

CITY OF NEWTON

IN BOARD OF ALDERMEN

REAL PROPERTY REUSE COMMITTEE AGENDA

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2013

**7:00 PM –Please note the time.**

Room 209

*A public hearing will be held on the following item:*

#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.

*At the conclusion of the public hearing, the Committee will hold a working session to discuss #384-11(4) and the following item:*

#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.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan S. Albright, Chairman



Setti D. Warren  
Mayor

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**Candace Havens**  
Director

MEMORANDUM

**DATE:** February 22, 2013

**TO:** Real Property Reuse Committee of the Board of Aldermen

**FROM:** Candace Havens, Director of Planning and Development  
Eve Tapper, Chief Planner for Current Planning <sup>ET</sup>   
Alexandra Ananth, Senior Planner

**RE:** Disposition of 1294 Centre Street

**MEETING DATE:** February 26, 2013

**CC:** Stephanie Gilman, Commissioner of Public Buildings  
Dori Zaleznik, Commissioner of Health and Human Services

In response to questions raised at the Real Property Reuse Committee public hearings held on January 29, 2013, the Planning Department is providing the following information for the upcoming working session. This information is supplemental to staff analysis previously provided at the public hearing.

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**PETITION #267-11(4)**

**1294 Centre Street**

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At the previous meeting of the Real Property Reuse Committee, the Committee commented that they felt it would be valuable to consider this request in the context of the whole block and asked the following questions:

**What does the Newton Centre Task Force report say about the block?** The Newton Centre Task Force was appointed by Mayor Cohen in 2005 and was charged to “develop viable option to address the commercial, residential, cultural and transportation needs of Newton Centre.” The Task Force was comprised of residents, including aldermen, business owners, property owners, planners, architects, landscape architects, and developers. In its final report, issued in July 2008, there was agreement among the participants that there ought to be something better in the center of the Newton Centre Triangle than a parking lot and all agreed that it would be desirable to improve the existing infrastructure, enhance the pedestrian experience, including beautifying the streetscape; however, the groups differed in the extent to which new development should be considered as part of a revitalization effort in the Centre.

One group (Group 1) commented that future development be in keeping with the current character of the Village and recommended that the City “reclaim public buildings for community uses, such as the former branch library [e.g., the 1294 Centre Street property].” The JAPG report echoed this

sentiment by recommending that the 1294 Centre Street building be preserved and at least some portion of it should be used for public and/or community space.

Other Newton Centre Task Force members (Groups Two and Three) made specific recommendations for several areas in the Centre and their recommendations included physical improvements, zone changes, as well as the reuse of publicly-owned land. Chief among their recommendations was to relocate 155 parking spaces from the Triangle Parking Lot to another convenient location in Newton Centre to enable its transformation into an all-season focus for public activity with an active public plaza, as well as a signature building. The Cypress Street Triangle was considered as one such destination on the edge of the business area. In addition to providing needed parking, locating a structure on the periphery of the commercial district will reduce traffic along the main streets that currently results from people driving around in search of parking spaces. It also will discourage parking on neighborhood streets if parking is readily available in a reliable location (p.17). The Group Two/Three assessment recognizes the uniqueness of each block in the Newton Centre; the lot and building sizes and locations demand different criteria for future development. The block containing 1294 Centre Street was identified as a transitional block between the commercial center and the adjacent neighborhoods. The report notes that these parcels may be suited to lower density commercial redevelopment and/or housing. Varied building height of two to four floors are compatible in height to adjacent residential neighborhoods (p.19) and are also allowed either by right or by special permit in the Business 1 zone. The Group also recommended pedestrian passageways and plazas as part of the infill construction in the central blocks of Newton Centre (p.37).

**What is the vision for the block in which the former Health Department Building is located? Would this include a land swap for the subject property?** The Newton Centre Task Force explored the potential for integrating a parking structure into the Cypress Street Triangle block, which would serve the purposes described above. Given the dimensional constraints of the existing City-owned parking lot, a functional parking structure could not easily be achieved. However, by swapping some land with an adjacent property owner, a properly-sized rectangular parcel could be assembled alongside and over the MBTA tracks, and a private building also could be constructed that would complement existing retail businesses and extend along the frontage of buildings along Cypress Street. To date the land swap discussion has not included any portion of the City-owned property at 1294 Centre Street. Subsequent conversations about this sort of redevelopment potential between City staff and the adjacent property owners (both commercial and residential) have been positive.

**Is Business 1 the right zone for this site?** The majority of the commercial property in Newton Centre is zoned either Business 1 or Business 2, including the adjacent privately-owned property on this block. The Cypress Street parking lot and the subject property are the only exceptions on this block; both parcels are zoned Public Use and have been used for public purposes, although the Health Department recently relocated its operations to City Hall. The Planning Department believes that the Business 1 zone is appropriate for the subject property because it allows a wide range of uses that will invigorate the neighborhood and are compatible with the existing surrounding uses and zoning. As was done with the Austin Street Parking Lot, pre-zoning this property would provide a level of certainty to prospective buyers or leaseholders as to the potential opportunities it offers, and will also enhance the value of the property when/if it is made available for purchase or lease.

**The Committee requested more information on the lease vs. sale options.**

The JAPG considered three alternative outcomes for the site:

- Maintain City ownership for community use. This would allow the City to retain its historic features, if desired, as well as use it for public purposes; however, the costs to repair building and City's limited funds led the JAPG to reject this alternative.
- Negotiated commercial lease. Leasing the building has three notable advantages: 1) it allows City to retain ownership over a valuable asset that will only become more valuable with time if well-maintained; 2) it allows the City to have larger say in future development of immediate area; and 3) it allows the City to retain the building without investing any monies in preservation or maintenance of the building, although it would command lower rents due to its condition. The Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) has successfully leased some of its historic structures; the lessee pays little or no annual rent, but is required to finance all renovation and maintenance work for the life of the long-term lease. If the Board chooses this option, the Planning Department recommends that the lease include specific requirements for an annual report from the lessee showing that the building has been properly maintained. Although a lease arrangement could be structured to satisfy City interests, the JAPG rejected this option, as it did not feel the City is currently well equipped or would want to take on ongoing management and maintenance of the property.
- Sell the property outright. The City would receive income from the sale, there would be little to no up-front or future maintenance costs, and the City would receive ongoing revenues from property taxes that it currently does not receive, which it could invest in priority needs. If the City wishes to have some control of the future use of the site and/or preserve the building in perpetuity, a deed restriction could be placed on the property with the desired specific restrictions, though such a deed restriction will likely depress the selling price. Likewise, the property value will be diminished by the current condition of the building. Rezoning for commercial uses and the promise of more parking nearby could increase its value.

**RECOMMENDATION**

The exploration of potential redevelopment of this block is ongoing. A parking study commissioned by the adjacent property owners is expected to be finalized within the month and the results of which will address the need for additional parking in Newton Centre under various scenarios and its appropriateness in this location. If the Committee wishes to consider the disposition of this property within the greater context of a plan for the block, staff recommends this item be held until staff can return to the Committee with this additional information.