

# Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council

## Meeting Minutes, March 7, 2019

### **Area Council members attending:**

Bob Burke, Barbara Darnell, Groot Gregory, Nathaniel Lichtin, Srdjan Nedeljkovic, Amy Wayne; Not present: Bruce Blakely, Carole Clark, Bill Roesner

### **Ex Officio:**

City Councilor John Rice; City Councilor Brenda Noel; Also present: City councilor Greg Schwartz; Waban Area Council Vice President Rena Getz

### **Guests:**

Hal Lichtin, Bill Humphrey, Mildred Hutchinson, and others

Meeting called to order at 7:33 pm. Srdjan Nedeljkovic taking minutes.

### Northland Development on Needham Street

Alan Schlesinger, on behalf of the developer, gave a presentation on proposed revisions to the Northland development on Needham Street. Also present representing Northland were Peter Standish (Senior Vice President of Development), Kent Gonzales (Vice President of Development), and Dan Bernard (Business Associate).

Mr. Schlesinger provided a preview of what the members of City Council will be presented at the Land Use Committee meeting next week. He will be discussing a proposed redesign of the site based on input from consultants, Newton officials, and public comments. Mr. Schlesinger noted that the Northland site is a 22-acre site off of Needham Street, with 1200 ft adjacent to the old railway bed. The site includes parts of the South Meadow Brook and a culvert under Tower Road, with the waterway flowing down to the Charles River.

The site will have automobile access several points. One access point will connect to Tower Road. There will be access from a new Charlemont Street 4 way intersection. There will be an entrance from Needham Street onto a new Main Street within the project. There will also be an entrance on Oak Street. The center of the development will focus on a Village Green. The old Mill building will remain as an office building. Everything else currently on the site will be demolished. Other than the Mill building, the project will consist of residential housing units on upper floors and commercial properties will be on the ground floor of some of the buildings. A mobility center will be created off of Needham Street for bus transportation.

Mr. Schlesinger pointed out that extensive feedback about the original proposal was received from community members and city staff. Initially, Building 6 of the project was a 5 story above ground parking garage with apartments on the outside. Northland received feedback that the bulk of the building was too much. The new proposal divides the original building footprint and eliminates the 5-story above ground parking garage.

The original proposal was for 822 residential units, of which 123 were planned as affordable units. The lining of buildings was retail and commercial for a total of 180,000 SF of retail space. Current zoning required 3400 parking spaces for development of this scope. Northland asked for a waiver to reduce the number of parking spaces to 1950. Mr. Schlesinger pointed out recent planning opinion that less parking is preferable to having an oversupply of parking. The current zoning ordinance requires 2 parking spaces per dwelling unit. However, the new development is being programmed to have 1 parking space per dwelling unit for a total of 800 parking spaces, with the remaining 1150 parking spaces allocated to support commercial uses.

Northland received feedback from several city councilors who wanted fewer parking spaces. There is a concern that an oversupply of parking spaces may attract more driving to the site. Some Upper Falls residents, however, remain concerned that more parking is needed on site, and they are concerned about spill-over parking into Upper Falls.

Another revision to the original plan was to move a “community building” closer to Oak Street from its original location near Tower Road so that it is closer to the Upper Falls village center.

RKG, an economic development consultant, provided an assessment that this project could support 100,000 SF of local retail. In order to fill 180K SF of retail, Northland would have needed to have a more regional attraction and more regional tenants, which would induce more traffic. By reducing commercial space from about 185,000 SF to 115,000 SF, this shrinks some of the buildings, reduces traffic generation, and will lead to reduced tax revenue.

The new proposal reacts to a number of comments from city officials and constituents. Building 6 has been broken into 3 buildings with a new interior courtyard. Building 5 has been divided into 3 smaller buildings with an interior courtyard. All the parking on the site that was in above-ground structures has been placed underground. The total parking count went from 1950 to 1550 spaces. The amount of parking is being reduced because the retail portion of the site has been reduced from 185K SF to 115 K SF, which allowed the removal of 200 parking spaces, with further reduction enabled by implementation of a robust parking management plan.

In the new proposal, the Village Green is being enlarged. A roadway around the green is being eliminated. There will be laneways designed for interior courtyards for residential buildings. Retail will be focused on Main Street and an Unnamed Street. Also, the mobility hub for the site will be placed in the middle of a building fronting Needham Street. This building will also have commercial uses on Needham Street. Building 4 was reduced in size, which allowed an increased in the size of the Village Green. A park adjacent to the Mill building will be widened by 10 feet to 73 feet. The community building has been relocated to be closer to the Community Park, just at the backside of the Depot Restaurant. The South Meadow Brook Stream will be day-lighted near the Mill Building, which will have a water feature.

