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Newton, MA 02458

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City Council
Newton, MA

Dear City Councilors,

First of all, thank you for your service to our city. I am a firm believer that a robust city council is one of the defining characteristics of Newton's government and one of the reasons it is such a great place to live.

I am writing to you as a 44-year resident of Newtonville. I have seen the city change slowly over the years and I believe that the slow change has been good for the neighborhood with its historic buildings and village accessibility. That is why I am opposed to the spot rezoning of the Orr Block which would accelerate a trend towards rapid change and a big-box cityscape.

Internet searches for "5-story mixed-use development" and "240,000 square feet 160 units" (without quotes) brought up a list of projects including:

- **247 W. 42nd St., Midtown Manhattan - 4 stories, 240,000 square feet**
- **77 West Post Rd., downtown White Plains - 4 stories, 230,000 sq ft**
- **Fuse Cambridge, behind Alewife T station - 6 stories, 205,000 square feet**
- **125 N. Central Ave, Glendale, CA - 5 stories, 164 units**
- **The Kelton at Clearfork, Fort Worth, TX - 2 4-story bldgs w/40,000 sf retail**
- **Madison Valley, Seattle, WA - 4 stories, 30,000 sq ft supermarket**

This size and style of building is being promoted in places like Times Square, West Philadelphia, Fort Worth, Los Angeles, Seattle and Downtown White Plains.

"Downtown" Newtonville? What's wrong with this picture?

Even slow growth is not without problems. Traffic in Newtonville has increased rather dramatically in recent years. During the evening rush hour, cars at the intersection of Walnut and Washington are often backed up to Harvard Ave. Sirens can be heard along Washington several times a day. Extra parking spaces squeezed too close to corners block the vision of drivers attempting to turn onto Washington from side streets. And all this before the Austin Street project has even broken ground!

Contentions that this massive, predatory development constitutes "Smart Growth" strike me as disingenuous. I think we are looking at an attempted leveraged buyout of Newton's intangible capital, including its reputation for safety, by investors exploiting state regulations for personal gain.

The net gain in affordable housing from this project is zero. Rapid growth causes destabilization, leading to more buyouts and more rapid growth. Witness that since the controversial Austin Street development was approved we suddenly "need" another 160 units across the way.

People who cite the nearby commuter rail stop as incentive for "transit-oriented development" are clearly unaware of the commuter rail schedule. It runs inbound in the morning and outbound in the evening on weekdays, and once every 2 hours on weekends. With only one platform, it is not engineered for frequent back-and-forth travel. Also, more and more jobs are located outside of downtown Boston (and with variable hours); the commute from Newtonville to these locations is dismally long and slow via public transit, meaning large numbers of residents will still rely on cars to get to work.

The idea that more people would ride bicycles is nice, but it's not a realistic option for many of Newton's more fragile residents, particularly seniors, not to mention the near-impossibility of bicycle travel in ice and snow.

The developers and others with financial interest in this project will try to assert that Newtonville is in a blighted condition and needs a clean sweep of its old buildings and a bold new look for the future. They will claim our neighbors are elitist NIMBY'ers opposed to diversity. What I see is a loss of diversity as longtime residents, unique local businesses and historic buildings are pushed aside to make room for soulless, cookie-cutter architecture, big-box retailers (or vacant storefronts as is the case in many of these developments) and the same amount of affordable housing as already exists, but this time for whoever is able to game the system in the new order. I am for affordable housing, I am for growth, but I feel strongly that the proposed development is too large for this residential village square.

I propose Newton's planners see Newtonville as a "slow growth" investment, rather than go for the fast cash and turn it into an expensive headache of tall buildings, deep shadows, wind tunnels, queues of buses vying for lanes with more cars, service vehicles, delivery trucks, fire engines, police cars and ambulances attempting to serve the needs of 300-plus new residents. Newtonville is "A Village of Newton." It's not a stock you sell off for quick profit.

I implore you to honor the work of your predecessors and let the current zoning stand for now. In only a few years, the Austin Street project should be up and running, and that would be a much more appropriate time to reconsider zoning changes in Newtonville.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ann Cohen', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Ann Cohen (p/k/a Annie Raines)