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Mayor

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**Barney Heath**  
Director

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**MEMORANDUM**

**DATE:** July 14, 2017

**TO:** Councilor Ted Hess-Mahan, Chairman  
Members of the Zoning and Planning Committee

**FROM:** Barney Heath, Director, Department of Planning and Development  
James Freas, Deputy Director  
Rachel Blatt, Long Range Planner

**RE:** **#95-15 Discussion to consider mix of uses at Wells Avenue Office Park**  
ALD. CROSSLEY, JOHNSON, LEARY, HESS-MAHAN, DANBERG, ALBRIGHT AND BLAZAR  
requesting a discussion with the Planning Department to consider the mix of uses in the Wells Avenue Office Park, with and without a second egress to the site, pursuant to the recent MAPC study recommending a strategic introduction of retail and restaurant uses to attract and sustain healthy commercial uses, and some number of residential units sufficient to support an economically viable and vibrant mixed use environment.

**MEETING DATE:** July 17, 2017

**CC:** City Council  
Planning and Development Board  
Donnalyn Kahn, City Solicitor

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Please find attached a draft memo describing a proposed vision for the Wells Avenue area and accompanying action items. This vision was presented at a meeting of Wells Avenue property owners on July 11, 2017.



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Director

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## MEMORANDUM

**DATE:** Month xx, 2017

**TO:** Mayor Setti Warren

**FROM:** Barney Heath, Director of Planning and Development  
James Freas, Deputy Director of Planning and Development  
Kathryn Ellis, Economic Development Director

**RE:** Wells Avenue Office Park - Vision

**CC:** City Council  
Planning and Development Board  
Economic Development Committee

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The office park at Wells Avenue is Newton's only business park and one of its most critical commercial areas. Over the last few years there have been a variety of viewpoints as to the future of the Wells Avenue Office Park. Built originally in the 1970s, the office park is located in the Oak Hill village area of Newton off Nahanton Street near the Needham border. The timing is ripe to work with property owners, tenants, the City Council, and other strategic partners to advance a new vision for this office park. Wells Avenue is located in The N2 Innovation District a regional economic development initiative launched in 2014 by the City of Newton in partnership with the Town of Needham and the Newton Needham Chamber. Moving this vision forward means building on the park's existing successes and positioning it as a hub for the region's thriving innovation economy. What follows is the City of Newton Planning Department's Wells Avenue Vision, which draws from a number of different sources including the *Comprehensive Plan*, market and economic development studies of the area, the City's Housing and Transportation Strategies, and interviews and meetings with current property owners and tenants.

*Wells Avenue Office Park is an important part of the N2 Innovation District, which is in turn an integral part of the greater Boston innovation economy. Developing from its origins as a light manufacturing/office district, Wells Avenue has evolved into a home for mid-sized mature innovation companies in life sciences, information technology, professional services and other industries. These companies are attracted here to take advantage of the rich amenities of the N2 Innovation District, but choose Wells Avenue in particular for its beautiful natural environment*

*on the Charles River, the potential for large office spaces in a campus-like setting, access to Mount Ida College and other educational institutions, and mix of business supportive uses.*

This vision integrates several important citywide policy areas including transportation and economic development, and describes their application within the specific geography of the Wells Avenue Office Park. This vision recognizes that change is necessary in order to sustain and potentially grow the commercial taxes generated for the city. The vision describes a future condition that has addressed change in a way that supports the resiliency and long-term health and vibrancy of the office park.

The primary challenge facing Wells Avenue Office Park is maintaining and improving its competitive position among several business parks in the 128 corridor. In order to meet this challenge, this vision anticipates creative solutions for renewing the existing building stock and adjusting to the changing demands of office tenants. There are three critical infrastructure and economic development components necessary to supporting creative solutions:

#### What is a Vision?

A vision describes how the City views its future objective for a geographic area or a public policy issue. A vision is used to guide public policy action, from capital improvements to regulatory changes or discretionary permits. A vision does not limit public action, but is intended to describe objectives so that reasoned decisions can be made and may include a set of policies or proposed action items. Inherent to the concept of a vision is the idea of place-making; the idea of protecting and enhancing the sense of place of a given location, those unique attributes of a place that distinguish it from any other.

