



Ruthanne Fuller
Mayor

City of Newton, Massachusetts
Department of Planning and Development
1000 Commonwealth Avenue Newton, Massachusetts 02459

Telephone
(617) 796-1120
Telefax
(617) 796-1142
TDD/TTY
(617) 796-1089
www.newtonma.gov

Barney Heath
Director

M E M O R A N D U M

To: Katy Hax Holmes, Chief Preservation Planner

From: Barney Heath, Director of Planning & Development

Date: September 22, 2020

Subject: Planning & Development Board Recommendation on the Proposed Landmark Designation for 1253 Washington Street

CC: Newton Historical Commission
Honorable Newton City Councilors
Planning & Development Board

Please find attached the Planning and Development Board's recommendation on the landmark designation for 1253 Washington Street.

**Planning and Development Board Recommendation:
Proposed Landmark Designation for 1253 (1251) Washington Street**

The Planning and Development Board is authorized under Newton’s recently-revised Landmark Ordinance (No. B-59) to make a recommendation regarding the property at 1253 (1251) Washington Street that has been nominated for designation as a landmark and is currently under review by the Newton Historical Commission. The role of the Board in making this recommendation is to evaluate “*the relationship of the proposed designation to the City's adopted policies and plans and the effect of the proposed designation surrounding area.*” In addition, the Board “*shall also make recommendations regarding any other planning considerations relevant to the proposed designation.*”

The Board heard a presentation of the landmark report on the property at 1253 (1251) Washington Street prepared for the Newton Historical Commission and of a counterpart report prepared by Epsilon Associates on behalf of the current owner of the property at its meeting on September 3, 2020. These reports describe a two-story free-standing building located in the West Newton Historic District that is currently occupied by a funeral home and is surrounded by one-story commercial properties. They find that this building is likely on the site of one of the earliest businesses in West Newton, it was owned until the early 1990s by a family with commercial ties to the site dating back to as early as 1861, and the site seems to have been used for funeral-related services since at least 1903. The original building has been altered substantially over the years and the most visually-prominent characteristic of the current building, its Classical Revival façade, was constructed in 1926 based on a design by a prominent Newton architect (Lewis H. Bacon).

The Planning and Development Board reviewed these documents and discussed the merits of the landmark nomination at its meetings on September 3 and September 21, 2020. It approved the following recommendation and additional commentary at its meeting on September 21, 2020 by a vote of 6 in favor with one abstention.

Evaluation of the Relationship of the Proposed Designation to Adopted Policies and Plans

Newton has a variety of policies and plans that are of potential relevance to the nomination including the general provisions of the *Comprehensive Plan*, the *Economic Development Action Plan*, the *Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment and Action Plan*, *Newton 2040: A Transportation Strategy for Newton*, and the *Washington Street Vision Plan*. In addition, zoning revisions are under discussion that would affect future building standards and the availability of more-affordable housing in West Newton. The Board’s consideration of the landmark proposal focuses on the *Washington Street Vision Plan* because it incorporates many of the goals of the other policy and planning documents and because it applies them to the specific context of Washington Street and the West Newton Village.

The aspiration of the *Vision Plan* is to revitalize the West Newton Village by building upon its current business and residential composition and the advantages of a “walkable and transit served mixed-use” district. The Plan seeks to achieve excellence in place-making and development on a human scale by encouraging areas of higher density mixed-use buildings near the Village’s transportation hub that gradually taper off into smaller scale structures that ease the transition into adjacent residential neighborhoods. The preservation of iconic historical landmarks is an explicit part of the *Vision Plan* because such landmarks can contribute to the goals of vitality and architectural diversity within the

Village. These guidelines for building structures are also accompanied by proposals for reconfigured thoroughfares and plazas with diverse store-fronts, more-adequate public parking, new public spaces, and the mitigation of the adverse impacts of the Turnpike.

In addition to these overall planning and development considerations, the *Vision Plan* recognizes the special place of the federally-designated historic district and its historic commercial buildings in the center of West Newton. Furthermore, the Plan includes a section that affirms the importance of protecting “iconic buildings” by treating them “as guideposts in the views along Washington Street while also growing and changing to support the other objectives of this *Vision Plan*.”

While the achievement of these goals will depend on decisions made about both larger projects and parcel-by-parcel developments, a transformation of the magnitude outlined for West Newton must be guided by the overall *Vision Plan* and its implementation will require careful and flexible balancing among many policy goals.

The Board endorses the place-making principles of the *Vision Plan* and has applied them in formulating its recommendations on the proposed nomination of 1253 (1251) Washington Street for landmark designation. While the *Vision Plan* does not define what is an “iconic” building, a common meaning is that a building must be “widely known and acknowledged especially for distinctive excellence” (Merriam Webster). The Landmark Ordinance provides more specific eligibility criteria such as architectural significance, identification with notable architects/designers/builders, and association with persons who significantly contributed to the development of Newton.

Recommendation on the Landmark Designation for 1253 (1251) Washington Street

The Board does not claim to have the expertise or first-hand knowledge to evaluate the aesthetic qualities and historical associations of the proposed landmark. However, it has reviewed the detailed documents provided by the Newton Historical Commission and by Epsilon Associates and finds nothing in these assessments to support the conclusion that the property at 1253 (1251) Washington Street has achieved iconic status. As a result, the Board does not recommend the acceptance of this landmark petition.

Additional Commentary

The Board also wishes to take advantage of its authority to “make recommendations regarding any other planning considerations relevant to the proposed designation.” to offer a further comment about the potential contribution of the façade of this property that is anticipated in the section of the Washington Street *Vision Plan* that proposes to “Broaden the toolkit to incentivize historic preservation”. This section recognizes the challenge of preserving the historic value of some of the detailed façades of one-story commercial buildings built along Washington Street in the 1930s that are “underperforming economically relative to their land value”. It further suggests these façades might be preserved if an incentive were provided that could be used by the Newton Historic Commission and the City Council in the context of discussions with developers about special permits.

There is strong sentiment within the Board that the façade of the building at 1253 (1251) Washington Street currently contributes diversity and vitality to the Washington Street corridor and would be a good

candidate for preservation even if the building does not meet the criteria for landmark designation. It therefore encourages the Historic Commission and the City Council to advocate for preserving this façade in discussions with current and future owners and developers about their plans for this property.