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Mayor Janey engages Hyde Park at community forum

Mary Ellen Gambon
Staff Reporter

More than 150 people attended a virtual Hyde Park community forum with Acting Mayor Kim Janey on Monday, May 3, where she discussed a range of topics from creating a community health center to building “a joy agenda” citywide.

The hour-long discussion, organized by the West Fairmount Hill Community Group (WFHCG), was moderated by the two elected officials who call West Fairmount home – State Rep. Rob Consalvo and District 5 City Councilor Ricardo Arroyo. It was an opportunity to get to know the new mayor and pose questions

to her on topics including development, crime, business support and ways to promote the arts.

“We love our community, and we want you to learn to love us, too,” said Marcia Kimm Jackson, the WFHCG co-chair.

“I already do,” Janey replied.

“Boston is the city that raised me,” Janey said, noting her career in education advocacy before running for the City Council in 2017 and becoming its president in January 2020. “I learned a lot here and I love my city. If I didn’t love my city, I wouldn’t fight so hard for my city.”

She noted that, although people are ready to return to

normal after surviving the COVID-19 pandemic, normal never was equitable for many Bostonians.

“For me, it is just very clear that we cannot go back to normal,” Janey said. “I want to remind folks that that normal is a quarter-of-a-million-dollar wealth gap between Black households and white households. That normal is mass incarceration. That normal is a housing crisis. That normal is too many people being left out of opportunity.”

Janey addressed a number of neighborhood-specific questions that had been pre-submitted.

HP Forum
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firestorm of comments about lack of action from city officials from the participants.

“We are looking for some leadership here,” said a man identified as Chris. “I don’t come here to pick on any one official. But we don’t seem to have a handle on what’s going to happen next.”

Development was a key issue. Several people in Roslindale said abutters were not notified about the recent six-story building proposed in Roslindale Square.

“People learned about this development on social media,” said Laurie Radwin. “It has been tenuous to get information. I just want to get a better playing field. This is not unique to me and it’s not unique to Roslindale.”

Jim Kirker, the outgoing president of the Hyde Park Neighborhood Association (HPNA), agreed.

“What we’re trying to do is to put political pressure on the ZBA and the BPDA to follow

their own damn rules,” he said. “What’s the point of having a zoning code if nobody follows it? And politicians need to know that their jobs are at stake if they are not going to respond to the people that elected them.”

“I love this meeting because we all have the same issues,” added Ginny Gass, the head of the Bellevue Hill Improvement Association (BHIA).

Lisa Beatman from the Crane Ledge Woods Coalition gave a presentation on the efforts of seven area neighborhood groups and other activists who have united in an attempt to stop the development of 12 acres of a 22-acre woodland on the Hyde Park-Roslindale border. She highlighted the health, recreational and environmental benefits of preserving the only undeveloped natural resource in this area. However, she did note that the property is privately owned by Jubilee Christian Church and a 270-unit complex is currently proposed

there. Kirker read part of a letter he received from Arroyo that the church is “not willing to negotiate with any third party, including the City.”

Pat Alvarez, the head of the Southwest Boston Community Development Corporation (SWBCDC), said she was hoping that the City could go to the church with a “win-win proposal” that would preserve the land – which is what more than 120 community residents expressed at a recent meeting – while offering the church fair market value.

“I think that speaks to why we should look at the legal issues that could prevent development,” she said, noting that the property is in an environmental justice area.

Dennis Kirkpatrick of Roslindale said development is also starting to “crush the business district in Roslindale Square” because there is no parking included.

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One was regarding the Boston Housing Authority (BHA) development in Fairmount, where a question had been asked about upgrades to BHA developments and if residents were properly vetted. There has been an uptick of crime and shots fired in this area of late, according to police reports.

“On the screening around safety, I would like a little more clarity,” she said. “I would think that anyone who is in need of housing and qualifies for housing should be given a fair shot at having housing.”

“The concern was whether or not some of the people who are being implicated in these activities are being screened,” Kimm Jackson said.

Janey also said she would be supportive of creating a neighborhood health center in Hyde Park, which has suffered one of the highest rates of COVID-19 during the pandemic and did not have access to a testing site for nearly a year – with a two-week exception.

“Probably my first call would be over to the Mass League of Community Health Centers to see what could be done,” Janey said. “There certainly needs to be access to community health centers.”

Regarding education, Janey said she has a “unique lens” from her predecessors, having been born into a family of educators.

Her philosophy is like a “four-legged table,” with students, teachers, parents and administration all having a voice.

“I think there has been a lot of progress on this front,” she said, adding that student leaders have been effective in affecting change, such as in school discipline policy. “I think we do need to make sure that there is more emphasis on teaching and less on testing.”

On an elected versus an appointed School Committee, Janey said she always has supported a hybrid approach.

“I am on the record for the hybrid model with direct accountability for the mayor and for parents long before I got into this seat,” she said. “I also think that there should be greater student voice on the School Committee.”

Environmentally, the Crane Ledge proposed development of 12 of the 22 acres of woods was brought to the mayor’s attention. Janey agreed to tour the site and learn more about the proposed development at the intersection of Hyde Park and Roslindale.

Support for the arts came up, as a question arose on the possibility of outdoor venues and pop-up exhibits.

“I want to do all that we can to promote the arts,” Janey said. “Especially now, after a year of isolation, after a year of devastation. A big piece of that agenda is a joy agenda.”

She envisioned more community gardens, outdoor plaza events, paint nights and ways to bring people back together.

Overdevelopment was “the million-dollar question,” Janey said. “What I have experienced is that lots the size of a stickie or a postage stamp, people want to put a huge development on it.

“Oftentimes the development isn’t meeting the needs of the community,” she explained, noting it changes a neighborhood’s character. “Oftentimes the development that is happening isn’t meeting the needs of the residents in that area. And so you’re finding the cost of that new housing is out of reach for a lot of the folks who would like to stay in their neighborhoods.”

Janey voiced her support of the Main Streets program and the launch of the new Blocal app, which provides shoppers at participating local businesses with points toward discounts. The discount is covered by the City in order to encourage neighborhood shopping.

Trash cans, city involvement in cleanups, the availability of liquor licenses, creating teen jobs and preserving the green canopy were other topics raised.

At the end of the meeting, Janey called the forum “a productive and robust discussion.”

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Ask St. Clare for three favors, 1 business, 2 impossible. Say nine Hail Marys for nine days, with lighted candle. Pray whether you believe or not. Publish on the ninth day. Powerful novena. Say “May the Sacred Heart of Jesus be praised, adored, glorified, now and forever, throughout the whole world. Amen.” *Your request will be granted, no matter how impossible it may seem.*

—S.G.H.

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