A vision is based in data analysis, public engagement, and wider policy objectives. A vision is not a Master Plan, which is distinguished by a more detailed description of future conditions and a more closely defined implementation path.

1. Transportation Improvements.

A second means of access/egress and enhanced transit connections are the most critical components. Bike and pedestrian oriented improvements would also be beneficial.

2. Providing Employee-Oriented Amenities in the Park.

Requires addressing zoning and deed restrictions in order to allow restaurant and retail oriented uses. Also includes enhancements of walking areas and natural features.

3. Integrating Wells Ave into the Wider N<sup>2</sup> Innovation District.

While the Needham Crossing and Needham Street components of the District are anticipated to be much more significantly mixed-use, Wells Ave's location does not lend itself to much residential or retail/restaurant development. The Park instead must be well interconnected with these other two locations, offering a different kind of workplace that is more campus like, while drawing employees who live in the other two locations. In order to realize the potential of the N<sup>2</sup> District, there must be opportunities for expansion within the Wells Ave Park.

#### Current Conditions

Wells Avenue is now home to a mix of small to medium sized businesses, innovation companies, educational institutions, medical offices, and indoor recreational facilities. The park includes approximately 1.24 million square feet of space (inclusive of the expansion of the 2 Wells Avenue building and addition of a second building at 180 Wells Avenue). With (re)development in the park subject to a restrictive covenant, Wells Avenue is presently constrained as to what redevelopment can occur within the park.

There is a restrictive covenant in place for the entire business park. The allowed uses, which were put in place in 1968, include:

- wholesale business or storage warehouse;
- telephone central office and exchange buildings;
- office and banks;

- carpenter or woodworking shops;
- glass fabrication and installation;
- laboratory, research and development;
- machine shops, plumbing and blacksmith shops, metal fabrication (light);
- molding, shaping or assembly from prepared materials;
- optical and scientific instruments and jewelry manufacturing;
- printing, publishing and reproduction establishments; and
- wearing apparel, fabrication and processing.

In addition to the use restrictions, there are also significant restrictions on building size and lot coverage. Subsequent waivers of the restrictive covenant have allowed for educational and recreational uses and small increases in the dimensional controls for specific projects.

### N2 Innovation District

In October 2014, the City of Newton partnered with the Town of Needham and the Newton-Needham Regional Chamber to launch the N<sup>2</sup> Corridor, encompassing a 500 acre area along I-95/Route 128 and straddling the border of the two municipalities. This area was recently renamed the N<sup>2</sup> Innovation District.

The partners in the N<sup>2</sup> Innovation District envisioned a place where talent, innovation, and community converge to support a vibrant, entrepreneurial economy, a model for the integration of economic development, place-making and social networks. Working together, they have secured State funding for significant transportation improvements in the area and federal funding from the Economic Development Administration (EDA) for the development of a long term strategy for the area. The Economic Development and Marketing Strategy report was completed in June 2016.

## **Proposed Actions**

### Economic Development

- Through the City of Newton Zoning Redesign project, define building types for the office park that allow for additional office square footage and height over what is currently allowed. Amend the deed restriction to reflect these changes. Allow a greater range of development to occur by-right or with a more limited review process than the current special permit process.
  - Height limits should be increased to five stories and allow for 15 foot floor heights.
  - The Open Space and Setback requirements should be reduced, while maintaining the open, campus-like feel.
- Expand the allowed uses in zoning and the deed restriction to include some retail, restaurant, and service uses on a limited basis to serve as amenities for the park.



- Allow food trucks to operate in the park.
- Allow life sciences uses by-right, with review of laboratory operations for safety/bio-hazard containment by the BioSafety Committee. **COMPLETE**
- Create opportunities to host events in the Park targeting employees. These can be both N<sup>2</sup> District oriented events as well as general entertainment or volunteering oriented activities.

