

CITY OF NEWTON

IN BOARD OF ALDERMEN

REAL PROPERTY REUSE COMMITTEE REPORT

TUESDAY, APRIL 28, 2015

Present: Ald. Albright (Chairman), Ald. Leary, Lipof, Crossley, Fuller, Hess-Mahan, and Gentile; absent: Ald. Danberg; also present: Ald. Johnson, Yates, Schwartz, Brousal-Glaser, Cote, and Sangiolo

Staff: Alexandra Ananth (Chief Planner for Current Planning), Ouida Young (Associate City Solicitor), Carol Stapleton (Recreation Program Manager, Parks & Recreation Department), Linda Finucane (Assistant Clerk of the Board)

#287-11(4) JOINT ADVISORY PLANNING GROUP and PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT filing their separate reports pursuant to Ordinance Sec. 2-7(2)b) identifying alternatives for the future use of the former Newton Centre Library/Health Department building at 1294 Centre Street, Newton Centre, which was declared surplus by the Board of Aldermen on March 6, 2012.

ACTION: HELD 7-0

NOTE: The committee reviewed the draft Request for Interest (RFI) prepared by the Planning Department attached to this evening's agenda. Ms. Ananth said the purpose at this point is information gathering to help determine what the market sees for the building, which ultimately will aid in drafting the Request for Proposals. The Planning Department included a list of suggested entities to which it should be sent. Ms. Ananth explained that it was a back of the envelope list and agreed that there were a number of other individuals and organizations that will be solicited as well. Although the Joint Advisory Planning Group (JAPG) recommended the property be sold, ensuing committee discussions contemplated a lease option, which the committee suggested be reflected in the RFI. The committee also suggested that the RFI should note the building's proximity to the Green Line. Alderman Lipof reported that he had spoken with Nancy Netzer from the McMullen Museum at Boston College, who was intrigued with the idea of a use focusing on art. Ms. Ananth said it still remains unclear from the building file whether the rear portion of the building is original or an addition. It was represented at the last meeting that a previous preservation planner for the city had verified that it is original to the building. Ms. Ananth said she will follow up; however, whether the addition is original or not, any proposal to demolish it and/or to modify the building will have to go before the Historical Commission for its review and approval. Responses to the RFI will be requested to be submitted by 5:00 PM on June 19, prior to the committee's next meeting. Upon a motion by Alderman Crossley, the item was held.

#384-11(4) JOINT ADVISORY PLANNING GROUP and PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT filing their separate reports pursuant to Ordinance Sec. 2-7(2)b) identifying alternatives for the future use of the former Parks & Recreation site at 70 Crescent Street, Auburndale, which was declared surplus by the Board of Aldermen on February 6, 2012.

ACTION: HELD 7-0

NOTE: Ms. Ananth reviewed the proposed objectives of the Request for Interest (RFI) and Proposed Development Guidelines included in the Planning Department's April 24, 2015 memorandum. Alderman Hess-Mahan suggested that perhaps ownership is not the only model. What if the city wants a portion of rentals for seniors, low- and moderate-income? Perhaps the committee should leave the ownership v. rental option open. Instead of setting limits, create performance standards such as asking the developer what it can do with a finite amount of land. The idea of Net Zero Energy units is fine, but it should not be overarching. There is also the remediation issue. As to exceeding the 25% affordable units, it's a good idea to ask if a developer can do so.

Alderman Crossley said eight seems to be the number for which some members have put a stake in the ground. Universal design is expensive and takes space as it must accommodate a myriad of disabilities. What if the market is not there and the units are not saleable/rentable to others? Making space adaptable is more practical. Rather than limiting the number of units, limit the building envelope, but allow more, smaller units. Alderman Lipof believes that eight units is underutilizing the parcel and may preclude what the city wants. Balance the number of units with what the city wants.

Alderman Fuller said that improving/expanding the playground and its connectivity and the affordable housing is a balancing act. The more the city wants then the more units it will have to allow. Is the RFI too explicit at this stage? Ms. Ananth said it if it is too general someone may propose 20 or more units. She believes it is better to make it as restrictive as possible.

