

## NEWS

# UNCIVIL DISCOURSE: TEMPERS FLARE AT LYNN HOUSING MEETING

BY THOMAS GRILLO | June 14, 2018



*The Munroe hi-rise meeting at 10 Church St. ended when the crowd got vocal. (Owen O'Rourke)*

LYNN — A contentious meeting over plans for a luxury high-rise apartment building in the downtown ended abruptly 40 minutes after it started Wednesday night.

More than 100 residents packed the Lynn Housing Authority & Neighborhood Development (LHAND) conference room at the invitation of Ward 5 Councilor Dianna Chakoutis, whose district includes Monroe Street where the \$80 million project has been proposed, and James Cowdell, executive director of the Economic Development & Industrial Corp. (EDIC), the city's development bank.

But within minutes of the developer's brief presentation, things got out of hand as some in the crowd talked over Cowdell and Michael Procopio, co-owner of Procopio Enterprises Inc., whose Saugus firm intends to start construction on the 10-story project later this year.

Resident Marsha Douyon asked Procopio if he would give back to the community considering they are in line for up to \$2 million in tax credits from the state.

In response, Cowdell said the 29,000-square-foot lot is billed \$3,000 in real estate taxes annually as a community garden. But when the proposed apartment building opens, the number will be closer to \$1 million, cash that could be spent any number of things to improve the city, such as schools and parks, he said.

But Douyon continued to speak, raising questions about what will happen to the "critters" who live in the garden, while Cowdell pleaded with her to allow him to finish.

Cowdell issued a warning that if she did not stop talking in 10 seconds, the meeting would be shut down. She continued and the meeting was ended amid chants of "Who's city? Our city!"

## **The project**

Before the chaos, Procopio described the "as of right project" that will feature 189 apartments with average rents in the \$2,000 to \$2,200 range, 16,000 square feet of retail, and an underground garage with 45 parking spaces.

The lower floor will mirror the architectural style of other buildings on the street with traditional details. The upper levels will feature glass, metal and paneling.

Resident Mary Sweeney said the project site, a community garden, is already vibrant.

"I have no desire to part with it," she said.

Cowdell said the property owner has generously allowed the garden for years at no cost, but he has decided to sell.

"Our goal is to find another home for the garden," he said.

A Munroe Street resident asked about construction noise when the project gets underway. While some noise is inevitable, Procopio said they plan to use electric cranes instead of diesel to keep the noise to a minimum.

He also said they will make every effort to manage the disruption to Munroe Street when it comes to delivery of materials to the site.

## **Affordable housing near the site**

Teena Bruton, a Boston Street resident, asked Procopio if the building would include any affordable units. When he said the project will be 100 percent market rate, she asked “What will happen to our children and grandchildren? They can’t afford to live in Lynn. I’m ticked. We don’t come first anymore.”

But Cowdell made the point that while this project does not contain affordable units, several projects nearby do, including Washington Street’s Gateway Residences on Washington, where 53 of the 71 units are listed as affordable.

David Gass, director of the neighborhood group Highland Coalition, asked Procopio if he would contribute \$250,000 towards an affordable housing fund. Procopio declined.

Charles Gaeta, LHAND executive director and chairman of EDIC said at least four affordable projects are in the pipeline in Lynn.

Eileen Jonah, a real estate agent at Annmarie Jonah Realtors, said the nation is in the midst of a housing crisis.

“It’s understandable that affordable housing is a struggle, but no city is more affordable than Lynn on the North Shore,” she said to groans in the crowd. “I’m telling you the truth, if you go outside of Lynn, everything is much more expensive...It’s difficult no doubt, but I don’t think you can vilify the people who came to talk to you tonight.”

Cowdell called the housing crisis a regional problem, noting surrounding communities of Swampscott, Lynnfield, Saugus, and Marblehead have very few affordable units compared to Lynn.

“No one wants to talk about these places that don’t do their fair share,” he said.

While some in the crowd insisted Lynn natives cannot afford these luxury units, Procopio disagreed.

“In 2016, we did 42 units at Needhams Landing in Lynn, it was fully leased in four weeks and 90 percent of the tenants were Lynn residents,” he said. “At Ironwood Apartments in Lynn we are pre-leasing market rate units, five have been leased and four of them are from Lynn.”

Following the meeting, Isaac Simon Hodes, a member of the New Lynn Coalition, said residents are upset.

“If people had gotten some input on this big tax break, maybe it would have been a little less hostile,” he said.

Cowdell said the Wednesday night meeting was a first.

“I have has been to more than 300 meeting since 1987 and have never had to stop a meeting because of a disruptive audience,” he said. “Many of the protesters were among the group of people who, two years ago, disrupted a tour held for 100 developers whom we were trying to convince to invest in the city. Sadly, this small group of people is trying to hold the city hostage by dictating what type of developments can and can’t be built.”

Chakoutis was disappointed over how the meeting turned out.

“I understand their concerns over affordable housing,” she said. “But this developer can build the project as of right and was not obligated to do anything. They were giving the community common courtesy because that’s the kind of contractor they are.”



### Thomas Grillo

Thomas Grillo is an award-winning business reporter who has worked at Boston's major newspapers covering real estate trends such as the emergence of Assembly Square in Somerville and chronicling the growth of Boston's Seaport District. In Lynn, Thomas covers City Hall and commercial real estate development including the transformation of Lynn's waterfront into a mixed-use neighborhood. Follow him on Twitter [@BosBizThomas](https://twitter.com/BosBizThomas).

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