#### Transportation

- Create a second means of access/egress to Wells Ave so that there are more options for entering and exiting the park. Use this new connection to enhance the connection between Mt Ida College and businesses located on Wells Ave. Begin with a transportation study to study route alternatives and cost/benefit analysis.
- Enhance pedestrian walkways within the park emphasizing safety, comfort, and aesthetic appeal. Identify opportunities to create at least one pedestrian link across the center of the park.
- Work with Conservation Commission and DCR on connections to existing trails on the lands adjacent to Wells Ave and along the Charles River. Create trail maps and attractive entrance areas.
- Coordinate with 128 Business Council and/or other transportation service providers such as Uber or Lyft, to establish a commuter shuttle or similar service connecting Wells Ave to rail transit, Needham Street, and Needham Crossing. It is essential for the competitive position of Wells Ave that it be easily accessible by alternative modes of transportation to both the MBTA rail service and, more importantly, to mixed-use residential areas on Needham Street and in Needham Crossing.
- Expand bicycle infrastructure, including protected bike lanes and bike racks, to better provide an integrated bike network connecting Wells Ave to transit and residential areas near Needham Street and Needham Crossing.
- Include bike and car share services in the Park.
- Study parking demand and consider management and supply solutions including shared parking.

#### Environment

- Improve stormwater management infrastructure in the park to protect the quality of adjacent wetlands and the Charles River.

- Create a street tree planting plan, working with property owners, so that streets and walkways are lined with trees.
- Create a landscaping guide that emphasizes natural landscaping that provides habitat and stormwater benefits in balance with more traditional lawn and planting beds. Encourage property owners to implement.
- Consider a kayak/canoe launch on the Charles.

#### Place-Making

- Consider standards for design review and signage for new development and significant exterior renovations.
- Officially brand the park (i.e. Wells Avenue Office Park, Wells Avenue Park). Include reference to the N<sup>2</sup> Innovation District.
- Create a new entranceway with clear signage and wayfinding.
- Identify opportunities for public art.



### Data / Policy Basis and Source Materials

The Wells Avenue Office Park Vision and action items identified above are based on Newton's adopted *Comprehensive Plan 2007*, local and regional data from the Camion Associates N2 Corridor study (June 2016), the Metropolitan Area Planning Council - Wells Avenue Market Study (March 2015) and interviews with property owners conducted by the Planning Department (Acting Director and Economic Development Director) in 2015 and 2016. The notes below do not represent official policy for the Wells Avenue area but are instead a sampling of the information that forms the basis for the actions identified above.

#### *N2 Innovation Corridor Economic Development & Marketing Strategy – June 2016*

- P. 2: Vision Statement – “The N2 Corridor is home to an increasing number of innovative businesses – new and established, large and small. It features a mixed-use community with retail, office space and open space integrated with housing and nearby transit, providing an affordable and desirable place to create, prosper, and adapt to an evolving business climate. The N2 Corridor will become increasingly recognized as a destination for investment by innovation-driven industries and will enhance the quality of life in the Newton-Needham region by providing employment, tax revenues, and educational entertainment, recreational and cultural amenities.”
- P. 3: Goal 1: Attract and retain innovative and growing companies in priority industries. An essential goal is to attract new innovative and growing companies to the office parks in the N2 Corridor. It makes sense to target the priority industries that are already present in order to build up the networks and interconnections that come from denser clusters of businesses that share workforce, infrastructure and other needs. However, this should not be done at the expense of existing companies, so actions to retain the companies already here are also needed.
- P. 8: Newton and Needham have experienced strong growth in jobs over the past ten years, showing 6% growth in employment from 2005 to 2015. Employment is concentrated in these five sectors: v Biotechnology and Life Sciences v Educational Services v Information Technology v Professional, Scientific and Technical Services v Real Estate.
- P. 12: Heavy traffic and a lack of sufficient public transit to the N2 Corridor are significant constraints on the area's attractiveness to younger and senior residents and new and expanding businesses. Talent recruitment and livability stand to be significantly improved if new transit options become available... but access and egress in the Wells Avenue Office Park is particularly problematic, and the reality of its single-access-point roadway is a barrier to redeveloping it in ways that are aligned with the preferences of 21st century companies and their workforces.
- P. 13: Many structures in the Wells Avenue Office Park are considered ripe for updating (and in some cases updates and expansions are underway), and the park requires other improvements—especially a second road access and dining, retail, or other amenities—to maintain existing tenants and compete successfully for new tenants going forward.
- P. 15: The priority industry areas include: v Information technology v Professional, scientific, and technical services v Biotech and life sciences.

