

PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT BOARD MEETING MINUTES

November 4, 2019



Ruthanne Fuller
Mayor

Barney Heath
Director
Planning & Development

Members

Peter Doeringer, Chair
Kelley Brown, Member
Sudha Maheshwari, Member
Jennifer Molinsky, Member
Sonia Parisca, Vice Chair
Chris Steele, Member
Barney Heath, *ex officio*
Kevin McCormick, Alternate
James Robertson, Alternate

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Full Members Present:

Barney Heath, Ex-Officio
Peter Doeringer, Chair
Sonia Parisca, Vice Chair
Kelley Brown, Member
Chris Steele, Member
Jennifer Molinsky, Member
Kevin McCormick, Alternate
James Robinson, Alternate

Staff Present:

James Freas, Deputy Director

Meeting held in Room 204, Newton City Hall

1. Approval of Minutes of September 10th, 11th, and October 7th

Chair Doeringer opened the meeting at 7:01 p.m. Upon a motion by Mr. Steele seconded by Ms. Parisca, the minutes of the meetings held on September 10, 11 and October 7 were approved.

2. Riverside Rezoning Discussion

Attorney Buchbinder, representing Mark Development, addressed the Board regarding proposed zoning amendments for the Riverside property. Attorney Buchbinder indicated that his client has been working with the neighbors and the Lower Falls Improvement Association to find common ground on the project and associated zoning. The project has been reduced in size from approximately 1.5 million sq. ft. to 1.025 million sq. ft. and the mix of residential to commercial uses has shifted from approximately 50/50 to 60/40.

Elizabeth Mirabile, representing the Lower Falls Improvement Association, addressed the Board regarding the proposed zoning amendments. Ms. Mirabile indicated that neighborhood is more comfortable with the size of the project and supportive of the revised amendments.

Barbara Gruenthal raised an issue with the size of the parcel identified in the zoning amendment. Ms. Gruenthal expressed a concern that the project size is not increased in the future.

Robert Korff addressed the issue of the MBTA. He indicated that by returning a portion of the planned development back to the MBTA, he was able to reduce the size of the project as well.

Mr. Brown asked for background on why the project was reduced. Mr. Korff responded that the revised program was developed to respond to the neighborhood's desire for a smaller size and more residential mix.

James Freas, Deputy Director, indicated that two separate sets of zoning amendments, the petitioner's and the Lower Falls Improvement Association would need to be approved separately.

Mr. Brown indicated that he thought that this zoning approach identifying specific square footage was not the way to approach zoning in the future.

Randy Block offered that the unique zoning was reflective of the unique nature of the property.

Ms. Molinsky added that the current zoning proposal, while somewhat awkward, should be advanced.

Mr. Steele agreed that for the present this rezoning proposal can be advanced, but it should not be repeated.

3. Washington Street Vision Plan

Mr. Heath referenced the memorandum proposed addressing the recent modification to the plan.

Ms. Molinsky provided a summary of her concerns (see attached). Concerns included extending walkability, pedestrian improvements and landscaping recommendations to the adjoining neighborhoods, not just limited to the Washington Street frontage.

After discussion, Mr. Heath and Mr. Freas reported that the Planning Board's change would be reflected in the new document presented on Thursday.

4. Climate Action Plan/ Climate Related Zoning

Mr. Heath relayed that these items are set for a public hearing on Thursday, November 14th.

5. Adjournment

Upon a motion by Ms. Parisca, seconded by Ms. Molinsky and unanimously approved, the meeting was adjourned at 8:40 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Barney Heath, Director of Planning & Development

Washington Street Vision Plan – Jennifer Molinsky thoughts for discussion

Per our recent discussion of the Washington Street Vision Plan, I reviewed the plan with an eye toward opportunities to improve its discussion about connections to the surrounding neighborhoods. I've based my reading on the October 2 draft (the latest available online).

Because not all were present at the last meeting, let me state my concerns briefly. The Vision Plan, as drafted, focuses very narrowly on the corridor but does not speak much about connections to the neighborhoods to the immediate north (or south, across the pike). In many cases, the north-to-south roads dead-ending at the Pike are entirely residential, raising questions about how the new Washington Street development would abut existing neighborhoods. In addition, the roads to the north of the pike, including Watertown Street, would likely be affected by traffic seeking to avoid the calmer situation on a re-engineered Washington Street. Finally, ideally the vision would result in people walking from all over the surrounding area into the Washington Street corridor – yet the pedestrian infrastructure around Washington Street is currently inadequate.

