often meant that other issues were prioritized over updates. One resident explained that updating members became more difficult the more meetings they missed because the conversations and processes accumulated and grew more complex.

Inconsistent Attendance

Inconsistent attendance also caused instability among groups from meeting to meeting. Several interviewees noted that sometimes the USNCWG and LOCUS meeting attendance would be almost completely different from week to week. This meant that conversations from one meeting often did not carry over to the following meeting. Groups often had to repeat conversations that had already happened, occasionally coming to completely different conclusions. In both LOCUS and the USNCWG, there were some decisions that absent group members did not agree with and subsequently challenged, delaying the process and reopening decisions that were previously closed. The USNCWG's decision

to become a private entity, which would enable them to receive money directly from US2 but would exempt them from public meeting requirements, was reopened after members who missed the meeting in question voiced concern and frustration that such a significant decision had been made in their absence.

Difficulty Doing Research

Doing research that was useful proved to be persistently difficult. Several interviewees pointed out that community groups often did not have enough members who were able to do research, making coordinated research more difficult. Community groups struggled to devote enough time to research or harness the relevant skills of their existing members efficiently. This caused groups to miss important details or advocate for slightly different policies than they would had they had the right information accessible to them. These challenges were

For example, one interviewee explained that he advocated for the linkage fee based on a lower percentage of locally sourced jobs than he thought would have been feasible in retrospect. He explained that this was because the City had released its nexus study less than two weeks before the meeting about the linkage fee. As a result, his group had not had enough time to adequately analyze the nexus study or research alternative linkage fee rates. As a result, he advocated for a linkage fee that would have resulted in less overall money to support workforce development in Somerville. In addition to receiving information too late, some participants mentioned that they simply did not receive the information at all, particularly about actual decisions that were made at public meetings.

Several residents also bemoaned the way the City presented information. One stated, “The city is very good at presenting unwashed data and does not do their due diligence in making sure that people have access to it or understand it.” The same individual pointed out that the City successfully transmits important information in other areas, “The City just released a report about childcare, and one of the things that they’ve been trying to do is put that report together and help synthesize it so that people can digest it. That’s useful. There’s not an effort made in this regard about development.”

Not Knowing How Input will be Used

Confusion about how input would be used by decision makers and the feeling that the City had already made its decision proved hard to overcome. When residents were not sure how their feedback would be used it was difficult for them to prioritize what to research or frame their research appropriately for the audience. In addition, when residents’ feedback was ignored they often felt unmotivated to continue to invest time and energy researching and presenting their opinions. When the SRA ignored the CAC’s recommendations for the Union Square developer and selected its third preferred developer, several interviewees felt as if their time had been wasted.

Negative Group Dynamics

Contentiousness and division in community group meetings was one of the most pernicious challenges to their effective participation. Many interviewees described some community group meetings as being contentious due to the decisions and topics being discussed – the conversations that needed to happen

were inherently hard – or because there were significant differences of opinion among the members. This was particularly relevant for the USNCWG and for LOCUS. As explained in chapter three, these groups were more task-oriented than Union United, AHOC, and USN, whose members joined ostensibly in support of each groups collectively held values or their mission. For the USNCWG and LOCUS, being task-oriented resulted in a membership with divergent values and opinions about each topic. Many residents that I interviewed felt like this contributed significantly to contention in the process.

For example, being asked to make decisions about abstract topics was particularly difficult when there were significant values differences between participants. One interviewee, who was part of LOCUS, felt that being asked to provide feedback on development trade-offs regarding community benefits was extremely difficult because many members had based their decisions on values instead of hard data. Some individuals valued dense housing with high affordability requirements and were willing to trade that for less open space. Others valued single family housing and large green spaces and were willing to trade that for less affordable housing. These residents were unwilling to compromise on their values, which made settling on an agreement regarding “benefits” very challenging.

Parsing decisions about trade-offs was also difficult when there was very little information available to residents to help them understand what the implications of the tradeoffs were for Union Square. This caused confusion and prevented the process from moving forward and individuals from compromising

on their previously held values. For example, when the USNCWG was deciding whether to become a private or public entity, there was very little concrete information available to members regarding the implications of the decision. This made it extremely difficult for members to discuss the difference in terms other than their opinions and values. Additionally, several participants indicated that conflict caused them to hesitate to participate out of fear that they would cause more conflict, incite anger, or be dismissed out of hand.

Several members of the USNCWG and LOCUS indicated that divisiveness during meetings made the community groups and their participation less effective and enjoyable because they could not work together or cooperate in ways that would produce useful feedback for the city. For example, during the unsuccessful Union Square-wide by-law election in June, 2017, several members who disagreed with certain aspects of the by-laws voted against approving the by-laws even though they had spent the last 6 months writing them and many other members essentially pleaded for their support.

Interviewees pointed towards several types of common behaviors that facilitated this conflict and divisiveness. Being disrespected, shut down, ignored, interrupted, and yelled at by other group members were all examples of behaviors that interviewees described as divisive or as causing conflict. These behaviors had a “chilling” effect on groups’ meetings. For example, one interviewee described his participation in the USNCWG, as “harrowing” and filled with personal attacks against him and other participant. Another stated that he would be “less effective but happier as a person” if he were not engaged as much in the

USNCWG, and another stated that she “would dread going to USNCWG meetings. They were just so unpleasant.” This sometimes prevented people from actually giving feedback to the City at all. Feeling ignored, or being actually ignored, by other members caused several interviewees to not want to be present, both because they felt that their presence was meaningless and because they preferred not to be in such a negative situation.

There were also several instances in which specific participants had negative experiences or negatively impacted processes outside the context of more typical negative behaviors. For example, several women described being dismissed, harassed, ignored, and/or belittled by male participants. Several other interviewees claimed that there were some participants who came to meetings specifically to disrupt them by proverbially “throwing bombs” into the conversation. These “bombs” were so distracting that they sometimes prevented progress through the meeting’s agenda. For example, one member of the USNCWG felt that several participants tried to undermine the group’s progress by consistently claiming that what the group was proposing was illegal or would never be supported by the wider community. This caused some members to doubt their proposals and re-opened decisions that had been already made.

Consistent divisiveness and conflict in meetings often had long lasting effects on community groups. One example that several interviewees brought up as indicative of this was the LOCUS meeting where members voted on forming a Neighborhood Council. Several interviewees felt that the City and consultant facilitator were attempting to prevent a vote from occurring while several other

interviewees felt that certain participants were attempting to disrupt and control the meeting for their own advantage. All participants who mentioned this meeting indicated that the poor relationships that had developed throughout the group's previous meetings, both between members and between members and City staff and the consultant, were primarily responsible for the vote's contentiousness.

Lack of Meeting Space

Lastly, several residents indicated that a lack of meeting space was a persistent problem for community groups to overcome. Union United, for example, met in the basement of a local church until that option was no longer available. Subsequently, like USN, they were forced to meet in different locations each week. Some residents felt that this lack of access to meeting space constrained their efforts to have private group conversations and prevented an important level of group stability. Some groups also lacked good quality meeting space. The USNCWG met in the Union Square police station for their main meetings and met in local cafes and members' houses for smaller committee meetings. While some members did not feel that this was particularly problematic, others felt that it may have prevented residents from attending, particularly if they did not trust the policy or were undocumented.

Perspectives of City Staff

Despite the importance of community groups to resident participants, City staff seemed to have mixed feelings about their relationships with community groups. Several staff members appreciated community groups that provided

nuanced research and well thought out proposals, particularly AHOC and USNC. On the other hand, one staff member felt that groups sometimes drew attention away from the concerns of un-affiliated residents, suggesting this was because addressing a large group seemed more efficient than addressing separate individuals. Several staff felt that some community groups were tricky to engage with and maintain relationships with other groups, officials, and interested parties. For example, one staff member indicated that the City staff sometimes had to step away from working with groups when they were actively criticizing or hostile towards the developer.