#### *Wells Avenue Market Study, March 2015*

- P. 3: Although office space within Wells Avenue is competitive and attractive in today's market, as evidenced by low vacancies and competitive rents, the future success and competitive position of the park is in question.



- Office Potential: Opportunity is strongest for continued office uses in the park – renovated, retrofitted, redeveloped or new development – that would appeal to small- to moderate-sized tech, healthcare or professional service companies. It is not likely to attract a large corporate headquarters, which often look for highly visible locations.
  - Retail Potential: Up to 15,000 sf of convenience retail and eating establishments could potentially be supported by current office park workers. However, despite opportunities for residents living within its trade area to support additional retail, a large retail development is not likely due to poor access, lack of visibility, and competition from established retail concentrations nearby. On the other hand, should more office space be constructed or better utilized, or should residential be introduced into the park, some additional amenity and convenience retail (e.g., restaurants, convenience store) could potentially be supported.
  - Residential: Wells Avenue could accommodate some of this development [housing], and should plan to do so in a strategic manner over time. However, from a market (and smart growth perspective), other areas of Newton (e.g., Needham Street and other transit-adjacent areas) hold greater promise given housing preferences that place a premium on existing proximity to transit and walkable amenities. Wells Avenue, which lacks both, would require additional physical improvements to provide such an environment.
- P. 4: A key impediment to unlocking the market opportunities and associated development is transportation access to, from and within the park – for automobiles, bicyclists and pedestrians, and especially public transit-dependent populations. Access and capacity is significantly limited by the park’s relatively isolated location, its single point of entry, lack of public transit or shuttle service, and poor pedestrian and bike connections. Automobile traffic congestion during peak commuting hours is already a concern, in part due to ongoing construction at the nearby Kendrick Street/Route 128 interchange (2017 completion projected), but also due to the park’s single entrance.
  - P. 5 to 6: To take advantage of this market opportunity and maximize the future value of the park, MAPC believes the City should explore options to revise the deed restriction and allow for a greater mix of complementary uses. Additionally, given access and other constraints, the City should work with existing property owners and/or developers proposing new or retrofitted office, retail, or residential developments to design infrastructure and programs that will support successful, mixed-use environments. These could include, without limitation:
    - Improving transportation access to and from the park, including additional entry points or other strategies to increase capacity;
    - Advocating for or providing transportation alternatives including new MBTA bus routes, robust shuttle networks, and/or alternative solutions to better connect Wells Avenue residents and employees to their places of work or residences;
    - Where feasible, developing internal connections – auto and/or pedestrian and bicycle – to create a more walkable, efficient and connected Wells Avenue environment attractive to workers and residents;
    - Improving pedestrian and bicycle connections to nearby office and mixed-use areas (e.g., N<sup>2</sup> Needham and Newton initiative); and
    - Designing structures that encourage mixed-use, such as pedestrian-oriented environments with ground floor retail (where supportable), wide sidewalks, minimal



building setbacks, shared parking, and parking behind or on the side of buildings (or in structures), etc.

*Newton in Motion: A Transportation Strategy for Newton, December 2016*

*Newton Comprehensive Plan, 2007*

- P. 6-1: “Successful businesses serving the local community in the village centers and the growth of more broadly based organizations contributing tax revenues and jobs in commercial corridors and transportation hubs are equally important targets for assuring Newton’s future prosperity.”
- P. 6-1: “The lack of available space, high taxes, and the difficulties of the permit process have discouraged some large scale business and office operations from seeking sites along Newton’s commercial corridors. An important challenge for planning Newton’s economic future is the need to adapt to change. Newton’s economy is closely linked to that of the Greater Boston area and to its neighboring western communities.”
- P. 6-4: “The commercial corridors offer different development opportunities than village centers and different objectives may be sought for these areas. Expanding Newton’s commercial base would increase contributions toward taxes somewhat more than the cost in additional community services that commercial enterprises require. Any increase in the city’s financial resources makes it easier to support current needs and to offset any potential shortfall in the capital budget, as well as to support promising new projects, although as outlined in the Facilities and Services Element, the ability of new development to overcome the City’s basic fiscal circumstances is limited. Ultimately, potential development opportunities along the commercial corridors, if well-conceived and shaped, can increase the tax base and provide job and housing opportunities without detracting from the residential communities which they surround.”