There will be two levels of parking underground, and all parking will be removed from the above grade buildings. Residential tenants will be required to pay for their parking. Transportation demand incentives will be developed to make every effort to reduce single car driving. There will be 2 hour parking available for retail customers.

Mr. Schlesinger described the transportation plan for the site. Northland is proposing 4 shuttle routes: one to Newton Corner, a second route to Needham to the commuter rail station, a third route to Cambridge, and a fourth route that will go to the Boston seaport district. It is hoped that residents will move to the Northland site knowing that they may take shuttle buses into town. The project will support the ability to share parking between office, retail, and residential users. A parking management plan will be developed. The site will not have park and ride, and will not allow all-day parking. The shuttle system will not be free. The plans indicate that there will be a shuttle that will stop at the Newton Highlands T station. The fare for these bus routes will be set so that enough people will find it attractive to take the bus. It is expected that some of the future Northland residents will travel to work in Cambridge and Somerville. The shuttle bus service will be operated by the 128 Business Council. Overall, there are trends to utilize more transit services. All buildings on the site except for the existing Mill building will have residential units above ground floor retail, with retail along Main Street and the Unnamed Road. Building 8 is being considered for some form of “affinity housing” for older individuals. It is important for older adults to feel welcome throughout the Northland site, and not to be segregated by age. In the “affinity housing” building, there may be additional architectural variety. There may be different color schemes in Building 8 that make this environment more attractive for older people. All of the buildings along Needham Street will have ground floor commercial.

The heights of the buildings will reflect a pyramidal structure. There will be 3 story buildings along Upper Falls. The Needham Street buildings will be 4 stories. In the middle, there will be a 7-story building, which will be 96 feet high. This will allow for varied roofing design. Although the overall number of units has been reduced to 800 units, 123 of them are still projected to be affordable units.

Mr. Schlesinger pointed out that Northland has had conversations with TripAdvisor about merging their two shuttle services. All of the D line shuttle buses are projected to run to the Highlands. It is unlikely that shuttles will go to the Eliot T station. Some shuttles may go to Newton Centre.

A discussion ensued about elimination of surface parking around the Village Green. A question was posed if reducing on street parking near the Village Green would have an adverse effect on vitality of the Green. Northland has decided to remove parking around the Village Green in this version of the site plan.

A question was posed about if the developer could provide 25% of the units as affordable housing. Concerns were also voiced about the impacts a project of this scope might have on city services. A concern was expressed about the new version of the plan generating less commercial tax revenue. However, there will be 115K SF of retail, which is 1.5x more retail than what is on the site now. Overall, the project is expected to generate \$1.2 million net dollars into the city’s

finances. The school overcrowding issue in Newton is being addressed by enlarging existing schools. The School Department is in the process of requesting funding for an enlarged Countryside school. The school is projected to expand to have space for 525 students.

Councilor Noel commented that this is a big project and that we are all trying to understand how this project benefits Newton. Many councilors support there being more density of development in certain parts of the city. The Northland project is consistent with the city's commitment to increase housing supply, in line with environmental goals. As far as transportation planning is concerned, a number of options might be experimented with to see what works best. Councilor Noel noted a number of ways that the Northland project can serve the goals of the city, including helping address the housing crisis that is going on.

Mr. Schlesinger pointed that Northland owns 22 acres of land where 1.5 million SF of office space can be placed by right. This type of development would require 4500 parking spaces. No mitigation would be required. Currently, the site is paved and causing a heat island effect. There is a brook now on the site that is polluted. The site currently lacks control of water quality and run-off from the site drains into the Charles River. The proposed Northland development will plant 9 acres of the site with greenery and will remove much of the heat island effect and create a sustainability plan. In Newton, this site will become a destination. It is likely that market rates for rent will be high. At Avalon, the current rents are approximately \$3000 to \$3500 for a 2-bedroom unit. At the Northland site, there will be 123 families who will have subsidized housing and who will pay 30% of their income for rent. The developer cannot include more affordable housing in the project based on the expected budget. Mr. Schlesinger stated that the project will create benefits to the City such as a new private transit system, new housing, the ability for people to work and live in the same place, 1400 jobs, and economic development.

Councilor Rice commented that this is a very large project on a large footprint. However, there will be a significant input from City Council as the final plans are developed. The current plan for the site is in evolution, and there will likely be more changes to the plans before final approval. Councilor Rice pointed out that Newton's population is rising towards the 90K threshold that it once had at its peak.

Bob Burke expressed concerns about the transportation plan for the site. He noted that the Riverside project will create pressure on transportation, as will the Northland project. However, no improvements are being planned for the Green line, which has not changed for many years. Bob asked how this project will be coordinated with other development projects in terms of transportation impacts. Nathaniel Lichtin asked about MBTA Green line capacity issues. Ms. Schlesinger noted that the Northland shuttle buses will provide options for transit away from the Green line. The shuttles will provide an alternative to taking the Green line to downtown Boston and to Cambridge and the Seaport.