Nevertheless, City staff engaged in several activities that they felt supported effective resident engagement and complimented community groups' efforts, including using public meetings more effectively, identifying alternatives to public meetings, recruiting diverse participants, providing access to raw data, and attending community group meetings to provide information or answer questions more directly. Though City staff frequently felt that these activities generally supported resident engagement, they regularly struggled to find the most appropriate strategy for each challenge and experienced their own difficulties in facilitating engagement and interacting with community groups.

Supporting Resident Engagement

Many of the City staff that I interviewed were concerned with outreach, especially regarding outreach of community members who do not already attend meetings. One staff member stated, "we are constantly going back out and engaging in phone calls, community meetings, surveys," all intended to involve

more residents in decision-making processes. Several staff indicated that they felt that feedback was more useful when the participants were very diverse.

Like residents, many City staff identified public meetings as an important, or at least efficient, tool for providing information and meeting with residents. As one city staff person explained, this was easier said than done, “At the end of the day...if I get everybody to a baseline understanding of the challenges that [the City] faces, then it’s great. It’s difficult to do this if people can’t show up to every meeting because they miss context and don’t understand some of the decisions.” Even though they relied on them heavily, several staff acknowledged that public meetings were not the most effective tool for providing information to residents because of challenges like poor attendance and overly technical language.

Several staff emphasized that they looked for alternatives to relying on public meetings as the primary vehicle for providing information. For example, the City has utilized bloc parties, engagement at public events like the Fluff Festival, and outreach at local cafes and bars to provide information to residents. City staff liked these types of settings because they facilitated informal conversations, which several identified as a preferred method of engagement. One staff member stated, “talking about relationship building, there’s no substitute for pressing the flesh: talking to people and seeing people.” Another indicated that informal conversation was simply easier, stating, “we have different styles of public meetings, but one we’ve found is valuable are open houses that have stations where you can discuss individual issues with small groups. You can

come and go, somebody can show up at the beginning or the end and discuss the project or plan the same as if they'd been there the whole time.”

In addition, several City staff indicated that they try to provide translation for meetings, documents, and outreach, as often as possible. One instance where both City staff and residents felt that this succeeded was the 2015 SomerViva public meeting that was conducted simultaneously in Spanish, Portuguese, Haitian Creole, and Nepalese.

Preparing Residents

City staff identified several ways in which they helped residents prepare themselves to provide feedback at public meetings. One staff member indicated that they tried to provide residents with relevant raw data, research, and public documents that they could analyze, citing as examples the Resistat program, the city's open data portal, and a new software that allows residents to comment directly on public documents. Several residents confirmed that the City's efforts to provide access to raw data was a significant support for their ability to engage in their own analysis and research.

City staff also tried to educate residents about important topics. In the CAC, for example, members of the group who had relevant professional experience and knowledge worked with City staff to run workshops on topics relevant to the decisions the group was tasked with weighing in on. These included a review of Massachusetts' Smart Growth Zoning act, 40R; an explanation of Somerville's housing goals by Mayor Curtatone, and an overview of common affordable housing development strategies. Because of those

workshops, members of the group were able to provide feedback that was informed and relevant to the City.

Research and Analysis

City staff felt that research and analysis was one of the most useful tasks residents could do to account for the difficulties inherent in attending public meetings. Several staff members explained that it was easier to respond to resident concerns when they arrived at meetings already informed and with their own research. One stated, “Effective participation is people who are willing to do their homework, have conversations off line among their peers, talk with City officials, and know that they have to do the work themselves and not just rely on government to solve all their problems.” Several staff members indicated that AHOC and USN were particularly strong in this regard.

One reason that staff thought this was helpful for residents to do was because the City tried not to have fully formed ideas and plans prior to entering into decision-making opportunities with residents. This was specifically intended to avoid seeming as if they had made decisions already. Several staff acknowledged that they did not always expect residents to know everything but explained that they frequently were not able to predict which questions and concerns residents might bring up at meetings. When residents came to meetings with their own research, especially on a topic that City staff had not predicted they would bring up, staff felt better able to address concerns during the meeting or follow up afterwards with supplemental research or new information.

Attending Community Group Meetings and answering questions

City staff attended community group meetings or met with community group members in order to more directly provide this information and answer questions about plans and decisions. Staff employed this strategy most often with Union United, USN and AHOC. Though the USNCWG was not officially supported by the City, like the CAC or LOCUS, members still were able to rely on City staff for resources and information. These resources enabled participants to access information with which to make more nuanced decisions. For example, when the USNCWG was considering whether the future Neighborhood Council should be a public or private entity, members asked the City for insight into the implications of each decision. At one meeting, the City explained that a private organization would not be able to receive financial support from the City. A public organization, on the other hand, would essentially be an arm of the City government to which the City could provide dedicated funding.

In another instance, City staff attended AHOC meetings to provide their perspective about the revision to the inclusionary zoning ordinance. Several AHOC members mentioned that this was extremely helpful for them. One AHOC member explained;

The [Board of Aldermen] and staff definitely helped [AHOC] with the Inclusionary Zoning petition... We accomplished this through many, many conversations [with them], which served almost as guides. They also helped us frame the discussion effectively. Ideas can't just be framed as reactions to something. Doing this takes time, skill, and feedback. Ideas can be tested by other peoples' reactions to them.

Another AHOC member agreed that the times when planning staff came to AHOC meetings were crucial for AHOC's ability to put forth meaningful recommendations. These members explained that the City staff attended AHOC's

meetings, answered questions about the City's opinions regarding the inclusionary zoning ordinance, and asked staff to review preliminary proposals.

Challenges of Working with Groups

Several City staff explained that they struggled to support residents in engaging effectively in most instances due limited time, money, and other resources. In addition, City staff experienced issues with continuity in their work which limited their ability to effectively respond to resident concerns or do their own preparation for a meeting. One staff member indicated that as planning processes progress it becomes more difficult for new staff to continue where old staff stopped. For example, the formation of LOCUS and the passage of the original Union Square rezoning plan from 2009 occurred before several current staff members began working for Somerville. Several staff felt that some prior decisions, like the 2009 rezoning plan, were made without much resident input, which resulted in a lack of trust on the part of residents that continues to affect their work.

In addition, the City did not seem to agree with residents about how to achieve inclusive meetings. Many of the city staff, and several residents with professional planning backgrounds, used "inclusion" literally, meaning attendance by as many people, with as many different opinions, as possible. They placed particular emphasis on including residents who do not normally come to meetings or who are not the "usual suspects." While many residents did not necessarily disagree with that goal, several indicated that "inclusion" more specifically meant meetings that *enabled* as many residents to attend by providing supports like

childcare, translation, and food as opposed to meetings that had the broadest possible attendance.

Putting in the Time

Most interviewees, regardless of their group affiliation, level of planning expertise, or whether they were residents or City staff, acknowledged that all of these tasks and activities took a significant amount of time. One noted that “the ability to put in the time is certainly the number one issue. There were weeks when I was putting in 15-20 hours of work. I didn’t really have that kind of time and I took a hit in my own job and didn’t perform well [there]”. Another stated, regarding their commitment to outreach, that, “having time was really important. So many people don’t think they have time and I’ve told myself that too, but I made the time.” These sentiments were shared by practically every individual who I interviewed and sometimes contributed to feeling frustrated when they felt like their time had been wasted, abused, or “consumed” by decision-makers. For example, several residents indicated that they felt like participation had consumed an inordinate amount of their time on processes and decisions where their feedback was ultimately not considered or was ignored.