I am largely in favor of the vision plan. But I do think one cannot treat a vision for a street that extends through multiple neighborhoods as if it's completely isolated from its surroundings. In some locations, the Vision Plan does recognize abutting neighborhoods: for example, the section on "creating more route options" does take into account the surrounding neighborhoods in its discussion of bike connections to the Charles River Greenway and the potential for more bridges over the pike, and the plan makes a point of discussing improvements to Cheesecake Brook (page 67). But there are many places where Washington Street is treated as if it exists in a vacuum. There are ample opportunities for increasing discussion of how a renewed Washington Street should connect to the surrounding areas and address effects of new development, which would make the Vision Plan more internally consistent and also a more realistic, usable document. To go further, a good vision plan will be more fully realized if it does recognize changes that might need to occur offsite for that vision to work.

All that said, and if the committee is inclined toward this point of view, there are a couple of ways we might make these issues known in our recommendation to the City Council

- We could propose specific areas throughout the proposed vision where it is appropriate to mention connections to surrounding areas.
- We could suggest a new stand-alone section in the plan that highlights these issues altogether.
- We could leave the vision plan as is but incorporate these thoughts and ideas into the letter to the City Council. I am least enthused by this because then these ideas will not be part of the plan (unless the Council chooses to include them) but it is a possibility for discussion.

If we were to add language throughout (the first bullet above), I think it might be appropriate in the locations I note below. But we can also summarize these thoughts in a single new section focused exclusively on making Washington Street work for surrounding areas.

- Page 15: The final paragraph suggests that office and lab space development is most appropriate at the edges of the centers of Newtonville and West Newton. I would suggest adding a final sentence as follows:

The pattern in both West Newton and Newtonville is for office-type buildings to be at the outer edges of the villages and the shops and restaurants to be located in the cores. There is already a small cluster of offices and industrial activities at the Crafts St intersection in Newtonville and a cluster of office and industrial businesses at Elm St/Border St and east of Chestnut St in West Newton. In each case this puts these office areas in easy walk of the village cores. Zoning for Washington Street could build upon this pattern to expand the mix of uses, create more gathering spaces, and support more office and lab space development opportunities at the village center edges. Since the edges of the villages contain and abut existing residential uses, zoning for Washington Street should carefully address the rear sides of new development, including building design that is compatible with neighboring buildings and activities that occur there (such as deliveries, trash pickup, etc.).

These ideas can also be added to “require gentle transitions to adjacent neighborhoods” (page 81), which does address setbacks and building step-downs but not the activities that occur behind buildings.

- In the section on “Prioritize People, Safety, and Comfort” (page 29), there might need to be a new section to the effect of “Extend Walkability Into Abutting Neighborhoods” or something like that, with the idea that neighborhoods to the north of Washington Street (and potentially the south?) should be areas of focus for new crosswalks, sidewalks, and street trees. Specific language could be added to page 31, the section on promoting safe neighborhood streets—because calming Washington Street should not mean other corridors become “less calm” – rather these should become more pedestrian friendly in order to draw more people from the area to walk to new development.

We need not put examples into the Vision Plan, but just to offer one here: there are no crosswalks between CVS in West Newton and the old Horace Mann School across Watertown Street, despite the fact that this is a corridor well-traveled by commuters and high school students walking toward Washington Street. This is the kind of thing that I would hope would be a priority if new development occurs on Washington Street as envisioned by the plan. And to page 33, “design sidewalks for year-round comfort” – agreed, but not every street in the surrounding area actually has complete sidewalks now.

- In “actively manage driving and parking” (page 45) there might be some acknowledgement that the Vision will likely create more traffic in surrounding neighborhoods that will require new infrastructure – from crosswalks and crossing signals to traffic calming to new traffic lights. I don’t think we need to specify who funds this (eg the city or the city via new part of development agreements) but I think it should at least be noted so that the vision doesn’t appear disconnected from reality.
- There are opportunities for installing plantings and street trees out from Washington Street to help with climate adaptation and mitigation of the Pike’s effects. In other words, there are opportunities to extend mitigation off Washington Street too in order to benefit the area.

- Finally, in the “Guiding Principles for Implementation” (page 97) we might propose language that says that pedestrian infrastructure, traffic levels, and other impacts of new development on surrounding neighborhoods should be monitored on a regular basis so that improvements can be made as issues arise. At a minimum such language could remind readers that Washington Street does not exist in a vacuum and that, as change occurs and problems arise, there is a mechanism for addressing them (maybe even a formal one – some kind of Washington Street neighbors council or something?).

I look forward to discussing!