

To: Newton City Councilors
From: Fred Arnstein, Neighbors for a Better Newtonville
Date: February 14, 2017
Subject: The vibrancy we are losing

Dear Councilor,

Even if you don't live in Newtonville, you may be familiar with some of the establishments in our village that are going to be destroyed, or already have been destroyed, by Robert Korff's takeover of the Orr Block at the corner of Washington and Walnut Streets. Mr. Korff's project will offer some commercial benefits, but against those benefits, what are we losing? Quite a bit, actually.

Here's a question. What establishment in Newtonville serves about 1200 paying customers each week, both adults and children? Is open from 10:00 in the morning until 8:30 in the evening? Promotes both health and the arts? Encompasses five studios covering 10,000 square feet of space?

Hint: this establishment is invisible as you drive along the perimeter of the Orr Block. It's nestled behind the façade. I wouldn't call it a beautiful building, but it certainly is a functional one. That building will be torn down and the establishment will move elsewhere. It will no longer be part of Newtonville.

You probably knew the answer. It's the Metro West branch of the Boston Ballet School. It's likely that your kids go there or did go. Maybe even you yourself have been a student there, in the past as a kid or now as an adult.

Compare the school against a benefit that Mr. Korff has offered: 2000 square feet to the New Arts Center so that it can expand its offerings and provide space sometimes to other community groups. That offering is praiseworthy, but balance it against the five-times-larger space of the current facility, which serves 1200 users a week. Will the New Art 2000-square-foot space do as well? That's unlikely.

Now consider another establishment which is located — actually, formerly located — just kitty-corner to the Ballet Studio. No quiz needed about this one. It's the Sunoco gas station, operated by Sam Akar. A few days ago it closed. It's now a small wasteland surrounded by chain link fence; the underground gas storage tanks are being excavated even as I write. There's no plan for re-opening that business elsewhere.

Up to the last moment, Sam's Sunoco was a thriving business in the heart of our village. Like the Ballet, it served large numbers of us for decades. You yourself — a city councilor — may have patronized it. Sam mentioned to me various of you that he knew by name. He had spoken with some of you about his upcoming eviction.

Other businesses that serve out community will also be gone. Present tenants, including Newtonville Camera, Joe's Barber Shop, and Karoun Restaurant will in no way be able to afford the new, higher rents; they will move or close.

For the proprietors and employees of these places there will be severe and very difficult disruption. But in this letter, I'm focusing on the loss to our community. Will the new upscale establishments do us more good than the more modest ones we are losing? Many speakers at the Land Use Committee have disparaged the current Orr Block as ugly, a dump, a hovel. Well, they're right that it doesn't look great; it does need refurbishing. But the developer does not plan to refurbish; his plan is to destroy the structures and the businesses that these structures house.

It's reminiscent of Boston's famously demolished West End, which was a vibrant Italian working-class community in the 1950s. The West End was tagged as a slum and destroyed by powerful interests in Boston who, for noble or base reasons, wanted to replace it with relatively high income housing. Improve the neighborhood; make it more upscale!

The disappearing businesses in the Orr Block have contributed hugely to the actual vibrancy our village. The claim of increased vibrancy under MU4 is dubious. It's clear that MU4 will benefit Mr. Korff and other developers; it's not clear how much it will, when all's said and done, benefit our villages and the city.

I hope that in considering the losses I've described, you might dial back what belief you may have that rezoning and major new development on that parcel — and on other parcels to come — will actually deliver the splendid advantages we are promised.