Alderman Gentile said the committee has talked about a maximum of eight units; it would be an affront to walk away from that now and a waste of time to open discussion to more than eight. The city can develop the project with Community Preservation funds. One hundred percent of construction costs could be covered if the units meet the threshold for affordability and remain affordable in perpetuity. He suggested the Board ask the Mayor to engage a consultant to work up a pro forma for rental units. Alderman Albright asked who would manage the project. Alderman Gentile suggested the Newton Housing Authority as it is an agency of the city.

Ms. Young said that the city has never been in the business of development and has no model for such. The only possible city agency with the ability is the Newton Housing Authority. If the Board is interested in pursuing this, it will need to see if the Mayor is interested as well. Alderman Sangiolo pointed out that the city built Oak Hill Park.

Alderman Crossley noted that Community Preservation funds seem critical. However, staffing is a concern. The city has been unable to free up staff for projects already in the queue, e.g. work at the Jackson Museum has been held up for five years because there are not enough project managers. Alderman Gentile said the solution is to build into the pro forma enough money to hire a construction manager

Alderman Leary asked why not the Newton Housing Authority? The Authority is expanding its units at JFK. She too is struggling to balance open space and housing, but is not sure she is willing to go more than eight units/12,500 sf. Alderman Yates believes the existing building (the former Parks & Recreation offices) if renovated might accommodate three units of affordable housing. Alderman Cote agreed. Also, the adjacent 20,000 square-foot Eversource property may present an opportunity for acquisition or a potential land swap. There is no rush and no sense in cramming in something for the sake of doing it

Alderman Hess-Mahan has concerns about the city doing the development. The project is too small for a large construction manager. The number of units depends on the type of housing: senior housing differs from family housing. The existing building, which might possibly accommodate two units, likely was always used for offices. Even if it is possible to convert it to housing the downside is the building's location constrains the layout of the site. Has anyone spoken with Eversource?

Alderman Gentile said that he cannot see this staying as open space but, given the amount of development that has gone on in the neighborhood, it is important to stick with eight units as it is the only fair thing to do. However, he is not wedded to a 12,500 square-foot footprint – an average of 16,000 square feet might be okay.

Alderman Fuller asked if the city would assume remediation of the site. And, if so, how is that cost transferred to a developer? Alderman Gentile said the city owns the problem. However, there have been two other entities on the property prior to the city: one private and the state. He suggests the city investigate a claim against both entities. Ms. Young explained that the state took the property from a private owner by eminent domain then gave it to city. Not discounting a claim, there are ways to handle liability. For example, in the case of the Boys & Girls Club when remediation costs turned out to be more than expected, the city reduced the amount the Club had to pay. In this case there has not even been a Phase I investigation; the RFI/RFP can ask a potential developer what it is willing to pay, set a cap which if it goes over city would assume. Alderman Cote has investigated Brownfield grants and believes from conversations he has had with the EPA different funding sources are available. He indicated that the EPA will come in and cleanup sites such as this one.

Alderman Sangiolo said any developer will have to take parking concerns into consideration and that a conversation with Myrtle Baptist about its parking needs is important and should take place prior to an RFI to determine what the Church's preferences are.

Alderman Lipof reiterated his belief that it is a waste of time to draft an RFI for eight units. He agreed that the only entity that could develop such a small number units would be the city and/or the Newton Housing Authority. He remains skeptical that any developer will be interested in developing eight units as it is too few for any profit.

Alderman Crossley said it could not hurt to look into a Brownfields grant. However, she asked for confirmation that the EPA actually comes in and cleans up sites. She believes this is a perfect place to spend Community Preservation funds; however, the number eight has always perplexed her as it seems if the footprint is small then more units should not matter as much. Nobody wants three to four 3,000 square-foot units. She would like the RFI to state a preference for attached/clustering to preserve open space.

The committee identified the following issues it would like addressed for its next meeting in May:

- Myrtle Baptist Parking
- Eversource property – land swap, purchase, relocate transformer
- Investigate EPA grant(s)
- Talk with Newton Housing Authority

- Retain same footprint with more, smaller units, e.g. 10?

Alderman Gentile suggested the city consider investing a small amount of money to hire a housing finance consultant to evaluate the project as it did for refinancing at the Hamlet and New Falls. He reiterated that the project if affordable in perpetuity is eligible for 100% Community Preservation funds for construction costs.

Finally, as a point of clarification, the size of the playground will not be doubled, but be increased by approximately 20,000 square feet.

The meeting was adjourned at approximately 9:30 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan A. Albright, Chairman