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November 8, 2012

Re: Adamant Opposition to Development of 4 Units at 9 Ripley Street

Dear Aldermen:

Thank you so much for being open to input from the neighbors of 9 Ripley Street.

I believe that basically all of us neighbors of 9 Ripley Street (except Alderwoman Vicki Danberg and, perhaps, now Norman Sirk) are ADAMANTLY OPPOSED to having 4 units at 9 Ripley Street. It is, admittedly, a double lot; and, although we would love to be able to keep it "as is," I think we all recognize that progress is about forward movement and change and that it is not unreasonable for a double lot to be used to accommodate 2 units. It makes us sad, but I think we all understand.

But for there to be 4 units on a double lot – requiring all sorts of "exceptions" made after more than 2 years of strategizing and scheming by a developer (with behind-the-scenes support from a member of the Board of Aldermen) – and done at such great expense to the neighbors, that's what's causing us all such upset and distress.

From the very beginning, our entire neighborhood has been adamantly opposed to the placement of 4 units on the double lot at 9 Ripley Street.

We neighbors of 9 Ripley Street have attended numerous "neighborhood" meetings to discuss the situation (with some meetings – hosted by Norm Sirk – having an attendance of up to 30 people). But sadly, as can so easily happen with a newly organized "neighborhood coalition" when the topic for discussion is something that hits so close to "home" for everybody, we have not functioned all that effectively. On one matter, however, we have been united, namely, we do not want 4 units at 9 Ripley Street – 2 units "yes," 4 units "absolutely not"!

Some months ago, we had created a large "plot plan" of 9 Ripley Street, including all the lots within 300 – 400 feet of the property. We asked those neighbors who supported the idea of 2 units at 9 Ripley Street to sign on top of their own plot plan; on the larger plot plan it was specifically indicated that a signature indicated support (specifically) of 2 units and neither 3 nor 4 units.

We painstakingly gathered everyone's signature and ended up getting some 25 – 30 signatures in all! – every single one of which indicated adamant opposition to the proposed 4 units at 9 Ripley Street.

We entrusted the large plot plan to Norm Sirk – whom we have since come to understand is probably now "in favor of" having 4 units at 9 Ripley Street (although he

had originally been opposed). We neighbors hypothesize that Norm prefers the 4 units to 40B affordable housing, which the developer has threatened would be his alternative proposal for 9 Ripley Street were he not to be given permission to move forward with his 4 units at 9 Ripley Street.

As it happens, it was ill advised on our part to relinquish the plot plan to Norm; because now, much to our dismay, Norm informs us that he is not really sure what happened to the enlarged "evidentiary" sheet with all our signatures. Norm says he thinks that maybe he submitted it to "somebody" in the Newton City Hall – but he doesn't really remember who exactly that would have been.

As I think the Board of Aldermen has begun to recognize, the already very complicated situation of the development at 9 Ripley Street has been even further complicated and compromised by Alderwoman Vicki Danberg's over-involvement. Parenthetically, her property is easily within 300 feet of 9 Ripley Street; and, despite repeated expressions of concern from all of us about a possible "conflict of interests," Vicki has summarily dismissed our concerns and vehemently insisted that there is no such conflict of interests.

Only later, and much to our horror, did we discover (directly from the developer himself) that Vicki had been closely involved for over a year and a half – behind the scenes and entirely unbeknownst to any of us – in strategizing with the developer to get his proposed 4-unit project at 9 Ripley Street "specially" approved and underway. And she herself never thought to mention this to any of us! Again, it was from the developer himself that we learned this... Vicki's non-disclosure of her behind-the-scenes scheming and strategizing leaves most of the 9 Ripley Street neighbors feeling confused and betrayed.

Understandably, we are very relieved that Vicki has now been recused by the Board of Aldermen itself. But she has already done so much "damage" over the course of the past year or two because of her undisclosed involvement with the developer (and his lawyer, whom she knows well) that everything has been really skewed – and justice is being obstructed. As I'm sure you know, she can be a powerful force and, when intent upon getting her way, there is almost no stopping her.

