

Comments from Orr Block Neighbors at 12/15/16 Land Use Committee Hearing:

Thank you for this opportunity to speak this evening. As abutters and close neighbors to the Orr Block, we support mixed use development on this site, including the creation of new housing, especially units that are affordable to individuals and families. However, we continue to oppose each of the proposed plans for the site to date as the developer continues to be unwilling to reduce the density, scale and height of the project in any meaningful way.

- We also oppose the developer's requests for rezoning and special permits that would allow for such a tall and dense project – 5 stories and 171 (or 164) units – and believe that it is out of proportion to Newtonville as a village. The developer could create a thoughtful and much more fully embraced project within existing zoning that could still include a significant percentage of affordable units. We are especially proud of the fact that Newtonville has provided affordable housing over the years and want to see it continue to do so.
- As we have looked at the criteria for Mixed Use Districts and development under City ordinances, we continue to believe that neither the developer nor the Planning Department has given enough consideration to the purpose of mixed use development, which includes encouraging “comprehensive design within the site and with its surroundings” and which “protects neighborhoods from impacts of development”.
- We have heard justification for the proposed height of the development being based on the width of Washington Street, and we have seen numerous depictions of the development plans from Washington and Walnut Streets, both during the day and at night. Frankly, until more recently, more attention has been given to what the development would “look like from the south, east and west”, and whether is “fits with” Washington as a street, than to its impact on those of us who live in what is a City Council-designated Historic District neighborhood who will have to live with, day in and day out, what is built here.
- More specifically, as abutters and other close neighbors, we have respectfully asked that the developer prepare renderings that look at the proposed project from the northern/Foster Street perspective and not just from our back yards with proposed plantings that might or might not survive. How will it look at night when five and four stories and parking lots are lit behind our homes? How will it look from our second and third floors? We have yet to see this but have serious concerns given the massiveness and height of the proposed project. While we appreciate the new rendering for what the back of the development would look like from the parking lot, we believe that the project is still too close to our homes, being only 45 feet away on the Walnut Street side.

- We also have heard how the proposed development will “knit Newtonville together”. While this may sound good, we wonder what this really means. Many of us who have lived in Newtonville for years walk around the village and cross the Walnut Street or Lowell Avenue bridges all the time. Building an oversized project will not change the division of Newtonville by the Mass Pike. In fact, there is an unfair irony that the presence of the highway, something we have had to live with over the years, is now being used as a justification for this site being “especially appropriate” for a 5-story development, something we do not support.
- In terms of Newtonville as a whole, we know that the village already has one MU4 development on Austin Street that has yet to even break ground. As we said above, there will be more development in Newton, but especially in village centers and bordering residential neighborhoods. It needs to be compatible with the surrounding community, appropriate in size and spread throughout the City. Just because a particular developer has chosen a particular site does not mean that what the developer wants should rule the day, with the City in a continual reactive mode.
- There also are serious concerns about traffic. The traffic studies are not plausible for anyone who lives in or drives through the area on a regular basis. This is particularly questionable since the impact of the Austin Street and Court Street projects are still unknown. It is premature to approve this development (which is more than twice the size of the Austin Street project) prior to assessing the effect on traffic and other impacts on Newtonville.
- Finally, many Newtonville residents also remain concerned that a development of this scale will set a precedent, not only for the Washington St. corridor but also other parts of Newton. At the most recent Planning and Development Board meeting, the City planner present was asked if any impact study had included the possibility of other MU4 developments in Newtonville – the answer was “no”. This is an important question to consider.

In conclusion, we do not see any compelling reasons to grant a change in zoning for the Orr Block site and urge you to keep the development within the current zoning. We also want to thank our own City Councilors for the time they have taken to hear and discuss our perspectives and concerns.

Sincerely,

Meghan Smith, 34 Foster Street, on behalf of herself and:

Ellen Fitzpatrick	20 Foster Street	Mari and John Wilson	30 Foster Street
Francesca Koss	137 Lowell Avenue	Robert and Elizabeth Smith	40 Foster Street
Bette White	14 Foster Street	Patrick and Gerald Slaterly	221 and 227 Walnut Street
Adel and Bonnie Foz	16 Page Road		