

October 18, 2016

Marc Laredo, Land Use Committee Chair
Members of the City Council
c/o David Olson, City Clerk

SUBJECT: Washington Place

Dear Councilor Laredo,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a presentation at the last Land Use hearing on the Washington Place project. As you suggested, we are forwarding our remarks to you in writing so they can be shared with other Council members.

During the several months in which this project has been in front of the Land Use Committee, it has become clear that the focal point of the discussion has been on the appropriateness of the site for a project in the Mixed Use 4 (MU4) zoning district. Since we both were actively involved in the crafting of this zone, we want to provide the Council and the public with background details that we think will be helpful to you in your deliberations, particularly with regards to the importance of the zoning for this site.

To step back in time briefly, many changes have shaped Newton over the years. The formative years began simply with train stops, which soon were surrounded by villages where people could live, work and shop. Eventually, the land in between was filled with suburban neighborhoods and other uses. Increased reliance on cars brought about other changes; parking lots and driveways interrupted some of the streetscapes, and people began shopping in other places because the car could take them there. Consequently, the villages became somewhat less vital to daily life. Zoning Regulations came late to the game and more or less documented what had occurred organically, with less focus on planning for the future, and often emphasizing the separation of uses.

Today, we have more sophisticated guidance. The *2007 Comprehensive Plan* and the Mixed-Use Centers Element, adopted in 2012, provide a vision and planning focus that offers a more intentional means of shaping the future of Newton. Based on current demographics and best practices in planning, they not only *allow* for but *plan* for a mix of compatible and complementary uses to coexist so people have the option to live more like they used to, above or within walking distance of the amenities they need for daily life. This also has the side benefits of reducing traffic and pollution by getting people to be less reliant on cars and makes for a healthier population. The *Comprehensive Plan* also calls for Flexible Moderate Growth, which is intended to be adaptive to the changing trends and needs of the population, respectful of the residential quality of life so valued in Newton, and also supportive of commercial uses while avoiding adverse impacts.

Originally inspired by the potential for development on the Austin Street parking lot, the MU4 zone utilized the knowledge acquired from the study of mixed-use centers, including lessons learned from Newton's historic past and the Joint Advisory planning process. From May to October of 2012 the Zoning & Planning Committee and Planning staff thoroughly and thoughtfully vetted the features that would make this district applicable to multiple village commercial centers, and not just to Austin Street, with Councilor (then Alderman) Baker taking a leadership role to make this happen. The unique design details embedded in the MU4 zoning text are now available for use on appropriate sites in our larger village centers ~ and Newtonville is one of them.

The intentions of the MU4 area are clearly stated in the Zoning Regulations:

- Create a sense of place and community
- Allow development of buildings and uses appropriate to Newton's village commercial centers in keeping with the vision of the *Comp Plan*
- Encourage compact, pedestrian-oriented villages with mix of uses that are complementary and serve community needs
- Allow enough density and intensity of uses to promote an active streetscape that supports local businesses and local transit
- Expand diverse housing options
- Promote health and well being of residents by encouraging walking and use of alternative modes of transportation

So how do we do these things? When crafting a village-centric zone, one of the things the Planning Department did was to review the features of Business zones, which under certain circumstances allow both commercial and residential uses in buildings that range in height from 2 to 8 stories. Given the additional housing and other benefits sought, two stories would not be sufficient, but eight stories were considered inappropriate for a village. After lengthy discussion, it was agreed that a five-story maximum by special permit that includes housing and meets the other requirements of the zone would be suitable in some locations of our larger village commercial centers, noting the final determinations as to where the zone could be placed would be up to the Council.

The final text of the MU4 zone translates its purposes into regulations to create an interactive mixed-use setting in a way no other zone does. It incentivizes housing by allowing for additional building height if more housing is included, with stepped back upper stories to let in light and reduce the perceived mass of the building. It requires windows with changing displays and frequent entries that are inviting. It encourages wider sidewalks comfortably enclosed by building facades, commercial spaces similar in size to those found elsewhere in our villages, and beneficial open space. But the devil is in the details and there can be many ways to accomplish the purposes of the MU4 zone, so some flexibility is also built in to allow the Council to grant exceptions and approve special permits for those features that make sense in a given location because not every site or situation is the same.

Thus far, the design of this project includes:

- Sidewalks that are wide enough for walking, sitting, and café tables, if desired, that will open up and enliven the streetscape on this prominent corner;
- Roadway changes to markedly improve the flow and safety of bicycle, pedestrian and vehicular traffic;
- An alternative to the single-family residential living that makes up most of our housing stock that aims to address a growing and well-documented need;
- Enough density and a combination of features to create an environment that will be attractive for residents, businesses, and customers alike.

As shown on the Newtonville Area Council's map (attached), the site is in the heart of the village. At the intersection of Walnut and Washington Streets, two major north/south and east/west roadways, this location is prime for anchoring the village on the north side. It has the capacity to function well under this new zoning and will bring to fruition the desired outcomes we've mentioned. As a village that was divided by the Mass Pike, it's hard to imagine a better place to inject new life and vitality to (literally) bridge that gap.

On September 24, 2012 the Zoning and Planning Committee recommended approval of the MU4 district (8-0), and on October 1st, the Board passed this district (23-0) with Councilor (then Alderman) Gentile absent. Given the overwhelming support for this district, which was designed for village commercial centers, we ask that this honorable Council respect and carry through what your former colleagues, and many who are here tonight, decided was in the best interest of Newton. Simply put, *if not here, where?*

We hope that future Newtonville Village Days will embrace *all* of Newtonville to include both sides of Walnut Street. With a lively new development, there will be lots to celebrate.

Sincerely,

Marcia Johnson
Former member of the Board of Alderman
Former Zoning and Planning Committee Chair

Candace Havens
Former Director of Planning &
Development for City of Newton

Newtonville Neighborhood Area Council

*City of Newton,
Massachusetts*

Legend

- ★ Polling Locations
- ▭ Precincts
- ▭ Council Area



The information on this map is from the Newton Geographic Information System (GIS). The City of Newton cannot guarantee the accuracy of this information. Each user of this map is responsible for determining its suitability for his or her intended purpose. City departments will not necessarily approve applications based solely on GIS data.



CITY OF NEWTON, MASSACHUSETTS
Mayor - Seth D. Warren
GIS Administrator - Douglas Greenfield

Map Date: September 09 2015