Comparative Analysis

The experiences of participation in the City’s decision-making processes varied across the different community groups and among participants with different levels of experience, knowledge, and skills, different levels of English ability, and different demographic backgrounds. These differences affected how members experienced participating as well as the strategies that groups pursued

when attending meetings, providing feedback, or attempting to influence decision makers.

Differences Across Groups

As discussed in Chapter 3, the groups involved in this thesis can be separated into two categories: those that received their legitimacy from the City and those that received their legitimacy from the community. Groups with City-conferred legitimacy maintained close ties to the City, were given responsibilities by the City relating to decision-making opportunities in Union Square, and existed by virtue of the City's action. These included LOCUS and the CAC, whose members the City appointed, and the USNCWG, though to a lesser extent. Groups with community-conferred legitimacy did not have official ties to the City, drew their responsibilities from the needs of their members and the wider community, and existed by virtue of action on the part of community members. These included Union United, USN, and AHOC, whose membership was public and voluntary. Community groups' experiences participating in decision-making processes varied significantly between these two types of group in ways which may be related to their source of legitimacy. The composition of a group's membership also played an important role in their experiences.

Groups with City-Conferred Legitimacy

LOCUS and the CAC members seemed to experience fewer challenges to their participation than other groups in several key areas. First, these groups had the ability to make recommendations that the City had agreed to consider, a level of legitimacy and privilege that none of the other groups enjoyed. Members

initially felt that this was extremely important, as many were frustrated by other instances where it was unclear if the City would consider their feedback at all.

Second, through their relationship with the City, these groups also had access to the resources, support, and information that many participants identified as important for effective participation. For example, City staff facilitated some and attended all or most of these groups' meetings. This enabled the City to share information with participants when they needed it most instead of relying on other formats like one-on-one conversations at charrettes or during public meetings. The City's presence at meetings also allowed members to ask questions about concerns they had or present research and suggestions directly to staff instead of via their testimony or during conversation at charrettes or public meetings.

The City also provided these two groups with significant financial resources which helped them gain information about the decisions they were tasked with making. For LOCUS the City hired a consultant from Smart Growth America to facilitate the process and educate participants about place-making strategies. For the CAC, the City flew out several members and City staff to meet with the potential developers so that they could interview them and assess their appropriateness for the Union Square development project.

Despite the City's commitment to at least consider the recommendations, votes, and other decisions made by the CAC, LOCUS, and to a far lesser extent, the USNCWG, many members felt that their feedback had ultimately not impacted the outcomes of the City's decisions. For example, when the SRA chose US2 to be the Union Square developer even though it was the CAC's least

preferred option, members felt that decision had contradicted the City's commitment to consider their recommendations. During the LOCUS meetings, several members felt that the City and consultant facilitators were not interested in some of the insight or comments participants had. When LOCUS voted on whether to form a Neighborhood Council, several members felt that the City tried to delay the meeting in order to prevent a vote. Interviewees indicated that this de-legitimization caused them to feel that the City had never really intended to follow their recommendations in the first place and that the goals of these community groups were nothing more than pretense.

The USNCWG

Because The USNCWG was formed by residents and not by the City, it was not provided with the same types of support as the CAC and LOCUS, even though the City later codified the Neighborhood Council, which the USNCWG was attempting for form, in its covenant with US2. For example, City staff only occasionally attended the USNCWG meetings, though when they did they provided some important insights and information regarding the impending Union Square development. The benefits that the USNCWG virtually disappeared after members of the group decided to become a private organization instead of a public organization. After that decision, City staff informed the USNCWG members that that a private organization would not be able to receive financial support from the City. The City also withheld access to their robo-calling technology, although it is unclear if that was in response to the decision to become private.

Groups with community-conferred legitimacy

AHOC, USN, and Union United struggled to participate effectively in several of the areas where groups conferred legitimacy by the City did not. First, these groups were not given any responsibility for providing recommendations about specific decisions in the process. They often struggled to ensure that their feedback would actually be considered as a result and often relied on tactics like attending meetings in large groups, and creating communal talking points to ensure their feedback would be considered

In addition, AHOC, USN, and Union United often did not have access to the same level of financial resources, information, and knowledge as the groups with City-conferred legitimacy. As a result, members of these groups appear to have devoted far more time to the already difficult tasks of gathering, researching, and understanding the materials and decisions available to them than members of the other groups. Because these groups also did not have direct access to decision makers they had to rely alternative ways to ask their questions, such as attending public meetings or meeting with decision-makers one-on-one.

Despite the fact that the City had not committed to considering any of their feedback, there were several prominent instances where these groups' efforts affected the outcome of a particular decision. There were two clear examples of this: the Citizens' petition to increase the inclusionary zoning set aside percentage spearheaded by AHOC and the comments and revisions that USN members proposed after the City submitted its initial Union Square zoning amendment in 2017. In both instances, members of these groups felt that they were successful

because they had the support of many fellow residents. For example, AHOC spent a significant amount of time collecting signatures from Somerville residents in support of their petition. In addition, members of each group spent many hours researching and analyzing policies and information, preparing feedback and giving testimony, proposing alternatives and submitting letters advocating for particular changes. AHOC's citizen petition was ultimately approved and, while several USN members indicated that it is difficult to tell exactly how influential their feedback was, they did see many changes to the zoning that they advocated for.

Composition of Membership

The composition of each of these groups' membership, their size, and also appeared to have affected their participation. As discussed earlier, groups with a larger diversity of opinions among the membership there was more divisiveness and conflict, particularly for LOCUS and the USNCWG. Sometimes this was the result of intentional design choices. For example, the City appointed members of LOCUS specifically to capture differing opinions and perspectives. All three of the groups with community-conferred legitimacy did not experience nearly the same level of hostility and conflict during their meetings. Though groups with City- and community-conferred legitimacy seemed have different experiences with conflict and divisiveness, it is unclear from the findings exactly how conflict is related to sources of legitimacy.

Several interviewees explained that small groups of members of the USNCWG and LOCUS formed factions within the group that which they felt

caused some of the divisiveness and conflict that negatively impacted these groups' effectiveness. In general, these factions seemed to form between members who were also part of groups with community-conferred legitimacy and advocated for these groups' goals. For example, a group of like-minded USNCWG members, several of whom were Union United members, started to have strategy meetings for the USNCWG right before the larger meetings so that they could plan for moving forward the meeting's agenda, and their own goals. During the contentious LOCUS meeting to vote about forming a Neighborhood Council, several non-member residents attended the meeting and protested to put pressure on securing a vote and moving the process forward. Unsurprisingly, LOCUS and the USNCWG experienced much higher levels of conflict among members than other groups.

In addition, continuity in participants from one process to another complicated groups' effectiveness as well. For example, even though these processes were intended to build on each other, the members of the CAC were mostly different from the members of LOCUS who were in turn mostly different from the members of the USNCWG. Several participants indicated that this caused these groups to duplicate their efforts, which interviewees felt wasted time. Membership continuity also seemed to impact smaller groups more than larger ones. Several members of AHOC and USN, which both had smaller memberships, mentioned that even one meeting with low attendance could slow down the group's efforts to prepare for engagement with the City.

Outside Resources

Several groups had professionals facilitating their meetings or had strong relationships with local non-profit organizations, both of which appeared to have significantly influenced their participation. AHOC is a committee of the Somerville Community Corporation (SCC) and both AHOC and Union United were facilitated by professional organizing staff from SCC. Several members of these groups felt these staff enabled them to be more organized and methodical in their activities and supported them in utilizing strategies they would not have known about, like stakeholder analysis. In addition, AHOC's relationship with SCC provided them with access to resources, like permanent meetings space, food and translation at meetings, and printed materials, to which other groups did not have access.