I think that Vicki does some very constructive things for her constituents; but, with respect to the development at 9 Ripley Street (and for reasons entirely unclear to us), it would seem that Vicki has a blind-spot...

And, admittedly, we neighbors have been so busy negotiating our complicated lives and, sadly, so disorganized and dysfunctional as a "neighborhood group" that we were never really able to mount an effective protest to what we came to feel was an effort by Vicki to "railroad" through her pet project of 4 units at 9 Ripley Street.

In fact, early-on, once the developer came to understand how adamantly opposed all of us were to the idea of 4 units at 9 Ripley Street, he had apparently proposed a 3-unit compromise that Vicki (as I understand it) single-handedly dismissed!! Only a few of us ever even came to know that the developer had proposed this 3-unit compromise solution.

So on the table for consideration has been the 4-unit project – again, with the omnipresent (and now unspoken) “threat” of 40B affordable housing as an alternative were the developer not to be given permission to move forward with his 4 units at 9 Ripley Street.

All of this has been absolutely devastating for the entire neighborhood. Again, we haven’t mounted a terribly effective opposition because of our ridiculously busy lives, but we are truly devastated and horrified at the thought of having 4 units at 9 Ripley Street. It would seem that only the developer will profit (financially) and Vicki (for some unknown – perhaps political? – reason unclear to us at the present time) – but at what cost to all the rest of us!!

I have lived with my partner Gunnar Engstrom in our home at 3 Ripley Street (which is right next door to 9 Ripley Street) for over 32 years – and I have loved every minute of my time here. I love living in Newton Centre; I love my home; and I love the neighborhood. My plan has been to stay here for the duration.

When, in 1980, I was looking around for a home to buy, I opted for this “neck of the woods” because I loved the “flavor” of this 1- and 2-family residential neighborhood – reasonably sized lots with nice homes and “space-between” to ensure privacy. Although a home in a neighborhood like Allston or Brighton would certainly have been much more affordable and closer to Boston, I chose to explore my options in the much pricier Newton Centre area because I knew that I would be spending pretty much the rest of my life in the home that I was going to be purchasing – and I knew that I wanted my space, my privacy, my peace, and my quiet.

And so it is that I settled upon a very nice Newton Centre neighborhood that I knew was zoned for 1- and 2-family homes but that had nice spacing between the homes. I loved the “feel” of the area. Indeed, I have thoroughly enjoyed my 32 years here at 3 Ripley Street. I have indeed found the space, privacy, peace, and quiet that I so crave.

Were there to be 4 units at 9 Ripley Street, I shudder to think about all the extra activity that this “quadrupling” of things would most certainly create – all the extra activity, extra cars, extra traffic, extra driveway, extra noise, extra people, extra visitors, extra comings and goings, extra lights, extra potential for bad stuff to happen... More specifically, I think about the quadrupling of electromagnetic fields generated by the 4 Smart Meters that will be installed next door (1 for each unit), not just the 1 Smart Meter that currently provides its electronic readings. And I think about all the potential noise generated by 4 central air conditioning units, not just 1 such unit. Everything quadrupled...

And I can’t bear to think of what will happen to all the gorgeous, old trees that currently resident on the lot at 9 Ripley Street. Please see the attached photos of the beautiful, tall trees that have been standing on the property (exactly where the proposed units and new driveway will go) for decades and decades. It would seem to us that the architect’s proposed “landscaping” depicts an unrealistic “re-positioning” of trees. As far as we can tell, we believe that very few of the trees (and their extensive root system) currently located on the land will survive...

And it is absolutely intolerable to Gunnar and me, personally, to think that there will be, instead of beautiful trees, a driveway and a “parking stall” (with cars coming and going)

right alongside our side property line – and certainly located within the side property line setbacks required for residences in our neighborhood.

Had I known all this might be happening next door to me, I would never have bought my current home.

