

Dianne Sanborn Letter - Orr Block - Dec2016
Newton, Massachusetts - Docket Items #179 16 & 180 16 [Density and Rezoning]

My name is Dianne Sanborn, and I live at 48 Circuit Ave., Newton.

I am writing to put forth my personal views on "affordable housing" in Newton. Since the spring of 2016 I have spoken to hundreds of Newton residents, as well as to most of the shop owners and workers in my village of Newton Highlands. A major theme seems to be the cost of renting/housing in this City, whether it pertains to residential housing or to commercial space: 99.9% of the people I have spoken with think rents and housing prices are too high. Because of this, TRUE diversity has been limited. Developers such as Mr. Korff say that they hope to offset this dilemma by adding "affordable" rentals into their properties. This, as we know, is done by a formula. My question to Mr. Korff and to the City Councilors is this: AFFORDABLE FOR WHOM??

The median income for Newton in 2013 is given as \$116,612, over twice that of the median income of U.S households (approximately \$51,000). Median rentals for 2013 have been given as \$1,673.00/month. Since 2017 is upon us, I expect that these figures may be higher. Let us say, for the sake of an example that a subsidized small studio in Washington Place would rent for \$1200.00/month. If we go by the rule of thumb that one should expect to pay one-third of one's income in rent, a subsidized tenant would be paying \$14,400.00 per year in rent. This would mean that he or she would have to have a gross income of approximately \$50,000.00/year. How many of Newton's service personnel (e.g., store clerks, janitors) would be able to live in even a tiny studio?

I have a friend who is a Lieutenant in the Newton Fire Department and has over 15 years of service, yet is unable to afford to live in Newton. He and other firemen my housemate and I have spoken to have said that most firemen cannot afford to live in Newton.

When I canvassed the shop owners in Newton Highlands, the majority of them (and 100% of the store clerks) said that they would LOVE to live in Newton, but can't afford it. According to the Newton Housing Authority, there is a 3-5 year wait to get into low income senior housing and a 7-10 year wait for families to get into public housing in Newton.

WHAT IS WRONG WITH THIS PICTURE??? Why shouldn't most of those people who serve Newtonites every day be kept out of our city because of the ridiculous cost of housing?? Why shouldn't people, who truly have a "lower income", have the same opportunity to live in a safe neighborhood with accessible green space and have their children go to good schools as the "well heeled"? I contend that we are NOT encouraging true diversity in Newton. What we ARE doing is providing more housing for the "same-old, same-old".

Most of the hundreds of Newton residents I've spoken with in the past 7 months or so seem to be under the impression that "affordable housing" is housing for the ordinary persons I've just described. That thinking seems to be a driving force behind the support for the Washington Place project and others such as Austin and Court Streets.

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Some residents have said to me: "The more dense the better! The higher the better." They are operating under the fallacy that greater density means lower rents!! I have been a renter for 49 years, in Lexington, KY; Los Angeles, CA; Cambridge and Somerville, MA, and now here in Newton. I can say FOR CERTAIN THAT THIS MISCONCEPTION IS NOT TRUE!! DEVELOPERS HERE IN NEWTON ARE NOT ALTRUISTIC! THEY ARE BEING FUNDED, IN PART, BY INVESTORS, WHO EXPECT TO SEE A HEFTY AND SPEEDY RETURN ON THEIR INVESTMENT!

Truly "affordable" housing is only possible under programs such as rent control/rent stabilization; section 8 or other government sponsored programs; benevolent landlords, and the like. I know this because I have been fortunate enough to rent apartments in MA in 2 different ways: through rent control and benevolent landlords. My current landlord has not raised my \$500.00/month rent for my 2 bedroom apartment since I moved into it in 1995. SO, IT'S LUCKY FOR ME, AS I LIVE ON SOCIAL SECURITY OF LESS THAN \$1400.00/month.

LET'S STOP TRYING TO PULL THE WOOL OVER NEWTON RESIDENT'S EYES AND BE UP FRONT ABOUT JUST WHO IS ABLE TO AFFORD TO LIVE IN THIS CITY!! SHAME ON US FOR KEEPING NEWTON TRULY UNDIVERSIFIED!! We do NOT NEED BIGGER, EXPENSIVE BUILDINGS IN NEWTON!!

I AM AGAINST ANY CHANGE TO THE CURRENT ZONING LAWS! I URGE THE COUNCILORS TO KEEP WASHINGTON PLACE AND ALL OTHER BIG DEVELOPMENT TO 4 STORIES OR LESS!

Respectfully,

Dianne Sanborn