A private consultant facilitated LOCUS, which several interviewees stated suffered from hostile facilitation. Several members indicated that the consultant's poor facilitation often caused meetings to wander and made participants feel that their feedback was not valuable to the process. Members of LOCUS seemed to ascribe this more to the individual and less to the fact that he was a consultant.

Differences Among Participants

Experiences of people of color

It is important to note that I interviewed very few people of color for this thesis. In general, the most active members of the organizations that I focus on in this thesis were white, which does not reflect the population of Somerville overall. Though it is beyond the scope of this thesis to speculate about why that is the case, two of the people of color who I interviewed for this thesis worked full time

and had children to care for, which prevented them from being more engaged in decision-making opportunities.

English Speaking Ability

The ability to speak English was crucial for being an effective participant. The vast majority of participation opportunities were in English, as were most of the published documents relating to the ongoing Union Square development. One notable exception to this, which several City staff and residents brought up, was the SomerViva meeting run by the City in 2015 in four different languages. Many of the residents and Staff who spoke English as their first language acknowledged that English was essentially a requirement for participating effectively and that translation was typically not sufficient to capture the content of meetings.

Unsurprisingly, very few of the residents I interviewed spoke English as their second language. One resident who participated in LOCUS noted that members who did not speak English fluently slowly started to miss meetings, eventually dropping out of the process all together. Of the three residents who I interviewed who did not speak English as their first language, two indicated that they had experienced difficulties following meetings, understanding the technical language being used by City staff and other participants, and being able to quickly read important documents.

Flexible Schedules and Available Time

Participants who had more time available in their schedules had a much easier time participating than those that did not. They also were able to engage in

the tasks and activities discussed earlier without compromising other aspects of their lives. Several participants, for example, were retired or ran their own businesses and thus had flexible schedules. These participants tended to feel more effective in their participation simply because they were able to change their schedules to accommodate meetings or spend long periods of time reviewing information. Several participants who were employed full-time and/or had children were not able to do the same. These participants frequently mentioned that their employment and family obligations prevented them from being able to go to regularly attend meetings or change their schedules to accommodate changes in meeting times. This caused them to miss meetings, hampering their ability to stay informed and up to date about what was happening in the process.

Prior Planning Experience

Though having some form of college education, or higher, certainly helped participants engage more effectively, residents with prior planning experience had a much easier time participating than residents without that experience. It is unsurprising that residents who were already familiar with planning jargon, technical concepts, and development processes did not have to spend time learning about those in order to participate. Individuals who did not have planning experience and did not have access to those who did had to spend many more hours educating themselves about planning concepts, language, and processes in order to participate. To contend with this, individuals with planning experience became the educators of those without planning experience. The same is true for individuals with significant lived experience as Somerville residents, or

experience as community organizers and other professional backgrounds. These individuals used their experience to educate, encourage, support, and inform other group members who lacked similar experience. Most groups utilized this strategy, notably USN, Union United, and the CAC.

Stage of the Process

Though it is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore in depth how residents' experiences participating in decision-making opportunities varied based on aspects of the process, a brief discussion is relevant. Many interviewees indicated that if they had become organized and involved earlier in a planning process, for example in 2012 when the Urban Revitalization Plan for Union Square was passed, that they would have been able to be more effective. One interviewee in particular explained that the Urban Revitalization Plan, which the City of Somerville was legally required to complete in order to access certain development funds for Union Square, involved very little community input because so few groups were aware that it had been submitted for review. He felt that many of the issues that residents were grappling with now originated in this plan. Several interviewees felt that the farther into a decision-making process they progressed, the harder it became to provide feedback and influence decisions.

Conclusion

Overall, these findings provide several insights into residents' capacity to engage effectively in decisions-making opportunities. The first is that most of the tasks and activities that residents relied on their community groups for the

majority of the tasks and activities they felt supported their effective engagement. Second, relationships are extremely important for effective engagement. Third, there are significant differences between the community groups that receive their legitimacy from the City and those that receive their legitimacy from the community. These differences influenced how community groups experienced participation but may also have been a function of group composition or stage of the planning process. Fourth, residents and City staff appear to have different expectations and priorities about the process, particularly regarding who will do some of the tasks and activities in question.

Tasks and Activities

The tasks and activities that residents considered to be most important for their effective participation occurred mostly on their own time or within their community groups, not in meetings run by the City. Rarely did residents indicate that they felt truly effective in public meetings, charrettes, or open houses unless they were able to interact directly with decision makers. Rather, residents often felt that the City's decision-making processes were difficult to participate in and spent many hours preparing to do so by analyzing documents, doing outreach, framing input, etc. In doing these tasks, residents relied more on their fellow group members than the City for support.

Differences Among Community Groups

The community groups that received legitimacy from the City, LOCUS, the CAC, and the USNCWG, received important assistance from the City, which supported their effective engagement. These groups also experienced

significantly higher levels of conflict and divisiveness in spite of the support they received from the City. Residents more frequently described their experiences in these groups negatively and often felt that their participation in them was ineffective. Union United, USN, and AHOC had much higher levels of group cohesion and cooperation but struggled to make up for the lack of support from the City. Residents often felt distinctly less effective when interacting with City officials or participating in City meetings. It is not clear exactly how related the source of a group's legitimacy is to how much conflict occurred during meetings

Relationships

The relationships that residents formed with other participants and with City staff and officials were instrumental for effective participation. Many residents relied on these relationships for all manner of supports, including emotional support and encouragement, access to information, educational opportunities.

Differences in Expectations and Priorities

The City and residents frequently did not agree about, or understand, the goals of various processes or share expectations about providing input. The City and residents regularly expressed different expectations for how processes would flow. Most often this disconnect occurred in public meetings, charrettes, and open houses when residents expected to be able to get information or ask questions and were not able to do so. Residents and City staff also had different priorities about what tasks and activities were important. For example, several City staff indicated that they felt residents should be responsible for “doing their

homework” with regard to preparing for meetings. Additionally, City staff were very concerned about reaching those individuals who do not usually participate in public meetings. Staff invested many hours in considering alternatives to the typical engagement strategies, like hosting bloc parties, which would incentivize these individuals to get involved. Residents did not seem to share this focus. Though no residents indicated that they felt reaching these individuals was unimportant, most were more concerned with building relationships among existing members and engaging in the preparation tasks discussed earlier.

Chapter 6: Discussion

Despite a wealth of writing and theorizing about resident participation, most scholars focus on the perspectives of municipal staff (Hafer and Ran 2016), overlooking the nuances of the activities involved in resident participation and the challenges residents experience in doing that work. As a result, there is very little empirical investigation exploring whether residents have the capacity to do these activities once they have already become engaged in decision-making processes. Though scholars have explored community groups in democracy, planning, and community development, this literature typically does not explore the role that community groups play in helping residents in contending with the challenges they experience while participating.

This thesis helps explore this gap in empirical research by describing and analyzing what residents actually do when they participate in decision-making opportunities how they contend with the problems they encounter along the way. The findings affirm some of the claims made in the literature regarding effective resident participation and the barriers residents experience. The findings also identify additional barriers to resident participation and suggest that community groups are extremely important for helping residents contend with the challenges they experience while participation.

