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James Freas
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MEMORANDUM

DATE: September 17, 2015
TO: Mayor Setti Warren
FROM: James Freas, Acting Director of Planning and Development
RE: Newtonville Vision
CC: Board of Aldermen
Planning and Development Board

In preparation for the Land Use Committee meeting on September 24, I have put together a vision document for Newtonville to be shared with the Board of Aldermen in relation to their discussion of the Austin Street development proposal. What follows is the Planning Department's Newtonville Vision, drawing from a number of different sources including the *Comprehensive Plan*, Aldermanic discussions prior to the rezoning of the Austin St. parking lot, MAPC projections for metro Boston, and the Economic and Fiscal Impact Analysis performed by RKG for the Austin St. project (which will be included in the Aldermen's packet).

Newtonville is one of Newton's thriving major village centers where neighborhood residents and people from throughout the City come to stroll, shop, dine, and attend village-centered events. A short walk connects residents and visitors to most daily needs, as well as unique shopping and dining experiences. The Village is re-connected; crossing over the Pike is a short, easy, and enticing walk thanks to street design improvements and the commuter rail station is both more prominent and accessible.

Newtonville offers diverse housing choices in a walkable setting close to transit. The residents of newly built apartments above the expanded retail core are welcome members of the community, contributing to the economic strength of the Village's businesses and championing the Village's improvement. Even as the Village has grown and diversified, Newtonville remains true to its heritage as a center of community and economic activity in the City of Newton through an improved pedestrian experience, public plazas, and new buildings that respond, in scale and materials, to its historic landmarks and add to street-level vitality.

The vision integrates several important citywide policy areas including diverse and affordable housing, multi-modal transportation choice, and economic development, and describes their application within the specific geography of Newtonville. The Newtonville Vision is based on Newton's adopted *Comprehensive Plan 2007*, local and regional data, market and fiscal studies, and public comments that have been generated over the course of the several years of planning that have gone into the Austin Street project and other proposals in the Village. Ultimately, this vision recognizes that change is important and unavoidable and that it is the City's responsibility to establish objectives towards addressing change in a way that supports the resiliency and long-term health of the City.

The following sections describe specific policies and actions that support realization of this vision for Newtonville over time.

What is a Vision?

A Vision describes how the City views its future objective for a geographic area or a public policy issue and may include a set of proposed policies or action items. A Vision is used to guide public policy action, from capital improvements to regulatory changes or discretionary permits. A Vision does not limit public action, but is intended to describe objectives so that reasoned decisions can be made.

Inherent to the concept of a Vision is the idea of place-making; the idea of protecting and enhancing the sense of place of a given location, those unique attributes of a place that distinguish it from any other.

A Vision is based in data analysis, public engagement, and wider policy objectives. A Vision is not a Master Plan, which is distinguished by a more detailed description of future conditions and a more closely defined implementation path.

Village Economic Development

- Support the development of one or more "destination" businesses north of the Pike to draw more foot-traffic to this portion of the Village.
- Retain the unique, independent and locally owned stores and restaurants in Newtonville through small business support programs and other actions.
- Explore creation of a merchants association or similar organization to promote Newtonville and its businesses. Coordinate with the Newtonville Area Council.
- Retain and improve the public parking lot at Austin Street for the benefit of Newtonville businesses and convenience of visitors to the village.
- Develop a village area parking strategy to better address management and improve availability.

"It was a thriving place where people would come and do shopping. It's turned into a place where people come to do errands. I want to bring back the Newtonville I remember."

- Alderman Susan Albright, Ward 2, Newton Tab, September 9, 2015.

Place

- Implement the proposed Walnut Street streetscape improvements.
- Develop an active public plaza that is an attractive gathering space and location for public art.
- Promote outdoor dining/sidewalk cafes.
- Encourage businesses to improve their building facades including higher quality signage (less plastic/neon) and creating a more coordinated, cohesive appearance.
- Respect the architectural heritage of Newtonville while still allowing for modern interpretation and creativity in design.
- Invest in high quality design, materials, and maintenance for public infrastructure – roads and sidewalks.