Greg Cohen, the developer, purchased 9 Ripley Street on August 16, 2010, for \$1,120,000. The previous owner, Maureen Grace, had put it on the market for \$1,195,000; but, in a conversation that I had with Maureen just before she moved out, she told me that she had offered the property to Greg because, although he was offering her considerably less than her asking price, he had promised her that he himself would be living at 9 Ripley Street – and specified that he had no intention of “developing” it. Maureen told me this directly; it mattered to her that her beautiful home not be made into a development.

Obviously, Greg Cohen (a developer by trade and with his own home elsewhere) misrepresented his intentions to Maureen Grace.

Also of concern to me is the following: Ryan and Tracy were a lovely couple who (with their adorable little twins) were tenants at 9 Ripley Street last year (when the developer was attempting to get the necessary permits for his development). Tracy shared with me the following rather upsetting story. She said that she and her husband had loved living in the house but that Greg was a “horrible landlord.” She told me that when they would have “issues” with the house, it would sometimes be “weeks” before Greg would return their calls.

More specifically: Tracy and Ryan had had a problem with their upstairs bathroom that developed last winter. Here, too, it was several weeks before Greg even returned their urgent calls and then, when he finally sent a plumber to 9 Ripley Street to investigate the problem and found out that repairing the problem would be expensive, Greg decided to do nothing about fixing their plumbing problem – because their lease was going to be up 4 or 5 months later. At the point when I spoke to Tracy in April 2012, Greg had still not addressed their problem – and Tracy and Ryan (now one bathroom unable to be used) were understandably very, very angry with Greg.

Amongst many other things, I am very concerned about the fact that Greg did not take the concerns of his tenants seriously – although, at least initially, he had seemed like a responsive and responsible landlord. More generally, I am very worried about the potential for “empty promises” from Greg to us.

I am of course absolutely thrilled that Greg has volunteered to rebuild – at no charge to Gunnar and me – our stone retaining wall here at 3 Ripley Street and obviously I hope that this will be one of the promises that he keeps (I understand he has been making a number of promises to various ones of us in the neighborhood); but I am concerned that, once / if his plans ever become approved, he will either inadvertently “forget” about our concerns or “dismiss” them summarily.

We had also been promised (by Greg) a list of other housing developments that he has spearheaded. He had promised to provide us with the addresses – so that we could go check them out. That never happened.

In sum: With respect to what now happens at 9 Ripley Street – not a single one of us wants 4 units at 9 Ripley Street. Not a single one of us – except Vicki and, now, Norm (who, as noted earlier, we believe prefers the 4 units to the 40B affordable housing option).

Again, we grant, though with some reluctance, that adding 1 home to the already-existent single home on the double lot at 9 Ripley Street makes sense. We don't love that idea but recognize that we don't have much of a leg to stand on in insisting that things remain as they are. Things change; we understand that. And as things change, we must accommodate those changes.

So we are all pretty much in agreement that adding 1 home to the lot at 9 Ripley Street is a reasonable compromise position for us to be taking – but that adding 3 homes to the lot is a project that all of us adamantly and vehemently oppose. We simply cannot support it.

Over the course of the 32 years that I have lived here, I have never seen such a ground swell of opposition to any proposal affecting our neighborhood.

...even when the addition of those new buildings for Hebrew College at the top of Herrick Road was being considered (which did then happen – and, later still, was “home” to a violent rape in the basement of Stoddard Hall), even then there was no such outcry as there is now with respect to Greg Cohen's proposal to add 3 additional units to the 9 Ripley Street lot.

The irony is that all of us (who have tended to be private people doing our own thing so that we can devote our attention to going about the business of living our very busy and complicated lives) are beginning to coalesce as a neighborhood in a way that we have never before done. I now talk to my neighbors as they walk past my home; and absolutely every single one of them is adamantly opposed to the proposal that there be 4 units at 9 Ripley Street.

Financial gain for the developer – but at such great cost to all of us.

Again, thank you for taking the time to listen to us and to our very real distress. It means everything to us that you would have wanted our input – so that you could think carefully about how best to proceed.

With deepest appreciation,

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