Recommendations and Challenges Identified in the Literature

Planning professionals and scholars overwhelmingly agree that resident participation is critical for effective planning and policy making (Bryson et al. 2013; Burby 2003; Hafer and Ran 2016). Much of the literature that addresses

resident participation either focuses on rationalizing the use of resident participation in policy and planning (Fischer and Forester 1993; Fischer 1993, 2006b, 2006a; Forester 1993, 1999; Healey 2014; Innes and Booher 1999a), or on providing municipal staff guidelines and recommendations for designing processes to better facilitate engagement, (Brody, Godschalk, and Burby 2003; Bryson et al. 2013; Burby 2003; Cooper, Bryer, and Meek 2006; Fung 2003, 2006; Howlett and Ramesh 2014; Johnston et al. 2011; Sjoberg, Mellon, and Peixoto 2017).

Residents' reports of their experiences participating affirmed many of the recommendations, guidelines, and other claims made in the literature regarding resident participation. Several recommendations and guidelines that scholars identified as important for supporting residents' participation were providing clear, accessible, and understandable information (Bryson et al. 2013; Cooper, Bryer, and Meek 2006; Fung 2015; Nabatchi 2010), ensuring inclusive meetings through strategies such as broad outreach and appropriate scheduling (Bryson et al. 2013; Feldman and Khademian 2007; Johnston et al. 2011), and allowing participants time for considering decisions and giving municipal staff time to respond (Forester 1993; Fung 2003; Herian et al. 2012; Sjoberg, Mellon, and Peixoto 2017). Residents reported that they felt more effective in decision-making processes that reflected these guidelines, particularly having enough time to consider decisions.

These findings also affirmed some of the barriers to effective participation identified in the literature. Several authors indicated that residents' lack of

available time, knowledge, and experience were detrimental to their effective engagement (Brody, Godschalk, and Burby 2003; Fischer 2006b; Fung 2015; C. S. King, Feltey, and Susel 1998). Residents regularly reported that a lack of time, relevant knowledge, and experience contributed to ineffective participation.

These findings also reinforce the conclusions of several recent attempts to more directly examine residents' capacity to participate. Fung (2015) argued that residents must have a stake in the participation itself, the institutions through which the participation occurs, and the methods by which resident input is solicited. Residents reported that when they did not have a stake in the process they were less likely to feel effective and more likely to feel that their input was not being considered. Mandarano (2015) concludes that tools like citizen planning academies, which provide planning training and education and social networks, are extremely useful for enhancing effective resident participation. Though Somerville does not have anything directly analogous to planning academies, residents reported that they felt more effective in instances when City staff were able to provide training and education and when they were able to rely on their social networks.

Reconstituting Resident Participation

Though the challenges and recommendations from the literature correspond to many residents' experience as participants, these findings indicate that when scholars and practitioners have paid attention to what residents need to participate effectively they have done so in a way that does not sufficiently account for the ways in which residents contend with challenges and receive

support for their participation or describe the variation in experiences across different residents.

Differences Among Participants

Numerous authors argue for processes to include many different kinds of participants (Brody, Godschalk, and Burby 2003; Feldman and Khademian 2007; Quick and Feldman 2011; Johnston et al. 2011). Several argue that processes should accommodate multiple ways of understanding planning and policy concepts (Bryson et al. 2013; Feldman et al. 2006). These findings indicate that variation among residents regarding their level of education, knowledge of planning, and ability to speak English, impacted whether residents could engage in the tasks of participation, the challenges residents experienced in doing so, and the supports they needed to contend with these challenges.

Engaging in the tasks of participation

The literature describes a number of tasks and activities that residents should do that support effective participation. These include considering the impacts of and alternatives to a particular decision (Fischer and Forester 1993; Fung and Wright 2003), building consensus among participants (Innes and Booher 1999b), asking questions and sharing information (Fischer 2006a), reading and analyzing relevant information (Burby 2003), and attending public meetings and giving comments (Bryson et al. 2013; Brody, Godschalk, and Burby 2003; Cooper, Bryer, and Meek 2006).

These authors assume that residents will be able to commit the time and effort necessary to engage in these tasks and that these tasks will occur during

participation opportunities. While residents reported that these tasks supported their effective engagement and helped them contend with challenges, these findings indicate that many struggled to engage in these tasks on their own. Instead, they often engaged in them during community group meetings or together with other participants. In addition, these findings indicate that the variation between residents along education, knowledge, and language lines affected their ability to do these tasks. Residents with more planning expertise did not have to spend as much time on these tasks as those without the same experience.

Accessing support for participation

Many authors claim that the process itself will provide most of the support residents need to engage effectively. For example, they argue that participation can build particular civic skills, like public speaking (Healey 1993; Fischer and Forester 1993; Nabatchi 2010; Pateman 1970; Quick and Feldman 2011), educate them about their government (Burby 2003; Fung 2003; Sjoberg, Mellon, and Peixoto 2017), and teach residents how to analyze and debate planning topics (Healey 1993, 1993; Fung 2003), among other things (Bryson et al. 2013; Fung and Wright 2003; Nabatchi 2010). These authors assume that residents will gain, or access, the information and skills that support effective participation during the course of, or as a result of, participating.

These findings indicate that, while residents reported learning some of these skills and gaining more knowledge about government and planning, they did not access these benefits from the participation process. Instead, residents were more likely to gain these benefits from their community groups and through

relationships with other participants. Moreover, when residents attended participation opportunities without having gained technical knowledge or having practiced public speaking, they reported being intimidated or not being able to understand the content of the meeting. This suggests that the assumption that individual engagement in a decision-making process will support residents' effective participation is not reflective of and potentially damaging to residents' participation.

Differences in expectations in participation

Numerous scholars argue that it is important for participants and practitioners to share an understanding of the context and goals of a process, the information being discussed, and what the participants' roles will be (Bryson et al. 2013; Cooper, Bryer, and Meek 2006; Fung 2015; Sjoberg, Mellon, and Peixoto 2017). Though these authors acknowledge how difficult this is, they imply that setting these expectations is largely the role of municipal staff, or whoever is facilitating the engagement. While the findings affirm the importance of common goals, they also suggest that adopting a municipal-led, top-down strategy may, among other things, cause residents to feel as if the municipality had already made their decision, thereby preventing municipal staff and residents from reaching a shared understanding. One potential alternative to this top-down planning strategy is advocacy planning, where planners support residents in proposing their own ideas to planning decision-making bodies and negotiating their own plans with municipalities (Davidoff 1965).

In addition, these findings indicate that this difference in expectations impacted the relationship that residents had with the City and the strategies they pursued when interacting with City staff and attending meetings. Though several authors have explored the impact of expectations on participation strategies, particularly regarding context and shared understanding (Bratt and Reardon 2013; Fung 2006, 2015; Sjoberg, Mellon, and Peixoto 2017), few have addressed how these expectations impact relationships. The findings indicate that residents adapted to these differences by utilizing strategies that were decidedly not deliberative.

The Role of the Community Group

The participation literature cited in this report does not explore in depth the role of community groups in resident participation, instead focusing on individual resident participants. Numerous scholars outside the participation literature argues that community organizations support civic involvement more broadly by educating and informing their members, building relationships among members, and transferring knowledge and social capital (Bratt and Reardon 2013; Cohen and Rogers 1992; Mandarano 2015; Putnam 2001; Roberts 2004; Skocpol and Fiorina 1999). The findings suggest that this research is extremely relevant for better understanding resident participation. Residents engaged in the majority their preparation tasks, like research, analysis, and information gathering and sharing, with members of their community groups and during community group meetings. Community groups also facilitated building the relationships and providing the emotional support that residents relied on to feel effective.

