

# Opinion: PlanBTV moves South End forward

Mayor Miro Weinberger 11:54 a.m. EDT September 10, 2015



(Photo: Free Press File)

This weekend Burlington will again experience the mix of art, business, food and friendship that is the South End Art Hop. Since 1992, the Art Hop has emerged as one of our most popular, quintessential Burlington events, and this year's arrival of the event is a good opportunity to take stock of the planBTV South End process and the future of this vibrant, evolving and unique part of Burlington.

The planBTV South End effort was designed as a community conversation about the South End to inform an engaging, accessible plan to guide public and private decisions and investments. The process has been led by the independent Planning and Zoning Department. Through a highly-competitive \$100,000 National Endowment of the Arts grant, Burlington City Arts, under the leadership of Executive Director Doreen Kraft,

brought robust and innovative engagement to the process through a series of arts-based projects to reach a diverse constituency of neighbors, businesses, makers, artists, non-profits and visitors.

The city undertook this effort out of a belief that proactive planning holds the promise of giving us more control over the future of the South End and the ability to protect what we love about it during a time of growth and change. The planBTV South End effort has been underway for over a year, and, as hoped, has focused important issues and sparked new ideas. The draft report was issued in June and remains open for public comment until Oct. 1.

The draft report has prompted an important and healthy debate about the future of the South End, particularly over the question of allowing some forms of housing in the Enterprise Zone.

I have been open to the idea of introducing mixed-use development that includes housing in carefully selected areas of the Enterprise Zone for a variety of reasons.

Our housing shortage is one of our largest social challenges, resulting in a chronic vacancy rate of approximately 1 percent with the average Burlingtonian spending 44 percent of his or her income on rent.

Infill housing as part of mixed-use redevelopment has the potential to transform some of the large, underutilized surface parking lots in the South End into vibrant, pedestrian and bike-oriented, sustainable neighborhoods.

From the start, planners on this project have understood that the Enterprise Zone's restrictions against housing have allowed industry, the arts and entrepreneurial spirit to flourish over the past two decades and slowed gentrification that has the potential to displace much of what we love about the South End, and only limited introduction of housing has been contemplated. However, the focus and concern about housing is distracting the much-needed, much broader discussion of the future of the South End. Thus, after listening carefully to this debate, I will not support a final plan that recommends adding housing as an allowable use in the Enterprise Zone.

Resolving the debate about housing will bring more focus to the many other important and exciting recommendations in the plan that will require consensus and considerable collective action to implement.

Beyond zoning, much more work will need to be done soon to protect the arts, makers and entrepreneurial uses that give today's South End so much life. The plan includes numerous recommendations and models of co-operative and non-profit ownership, incentives, and city support that have protected and expanded these uses in other cities.

The plan re-envisions the abandoned and contaminated Barge Canal as a large, accessible open space. The plan could help us start to lay the groundwork for this long-term transformation.

We will need incremental changes to the Enterprise Zone for the proposed South End City Market to be built and for other desirable improvements to be achieved. This kind of change is consistent with past additions to the Enterprise Zone that made it possible for Dealer.com to locate on Pine Street, and that recently made ArtsRiot an allowable use.

The plan will benefit from your letting us know what you believe is important, exciting and challenging about the draft document. I look forward to enjoying all that the South End has to offer during this weekend's Art Hop and for many years to come.

Miro Weinberger of Burlington is the mayor of Burlington.

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