A discussion ensued about the merits of improving the overall public transit system, the MBTA, rather than investing in a private transit system that does not provide broad access as the MBTA. Concerns were expressed about the utility of infrequent bus service to various locations that may not match current travel patterns. Srdjan Nedeljkovic pointed out how an extension of the Route 60 bus that runs along Route 9 to Chestnut Hill to the Needham Street corridor would allow for

improved access from this part of Newton to the center of Boston and be available to all people along the route.

It was noted that the new revised Northland plans will result in a reduction of commercial space that will reduce net gain of tax revenues to the city. Further discussion ensued about the roadway exit from the site to Oak Street. Many Upper Falls residents do not want an entrance from Northland to Oak Street at all. However, Mr. Schlesinger pointed out that an exit is necessary to Oak Street to reduce traffic congestion on Needham Street and at the intersection of Oak and Christina Streets. Mr. Schlesinger noted that the overall volume of traffic to Upper Falls will not be affected by the entrance at Oak Street. Regarding cut-through traffic, there will be multiple turns on the Oak Street access road with raised platforms to control speed and to reduce desirability of the Oak Street access route.

Nathaniel Lichtin noted that the proposed Northland shuttle buses will run on the same route as the Route 59 bus. He questioned how this will be coordinated with the MBTA system in terms of schedules and timing. Mr. Schlesinger pointed out that the shuttle bus service is intended to supplement existing service on the Route 59 bus.

Councilor Rice noted that when the Green line shuts down, the Highlands turns into a big bus stop due to all the buses that are put in service to replace the trains. There will be difficulty with the Northland shuttles if they are added into the bus queue on those dates that the Green line is not in service. Mr. Schlesinger noted that the frequency of Northland's shuttle service has not been determined, but that these may run as a commuter shuttle. Mr. Schlesinger noted that some individuals may take the shuttle bus to Newtonville in order to take commuter rail into Boston.

At around 8:45 pm, after opportunity for questions and comments, the Northland proponents concluded their participation in the meeting.

### Better Bus Proposal by the MBTA

Srdjan Nedeljkovic presented an overview of the MBTA Better Bus proposals as they might affect Newton Highlands. There are three bus routes in question: the Route 52, the Route 59, and the Route 60.

#### Route 52:

This route currently runs from Watertown to the Dedham Mall. Buses run along Centre Street from Watertown, with some service continuing down Winchester Street to Nahanton Street, and then to Dedham Street, Oak Hill Park, and on to West Roxbury and the Dedham Mall.

The MBTA proposal recommends eliminating service on the portion of Centre Street south of Newton Center and on Winchester Street and shifting all service to Parker Road, Wheeler Road, Meadowbrook Road, and then to Dedham Street, Oak Hill Park, and further to the Dedham Mall.

A discussion ensued with the result that there was support for keeping the current service. In spite of there being low service and limited frequency for this route, there was consensus that the

there were riders dependent on this service who had few other options and that the service should be maintained.

#### Route 59:

This route runs from Watertown Square through Nonantum, then down Walnut Street through Newtonville, passing by City Hall and the Library, and then continuing to Newton Highlands where the majority of buses travel down Lincoln Street to Woodward Street and then down Elliot Street to Upper Falls, before continuing to Central Avenue in Needham and onto Needham Junction.

The MBTA proposal recommends elimination of service along Lincoln Street, Woodward Street, and Elliot Street and puts the bus route on Needham Street.

There was broad consensus that this route should not be changed, as it services the heart of Newton Highlands and Upper Falls. It was pointed out that the bus stop at the Oak Street and Chestnut Street stop is servicing the Upper Falls community and not just the Needham Street corridor.

#### Route 60:

The Route 60 bus runs from Kenmore Square in Boston along Brookline Avenue until Brookline Village, and then continues to High Street and Cypress Streets in Brookline before turning to Route 9 west until Langley Road, at which point the bus turns back to Boston.

The MBTA proposal recommends terminating the bus at Chestnut Hill Square and eliminating the Langley Road loop and the bus loop into the Chestnut Hill Mall.

There was consensus that bus stops should be maintained on both sides of Route 9 at the Chestnut Hill Mall so that riders do not need to cross 8 lanes of traffic to access the bus at Chestnut Hill Square. Srdjan Nedeljkovic presented a proposal in which the Route 60 bus would be extended on Langley Road to Newton Centre, then turn south on Centre Street to Winchester Street and then to the Needham Street corridor. This extension would restore bus service along Centre Street and parts of Winchester Street currently served by the Rout 52 bus that is under consideration of being discontinued.