The Importance of Relationships

Residents received a significant amount of support for their effective participation from the relationships that they formed with other participants and with City officials. Several authors have argued that strong relationships are important to effective participation because they can reduce instability and conflict and promote problem solving (Bryson et al. 2013; Feldman and Khademian 2007; Forester 2006). Mostly, authors imply the importance of relationships through the recommendations or participation techniques, like deliberation, that they adopt (Fischer 2006a; Fischer and Forester 1993; Innes and Booher 2003) For example, participants must interact with each other in order to test collectively held values (Healey 1993). When authors explicitly address relationships, they typically focus on the impact that negative or conflictual relationships between participants and between participants and City staff have on effective participation.

Though residents reported experiencing significant levels of conflict in certain decision-making opportunities and among certain community groups, they also indicated that they relied on their relationships both with other participants and planning department staff for a significant amount of support. These supports included such things as increased education and awareness and assistance with tasks like analyzing documents, which, as discussed earlier, the literature suggests they would attain through participation itself. Residents relied on relationships as vehicles for learning and sharing not only with other residents but also with City

officials. The importance of relationships for providing these types of supports is generally absent from the participation literature.

Municipal Planning Staff

The literature is dominated by staff perspectives and many of the recommendations that authors make are directed towards staff and intended to guide them in facilitating engagement (Hafer and Ran 2016). Many authors also identify the struggles that municipal staff encounter, like lack of time and money, when trying to facilitate resident engagement (Brody, Godschalk, and Burby 2003; Bryson et al. 2013; Burby 2003; Cooper 1979; Fung 2003; C. S. King, Feltey, and Susel 1998). Municipal staff were familiar with the struggles and challenges that residents experienced when participating but often did not have the capacity to respond to them how they would like. These recommendations, however, do not fully account for how the City's relationships with residents might affect their ability to respond appropriately. City staff were reluctant to fully rely on community organizations when facilitating resident engagement. The combination of their reluctance and their limited capacity hampered their ability to fully respond to some of the challenges discussed earlier.

Revisiting Empowerment

Fung and Wright describe Empowered Participatory Governance as a type of participatory design that devolves decision-making authority, and as such legitimacy, to local units while building and maintaining formal accountability relationships with a central authority, which provides training, support, and authorization to support local units making decisions. (Fung and Wright 2003,

15). This relationship and provision of resources has the potential to help participants more effectively contend with the capacity challenges they experience. Though none of the groups in this study were truly empowered, EPG is a useful lens through which to view the impact that receiving legitimacy from official government agencies has on a group's experience with participation.

These findings indicate that the relationship and resources that City-legitimized groups enjoyed did not necessarily ensure their effective participation. Even though City-legitimized groups received important supports, such as information, education, and money, they experienced significant challenges to their members' engagement which hampered the group's overall effectiveness. In contrast, community-legitimized groups were able to amplify their residents' capacity for effective engagement despite the fact that they often did not receive the same kind of support from the City.

Differences in the source of a group's legitimacy may have affected how community groups responded to the challenges their members experienced while participating in several respects. First, empowerment change how groups experienced and received authorization for providing input which in turn created differing expectations of what this authorization should entail and affected members' ability to participate effectively. Second, because more empowered community groups were dependent on the City for authorization to provide input and for financial and educational resources, they were unable to utilize more confrontational participation strategies to influence decisions.

Authorization and Effectiveness

Though none of the city-legitimized groups were given final decision-making authority by the City, they each were asked to provide input, which the City would consider, on a particular decision, which legitimized their existence. Despite the city conferring this responsibility, and providing appropriate resources, these groups struggled to function effectively. For example, the CAC's recommendations were ultimately ignored by the SRA, compromising any notion of decision-making authority that members may have had and relegating their participation to the lower levels of Arnstein's ladder. In addition, because residents were recruited or appointed by the City to these groups their overarching goals were decided by the City prior to any community involvement. This made it much more difficult for the City and community groups to come into agreement about what participation would accomplish and how feedback would be considered. These differences in expectations, particularly when the City's actions contradicted the goals they set for the groups, generated conflict and confusion during meetings and deteriorated the relationships and trust between members and City staff.

In contrast, community-legitimized groups were successful in influencing decision-making processes in several ways, despite not being conferred any kind of decision-making authority by the City. The goal setting and collective tasks and activities that AHOC, Union United, and USN members engaged in provided a clear path for their participation and helped members understand what their roles in each of those groups would be. The goals of these groups also provided

them with legitimacy, a concrete mission, or mandate, for what they wanted their input to accomplish. Because of this, the expectations that these groups had regarding their input came from within the group, not from the City, and was based on their overarching goals and not on those of the City. Though these groups certainly experienced frustration with their feedback being ignored by the City, it did not seem to compromise their authorization to provide input, undermine their ability to set and follow through on their own goals, or generate conflict among members.

These differences between groups based on the source of their legitimacy suggests that just a little recognition from official government agencies is sometimes worse than no recognition at all. Receiving legitimacy and recognition from the City can be harmful when there is not a shared expectation of what that recognition and legitimacy actually means. Being able to determine and follow through on their own expectations and goals for participation enabled less empowered groups to overcome having their authorization compromised in a way that empowered groups were not able to.

Flexibility and Accountability

Fung and Wright stress the importance of the formal linkages between authorities and local units through which authorities can provide important training and resources and local units can hold them accountable for their commitments. These structures necessarily cause local units to depend on authorities, both for the authorization discussed earlier and for the resources they need to function. These findings suggest that while EPG's dependency

relationship provided real advantages to groups (like resources), it also sometimes compromised their ability to deal with challenges to their authorization and legitimacy or changes in their relationship with the City.

When groups did not have to rely on the City for these supports they appeared to have more flexibility in the ways in which they could choose to engage in a process and were better able to hold the City accountable for its actions. This enabled these groups to change their participation strategies based on, for example, how supportive the City was of their goals or whether a particular decision-making opportunity allowed for public much public input. Members of community-legitimized groups were able to attend public meetings and protest in support of a goal without potentially undermining their accountability relationships with City staff. The ability to do this proved crucial to these groups' ultimate successes and helped them overcome those instances when their feedback was ignored or their authorization compromised.

Lastly, these findings suggest that the strength and quality of the relationships among participants may be the most important factor regarding the success of EPG and other participatory designs. Fung and Wright assert that EPG relies on relationships *between* participants and authority figures to spread information, authorize decision-making. When it was not possible to form these relationships, or they deteriorated or encountered the barriers discussed in the previous chapter, groups struggled to be effective in their participation because their members were not able to discern the role of the group in the process. Fung and Wright make clear that the relationships that they argue are important for

EPG are iterative, negotiated and re-formed again and again. Any participatory process that hopes to utilize EPG in its design should bear this repetition in mind.

Chapter 7: Limitations, Directions for Future Research, and Recommendations

In this chapter I summarize the primary findings of this thesis and briefly review their contribution scholarship in public participation. I then discuss the limitations of this research and identify opportunities for future research. Finally, I conclude by making recommendations for how various stakeholders and utilize these findings in their practice.

Summary

This research provides an important step towards better understanding residents' capacity to engage in participatory planning processes. These findings suggest that residents in Somerville experienced significant barriers to their capacity to participate in public meetings and other decision-making opportunities, such as lack of information and time and confusion regarding how their input would be used. Though many of these challenges were identified in the literature, there was not a coherent description of how residents dealt with these issues as participants in planning processes. The findings indicate that residents engaged in a variety of tasks aimed at contending with the challenges they experienced, including gathering and sharing information, analyzing data collectively, and setting community group goals.

