

September 3, 2020

BY EMAIL

Richard A. Lipof, Chairman
Land Use Committee
Newton City Council
1000 Commonwealth Avenue
Newton, MA 02459-1449

Re: Riverside Station/355 Grove Street and 399 Grove Street / #26-20 and #27-20

Dear Chairman Lipof,

At the outset, let me express my appreciation for your leadership of an effective Land Use Committee process in a virtual setting. I am confident that all voices are being heard and that the process is working as intended, despite the challenges. As we hopefully near the end of this process, I think it is appropriate to review the process to date, and also to share some concerns which I have.

The current Riverside proposal is the culmination of nearly five years of community outreach and engagement, including approximately twenty-five meetings with neighbors, Councilors, and municipal staff since September of 2018. We have offered at least three separate proposals, with several additional, significant adjustments along the way, and each time the project has been reduced in size. It has taken a great deal of creativity and thoughtfulness to assure that the changes continue to be consistent with a financially viable project.

Since filing the initial special permit application in March of 2019, the project has decreased in size by 32%. We have maintained a focus on the residential component, consistent with the wishes of the neighborhood, while significantly cutting tax-generating office and commercial space.

March 2019	Today
1,518,653 square feet	1,025,000 square feet
675 Residential Units	582 Residential Units
611,437 square feet of office space	246,620 square feet of office space
194 key hotel	150 key hotel
64,655 square feet of retail space	43,242 square feet of retail space

I was willing to make such deep cuts because I had assurances from all involved that the special permit process would recognize that Mark Development had already gone above and beyond in addressing the concerns of the major stakeholders during the zoning process. As you know, the zoning which the Council approved last December is extremely prescriptive, to a degree rarely seen. As a result, I was led to believe that the special permit process would move quickly with a decision in place by late spring of 2020.

That has not happened. In fact, since we filed the initial special permit application in March of 2019, it has now been 18 months

At every step of the way, we have been asked to make changes that add cost, reduce the marketability of the project, and delay its forward progress. I am perplexed as to why I am still negotiating technical details of the project directly with the LFIA, which has already had a major impact on the scale and design of the project during the zoning process. The changes which they and certain Councilors acting on their behalf are proposing are in many cases commercially unreasonable, and taken together make it increasingly difficult with every passing day to reach a final result.

Now, we are hearing that Woodland Golf Club, a large private landowner that pays no real estate taxes to the City, is likely to appeal unless we address non-existent, purely speculative adverse impacts with financial contributions and other unreasonable measures. This type of NIMBY approach is the reason why projects that add to our housing stock, commercial tax base, and quality of life simply can't get done in Newton.

While the project is still significant in size, further financial givebacks are simply not feasible. This attitude is what resulted in an initial Riverside project, approved in 2013, that ultimately was not buildable. Frankly, in today's uncertain economic climate (and in a time when many developers are retooling projects to increase the amount of laboratory/research space), this project cannot sustain further concessions to the City. Agreeing to do so would represent a "bad deal" and result in a project that is not feasible.

The project before you is the result of extraordinary hard work on all sides. It is a project that is buildable, and a project which my team is eager to bring to fruition. If that proves impossible, then I will need to explore other options for this site, which I would do only reluctantly.

Though there may be certain Lower Falls neighbors who see no project as a viable alternative, I believe that the majority of our citizens are supportive of the project, and recognize its many benefits, including:

- 103 affordable units to the City's housing stock.
- A firm commitment to direct access to the Project off I-95 and other improvements to Grove Street and the I-95/Route 128 corridor, all at an approximate projected cost of \$20 million. Based on the current project size, another developer might not be willing to make that same commitment.
- A dedicated two-way bike lane and pedestrian pathway on Grove Street. Our proposed infrastructure improvements will lessen traffic on Grove Street and provide a safer, better option for both cyclists and pedestrians.

Newton also benefits from nearly \$8 million in mitigation as follows:

- \$1,400,000 for municipal infrastructure improvements;
- \$1,300,000 for neighborhood improvements or traffic mitigation;
- \$1,500,000 for improvements to the Williams School;
- Up to \$3,000,000 for off-site trail improvements;
- \$200,000 for the Bike Lane Extension to the driveway at the Hamilton Center;

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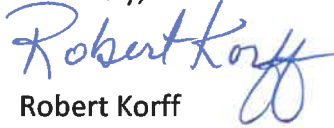
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- \$130,000 for a pilot Commuter Rail Shuttle; and
- \$450,000 to cap three of the affordable units at 50% AMI (as opposed to 80%).

I have every confidence that the project before you continues to benefit our community. But further changes could risk that.

In closing, I do want to thank all of you for the time and attention which you have given to this matter over the past eight months, including 18 Land Use meetings. I hope that collectively we can take advantage of the opportunity before us.

Sincerely,



Robert Korff

cc: (By Email)

Councilor Andrea W. Kelley
Councilor Maria Scibelli Greenberg
Councilor Jacob D. Auchincloss
Councilor Christopher J. Markiewicz
Councilor Andreae Downs
Councilor Alicia G. Bowman
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