

Council leans toward easing of shadow law, despite critics



HANDEL ARCHITECTS

A rendering of Millennium Partners' proposal for a skyscraper on the Winthrop Square Garage site in downtown Boston.

By [Tim Logan](#) | GLOBE STAFF APRIL 25, 2017

Mayor Martin J. Walsh's bid to get state law revised so a skyscraper can be built on Winthrop Square was hammered at a City Council hearing on Monday, but the measure appears to have enough support to pass and move on to the State House.

Walsh needs regulations that restrict shadows on Boston Common and the Public Garden eased before a plan to build a 775-foot tower can move forward. The City Council, Legislature, and the governor would have to approve the changes.

Supporters and opponents of Walsh's effort crammed into the City Council chambers for a hearing that ran more than five hours. The crowd — many of them wearing buttons and hoisting signs, either for or against the proposal — heard several councilors blast the process that led to the complex legislation. But most members suggested they would back the plan, chiefly for the sake of the \$153 million that Millennium Partners, the developer, is offering to pay the city to buy the shuttered Winthrop Square Garage.

“This is a no-brainer,” Councilor Sal LaMattina said. “This is just a good deal for the City of Boston.”

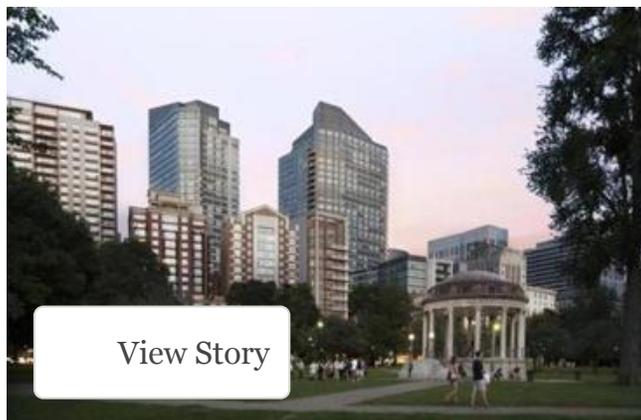
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The Walsh administration has earmarked much of the money to upgrade Boston Common and Franklin Park and help renovate two public housing projects. The pledge to spread the wealth to some of the city's outer neighborhoods appeared to win support from several councilors.



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Comments We don't have enough information to know if this proposed tower and legislative compromise is the best solution.

Walsh pitches deal on Winthrop Sq. tower, shadows

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Andrea Campbell, who represents Dorchester and Mattapan, said she would be glad to see the proceeds from a downtown high-rise invested in Franklin Park, which lies in her district.

“I see this very much as an equity issue,” she said.

Yet three councilors said they objected to the plan, which was crafted during months of talks between the Boston Planning & Development Agency, Millennium Partners, parks and neighborhood groups, and city and state lawmakers.

The discussions took place with the clock ticking on the city's deal with Millennium, said Councilor Tito Jackson, and would result in a law being rewritten for the benefit of just one developer.

“You want us to open a 20-year-old law, let one project through, and then close it again,” said Jackson, who is challenging Walsh in the November mayoral election. “That to me is — pun intended — a shady deal.”

City Council president Michelle Wu criticized Walsh for rushing through a bill without enough input from all affected parties.

“I don't think there's enough urgency to justify ramming this through,” she said.

Josh Zakim, whose district includes the Back Bay, Beacon Hill, and Mission Hill, also opposes the measure.

Other critics, including the Friends of the Public Garden, repeated concerns that the deal would set a precedent that would allow future projects to cast shadows on the parks if they bring new funds to the city.

“Would a future mayor turn down \$50 million in one-time revenue in exchange for a little shadow?” asked Liz Vizza, executive director of the Friends. “This deal provides that blueprint for the future.”

“

*‘That to me is — pun intended
— a shady deal.’*

Tito Jackson, city councilor and mayoral candidate, on a plan for rewriting state law that he says would benefit one developer

Representatives of landowners and developers in the Back Bay voiced concern about a clause that would make it harder to build a tall building in the neighborhood that casts much new shadow on Copley Square. While zoning approved last year contained such restrictions, Walsh is now open to having them put into state law — meaning they could not be undone through zoning variances, which the city often grants to developers.

Leaders of several neighborhood groups and churches and dozens of union construction workers showed up to testify in support of the project, and executives from Millennium stressed the benefits the project would bring to the entire city.

After giving two hours of testimony, the BPDA’s director, Brian Golden, said he was optimistic the City Council would support the mayor’s plan, with a vote coming as soon as Wednesday. The measure could move on to the Legislature. Golden is hoping for a vote by state lawmakers by the end of the session this summer.

Golden acknowledged that Walsh still needs to win support on Beacon Hill, where at least two Boston lawmakers have voiced concerns about the plan. More tweaks could yet be made in negotiations there.

But on Monday, Golden said that he wanted to make sure he won over the 13-member City Council first.

“Right now,” he told councilors, “we’re focused on you.”

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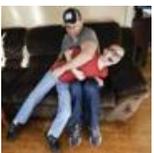


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