The findings of this thesis also indicate that some of the literature's assumptions about resident engagement, namely that participation itself provides residents the tools necessary to participate, do not reflect the reality of resident engagement in Somerville. The findings indicate that residents gained significant

support for their effective participation from their community groups, including emotional support, information, and knowledge. This finding is significant as the role of community groups in supporting residents in participation is underdeveloped in prior research.

This thesis indicates that the source of a group's legitimacy and their access to city resources affects groups' ability to participate effectively. These findings indicating that there were significant differences between groups that received legitimacy and resources from the City and those that received legitimacy from the community and no resources from the City. These findings also suggested that there may be important advantages to community-based legitimacy. Lastly, these findings suggest that, while legitimacy was an important factor in the differences between groups, there may have been other influential differences, such as the size of a group, the composition of its membership, and the presence of professional staff.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

At the outset of this thesis project, I set some important boundaries regarding what this project aims to address. This thesis describes the experiences of residents who are already involved in decision-making opportunities in order to better understand their capacity for meaningful participating. This narrow focus limited this project in several specific ways, though each of these limitations also presents an opportunity for additional research.

Methodological Limitations

Eckstein's (1975) least likely crucial case study methodology that I adopted for this thesis, while helpful for describing resident participation in Somerville, limits the ability of these findings to be applied outside of this community in several ways. First, truly crucial cases are extremely rare, especially when the literature they investigate is as diffuse and multitudinous as the participation literature discussed in this thesis. Unsurprisingly, participation in Somerville does not fully correspond to how participation is described in the literature. Second, because this thesis focuses on only a single case, the insights gained from this research must be applied carefully outside cases. Because Somerville has so many opportunities for community participation in planning processes, this thesis cannot fully account for participation struggles in communities with fewer opportunities and where municipal planning staff is less committed to engaging with the public. Future research should investigate these issues in less supportive contexts and compare these findings across several cases for more thorough and generalizable results.

Changes in Union Square and Beyond

This thesis involved the perspectives of 29 participants, five of whom were municipal planning department staff, and was limited to a specific period of time. There are many, many more individuals and staff members who have and continue to participate in decision-making opportunities in Union Square whose insight, opinions, and knowledge would have provided useful insight. At a certain point, it became necessary to stop interviewing new participants and analyzing new decisions and community groups. Because of that, this thesis does

not consider the work of the Union Square Neighborhood Council, formed in December, 2018, or discuss any of the decisions and public meetings regarding Union Square's development that occurred after this thesis began in February, 2018. These changes surely all have implications for participation in decision-making but were unfortunately beyond the scope of this project. Future research should examine these developments.

Participation Strategies and Outcomes

In *Beyond the Ladder*, Bratt and Reardon (2013) suggest that future research should focus on "how various resident participation strategies, pursued in a range of contextual environments, result in particular outcomes," (378). Though this thesis provides some insight into this question, additional research should focus on linking residents' capacity to participate to particular participation strategies and outcomes of processes. For example, citizen petitions were successful in codifying requirements for developers to invest in additional affordable housing and employment opportunities. However, it is not possible to draw conclusions about the effectiveness and applicability of the citizen petition strategy to other issues. Future research should focus on connecting the City's practices and decision-making processes to particular outcomes.

Legitimacy and Differences Among Groups and Residents

This thesis represents an initial exploration of how differences in the source of legitimacy impacts residents' experiences while participating in decision-making processes. These conclusions however, are limited by the fact that none of the groups that I focus on in this research fully match Fung and

Wright's description of EPG. As a result, it was difficult to discern the differences between the impact of particular group members, like professional organizers, and the sources of a group's authority. Future research should allow for delineating these differences more clearly through comparative study.

Though the source of a group's legitimacy appears to have been very important, there were several other important factors that may have influenced how community groups participated, including their size, composition of membership, the diversity of group's membership, whether they had professional staff, the type of process they were participating in, and so forth. These factors are all potential areas for further research. In addition, there appears to have been significant interactions *between* groups, like the factions in the USNCWG, that may have affected their ability to participate effectively. Likewise, power-dynamics within groups also impacted their members' experiences with participation. Future research should examine these phenomena as well.

Non-White Voices

Though the residents I interviewed represented many different life experiences, knowledge levels, and community groups, I interviewed very few people of color and immigrants for this project. Two of the people of color that I interviewed in this thesis had significant capacity challenges because of work and family obligations, which prevented them from sustaining engagement. This reflects both the demographic make-up of residents who participated in the City's decision-making opportunities I focused on for this thesis. It also parallels the large-scale exclusion of people of color from political life in the US. Considering

that Somerville has a significant immigrant population and is more than 30% non-white, this missing perspective is an important limitation to these findings. It is critical that the perspectives and experiences of people of color who are participants be documented in order to ensure their ability to engage.

Recommendations

Despite the aforementioned limitations of this research, my findings suggest important practical lessons for resident participation in policy and planning decisions, both in Somerville and more generally. The recommendations that follow pertain to residents, community groups, City staff.

Recommendations for Individual Residents

Most of the residents I interviewed felt that community groups were essential to their effective participation. Residents should consider joining a community group if they want to feel more effective in their participation. However, several residents had negative experiences in their community groups. Residents should take particular care to avoid groups with negative group dynamics and, when that is not possible, develop strategies for mitigating them, like forming relationships with other group members and limiting the time they spend per week on work for their group.

The struggles these groups experienced illuminate recommendations about how to form new community groups as well. In particular, if residents are interested in forming their own community groups they may want to formulate a clear mission or set of goals regarding impact they would like to incur as a result of their formation.

Recommendations for Community Groups

Community groups that did not have legitimacy from the City may want to pursue strategies that account for the City resources they lack. For example, these community groups may want to consider raising money to pay for, among other things hiring staff and/or professional facilitators, providing translation, printing documents and agendas, planning education sessions or other trainings, and renting meeting space. Professional organizers, facilitators, and community planners are all potential staff positions that could bolster a community group's effectiveness during decision-making opportunities. Grant programs and outside funders may be ideal for providing the funding for these suggestions. In Massachusetts, the Citizen Planner Training Collaborative provides training for residents and community groups regarding land use issues, zoning, and other planning topics.⁴ City-legitimized community groups may also benefit from these recommendations, especially if they can reallocate their existing resources.

In the (likely) event that community groups are not able to raise their own funds, they may want to focus on strategies that bolster their existing activities. Knowing what tasks members have found helpful for addressing the various capacity struggles can help groups prioritize their activities, advocate for better resources, request more educational support, or do whatever they feel best addresses a particular capacity challenge. In order to bolster their capacity to do research and analyze documents, community groups may want to consider pursuing relationships and support from area universities (like Tufts).

⁴ <http://masscptc.org/training/training.html>

In order to make existing information more accessible and easier to share, community groups may want to create one location online, either in an email listserv, in a free online database like DropBox, or on their websites (if they have one) where residents can access the documents they need to read and understand for particular decisions. Community groups that have already implemented this recommendation, like Union Square Neighbors and the CAC, can serve as models.

Community groups might want to structure their meetings to make sure they have time to review important documents as a group, recap the events of previous meetings, and set goals for their future engagement. Community groups may also want to demand, or at least advocate for, access to information in a timely manner during City planning processes. These community groups may also want to recruit members with specific knowledge or experience to fill gaps in their group's ability to analyze documents. Community groups may want to formulate questions for public hearings that are aimed at addressing specific capacity struggles they are experiencing. Groups that receive their legitimacy from the community may want to consider inviting City staff to meetings more often in order to gain some of the benefits associated with their attendance at meetings.