At the conclusion of the Better Bus discussion, the Area Council voted 6 to 0 to support the draft letter written by Srdjan Nedeljkovic to the MBTA regarding the Better Bus recommendations. The Area Council does not support any service cuts by a vote of 6 to zero. The Area Council moved to include a statement that the Route 59 bus stop at Oak Street and Chestnut Street services the Upper Falls community. Nathaniel Lichtin moved to remove language from the letter that if it came down to reducing either 52 or 59 service, maintaining 59 service was preferable. This was voted 5 in favor, 0 opposed, and 1 abstaining. The Area Council will send the revised letter to the MBTA before the comment deadline on March 13.

#### Charter Home Rule discussion:

Nathaniel Lichtin reported that City Council decided not to make any changes to Article 9 in the City Charter regarding Area Councils. At a hearing on March 6, there were many people who were in support of keeping the Charter the same with regards to Area Councils. There was a discussion of whether to change the requirement of there being 20% of voters to enact a referendum, rather than 10% of the voters. A subcommittee has been created at the City Council level to review the City charter proposal that failed to get approved at the last election. The subcommittee took many of the smaller items from the failed charter revision proposal and has proposed them as a Home Rule legislation to update the charter. Area Councils will continue to be under the language of the existing charter and will not be part of the updates.

Nathaniel pointed out that public comment is important to provide input regarding the Home Rule Legislation to amend the Charter. Waban Area Councilor Rena Getz joined the meeting to provide further information about the charter home rule discussions and about the minimum voter thresholds to enact legislation.

### Village Day Discussion:

There is no significant update to report about planning for Village Day. John Rice and Maureen Oates have met to discuss the road race, and John noted that the police are recommending to have safety cones on Beacon Street and Walnut Street during the race. The cones may cost \$1200 or \$1400. A discussion briefly ensued about changing the route to Crystal Lake. However, this would require a formal measurement of the distance and appropriate registration of the route as a road race. Groot Gregory pointed out that the Area Council should decide on dates and deadlines for reserving activities related to Village Day.

### City Updates:

**Zoning Redesign Update.** Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin noted that a zoning build-out analysis was presented at City hall on February 25<sup>th</sup>. Some changes were noted related to lot coverage, setbacks, and the size of buildings. The Area Council, in collaboration with the Waban Area Council, will be setting date for a community meeting regarding the zoning process. Possible dates include March 23-24, March 18, and March 21.

Bob Burke pointed out how a Newton Corner neighborhood group is supportive of efforts for historic preservation.

**Riverside Update.** Public comments are being accepted about the proposed development plans through the city website. The Land Use Committee will be having a required public meeting to provide feedback to the developer regarding the proposal for the site. This meeting provides an opportunity for the developer to consider community concerns and revise the project prior to submitting it for special permit consideration. A visioning meeting for Riverside is planned for March 28<sup>th</sup>.

**Walnut Street Development Project at Pine Crest Road.** The proposal to construct a 7-unit development, with one affordable unit, was reviewed by the Fair Housing Commission and

received a favorable review. The project will consist of 2 attached units and a building with 5 attached units with underground parking. There are an additional 2 units that are being built by right. No changes to the latest proposal are being considered at this time.

**Climate Action Plan update.** Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin noted that a workshop to discuss the Climate Action Plan will be taking place at the Barry Price Center on March 21. No further discussion ensued.

**Elliot Street marijuana dispensary.** The proposal to open a recreational marijuana facility at this location will be before the Land Use Committee in the near future.

**Washington Street Visioning.** Area Council president Nathaniel Lichtin noted that the Washington Street vision and plan is available for review on the City website.

**Newton Highlands MBTA Station Accessibility project:** The MBTA has started work on a temporary ADA-accessible ramp at the station in preparation for track work that is scheduled to take place in 2019.

#### Administrative Items:

#### Approval of the February Minutes:

A motion was made to approve the February minutes, which was accepted 6/0 with 3 absent. No revisions were made to the draft minutes.

#### Treasurer's Report:

The Treasurer's Report was submitted to Area Council members by Groot Gregory via e-mail several days earlier. No new recommendations or other updates were made to the Treasurer's report or regarding the budget for 2019.

#### Next Meeting:

No new special items are currently planned to be discussed at the next Area Council meeting in April, to be held on Thursday, April 5<sup>th</sup>.

#### New Business:

John Rice noted that as part of Newton Serves on April 26 and 27, the children's playground at the Hyde Center will be renovated. Volunteers are needed to assemble the new playground. Sign up sheets will soon be made available. The Taiwain Cultural Center is also supporting rebuilding the children's playground at the Hyde.

#### Meeting Adjournment:

The meeting was adjourned at 9:38PM.