Data / Policy Basis and Source Materials

Newton Comprehensive Plan, 2007

- P. 3-6: “Land use is to be guided with the intention of enhancing village centers, supporting their vitality, with special emphasis on the role of those centers in:
 - providing services to nearby neighborhoods, restoring that function where it may have been eroded, while also
 - reflecting how those centers interrelate to each other in often complementary ways in serving the entire City, and
 - providing a housing alternative - that of living in a mixed-use environment - otherwise largely missing in the City, and
 - providing focal areas around which the sense of place and of community that we seek can be effectively shaped.
- P. 3-25: Newtonville is identified as a Major Center with between 500,000 and 1 million square feet of commercial area.
- P. 3-31: “While each of the village centers is different, certain general policies should be observed. The smaller village centers should be left to their own devices. Their current land use seems appropriate both as to scale and type, and any significant expansion would significantly alter their character. The larger centers are another matter. A strong case can be made for moderate growth in some of them and a change in the balance of uses in others. Providing incentives for the creation of more

multifamily housing in the larger centers deserves serious consideration. So does the application of a more proactive approach to planning. It is appropriate for the City to encourage the uses and design criteria it deems preferable while discouraging those which are not. This is different from a no-growth strategy. On the contrary, many of the larger centers could and should be expanded at a moderate pace.

The City needs to look at each of the larger centers and develop a plan to enhance it. One size does not fit all; but certain facts are clear. Existing parking patterns and locations are not optimal. Parking in those locations should be shared or otherwise consolidated. The elimination of on street parking in selected locations would also do much to improve traffic flow.

One-story buildings are often inefficient and a waste of expensive land so should generally be discouraged in the village centers. Where overriding historic or scale considerations are not present, density incentives might be provided to owners or developers who are willing to develop multi-story buildings. There are vacant second and third floors in buildings in the village centers, but not because of a lack of demand. This space is often physically and economically obsolete. In towns such as Needham, Concord, and Wellesley new buildings are being built and old ones renovated in the town centers, and they are full. The reason it does not happen in Newton is because it is too difficult to develop new space.”

- P. 4-10: Village Center Roads: About twelve or more Village Centers in Newton are intended to be strongly pedestrian-oriented areas, including those listed below. Within them, roadway and other infrastructure improvements and regulations are to be designed to maintain and improve the pedestrian experience.

Population and Housing Demand Projections for Metro Boston, January, 2014

- Housing younger workers and the growing senior population will require between 305,000 and 435,000 additional housing units by 2040. Two-thirds of these units should be multi-family unit types.
- Under current trends, two out of every five workers in Greater Boston will retire by 2030. New housing to accommodate a growing younger workforce is essential for future economic growth in the region.
- A continuing trend of declining household sizes means that, even if the population remains level or drops, there would be a strong demand for additional housing units.
- Demographic trends and preferences amongst seniors and younger adults means the majority of necessary units will need to be in multi-family structures, largely in urban and transit oriented areas. Most of the demand for single-family homes for young families will be met as seniors move out of their existing housing stock.
- <http://www.mapc.org/projections>

Economic and Fiscal Impact Analysis (for 28 Austin Street project)

- The 28 Austin Street project will generate an estimated \$1.56 million annually in local spending on goods and services and \$280,439 on food away from home.
- In total, Newton households spend more than \$1.32 billion in these retail categories each year. In contrast, City retail businesses capture approximately \$693.4 million in sales, indicating there is measurable sales leakage totaling \$628.1 million.
- In terms of retail density, the Newtonville village center is almost 50% below national average for square feet of retail space per person. The average square feet per capita is below 13 for both the 3-minute and the 5-minute drive time areas. The 10-minute drive time area is comparable to the national average, but still well below what the spending potential for the local consumer demand could support.
- Slightly more than three-fourths of the respondents indicated that 40 percent or more of their business was from the immediate Newtonville area. About 50 percent of the respondents stated that 40 percent or more of their remaining business was from elsewhere in Newton. All told, the surveyed businesses garnered most of their sales from proximate and surrounding residents... several [businesses] noting that the proposed additional residential units would in fact offer up “new” customers living right in Newtonville.
- A general pattern of responses indicated the desire for “anchor” type stores or those that bring customers to the area, generate foot traffic and enhance the potential for multi-destination shopping – noting a strong desire for additional dining and drinking.

Other Sources

- Aldermanic discussions and documents relative to the RFI, RFP, and Reuse process, Rezoning process for the Austin Street project.
- Collected comments from Austin Street and Walnut Street Streetscape meetings
- Beautiful Newtonville Survey Results, January 2013