There were significant challenges to effective participation when community groups could not discern if or how their feedback would be used. Community groups may want to pursue this information where possible and demand that the City be more clear regarding their use of feedback. In addition,

city-legitimated community groups may want to advocate for a memorandum of understanding, or similar agreement, between them and the City. This may help clarify the exact roles that community groups will have in a particular decision-making process.

Lastly, relationships among community members featured prominently in most of the activities and tasks residents engaged in. Community groups may want to provide time during meetings for residents to meet each other and form relationships. This could include time for socializing and conversation at the beginning of the meeting or using icebreakers to introduce members to each other. In addition, groups may want to include refreshments during their meetings.

Recommendations for Municipal Staff

There many fairly obvious ways that the City could alter its approach to facilitating resident engagement. These include providing financial resources to groups, analyzing and interpreting information in-house and subsequently making it available to residents, and teaching educational sessions about particular planning processes and documents.

In the face of their own limited resources and time, however, these become exceptionally difficult to follow through on. Orienting City staff's resident engagement work towards existing community groups may address these limitations without adding significantly more work. This could include setting monthly appointments with particular community groups and/or some of their members, sharing new documents and decisions with groups as they are available, and directing new participants to any or all of the appropriate community groups

meetings. City staff may also want to explore ensuring that public meetings, charrettes, open houses, and other engagement opportunities overlap with as few community groups as possible. In addition, the City may want to ensure that relevant documents and information (like the linkage fee nexus study) are made available to community groups as soon as possible before relevant meetings.

Cultivating more intentional relationships with the existing community groups in Union Square may ease some of the burden on City staff for facilitating resident engagement. Though strong relationships with individual participants are also extremely important, community groups may sometimes be better positioned to engage in community outreach because they regularly engage in outreach tasks already. This could allow City staff to focus on other tasks that support resident engagement, like analyzing information. In addition, many community groups lacked good quality meeting space. The City should consider allowing community groups to utilize meeting spaces in municipal buildings for free as well as implementing an easy-to-use online scheduling system. The Somerville Public Library may be a useful example to follow in this regard.

Though recognition may not be a panacea, there seem to be some benefits to legitimizing community groups in decision-making processes. Recognizing independent community groups, especially those such as the Union Square Neighborhood Council, as opposed to convening new groups that are dependent on the City, may bypass some of the issues that groups like the CAC and LOCUS encountered. However, without shared expectations of legitimacy or responsibility, these groups will likely struggle to be effective in their input and

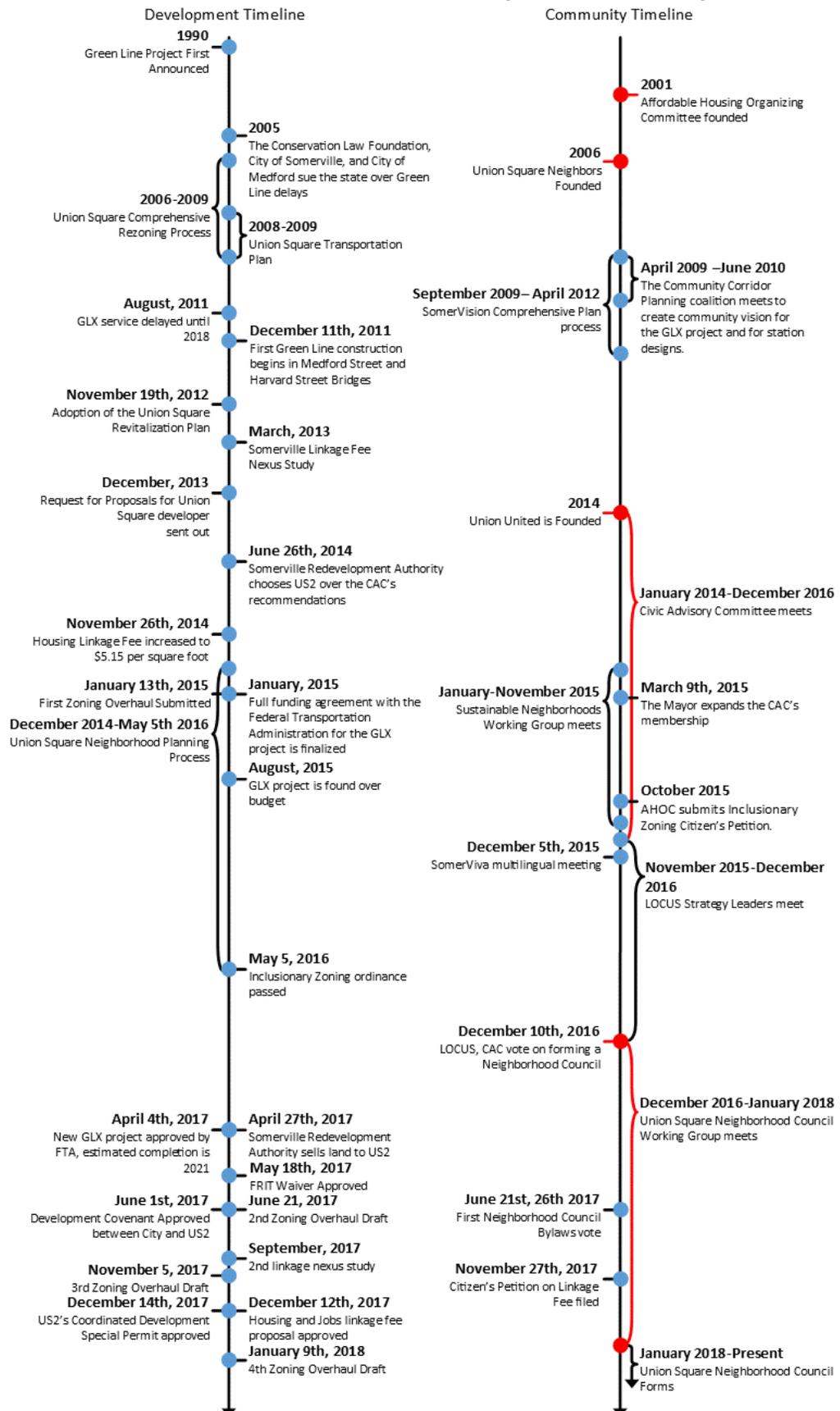
may not benefit from their empowerment at all. City may want to take extra care to clearly state the expectations of residents' participation and how their feedback will be used. Failure to do so could result a deterioration of relationships and trust among residents and City staff and hamper the ability of community groups connected to the City to flexibly contend with some of the capacity challenges they experience.

Parting Thoughts

As participation in Somerville continues to evolve, so too will the capacity struggles residents experience during participation. While these recommendations represent potential ways in which residents, community groups, and City staff can address these struggles, more work must be done to improve participation if residents and City staff are as committed to engagement as they seem. My hope is that this thesis' findings and recommendations provide a useful starting for this future work.

Appendix I: Timeline of Union Square Development

Timeline of Green Line Related Development in Union Square



Appendix II: Interview Questions

For residents:

1. Could you describe what effective participation means for you?
Specifically, think about what activities you do when you participate effectively.
2. Can you describe some examples of when you feel like you were able to participate effectively (i.e. do the things you just mentioned) in decisions about the development in Union Square?
3. Can you describe some examples of when you feel like you were **not** able to participate effectively (i.e. do the things you talked about earlier) in decisions about the development in Union Square?
4. What do you think would help you participate more effectively/do the activities you mentioned earlier (i.e. convey your opinions and preferences)?

For municipal staff:

1. Could you describe what effective resident participation means for you. Think about specifically what activities residents do when they participate effectively.
2. What do you think was instrumental to the more effective examples of resident participation you described?
3. What are some challenges you have faced in doing this work and how have you dealt with them?
4. What do you think would help make resident participation more effective?

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