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Dear Board of Aldermen:

I am writing regarding petitions #273-14 and #273-14(2), the measures in play to rezone 114 River Street and the approvals for the development of 114 River St./5-7 Elm Street. I understand there will be a vote this evening about the petitions, and I'd like to voice my concern about how I see the proposed development—which is similar to other already completed projects nearby—negatively affecting my neighborhood.

For nearly six years, my family has owned and lived at our West Newton address, which is a house built in 1890 that holds two smaller, side-by-side condos of about 1,300 and 1,500 square feet, respectively. In that short time, we have seen building after building in the Elm St./Oak Ave./Webster St. blocks be turned from older single-family homes into large two- (or more) family buildings costing roughly \$1 million or more each when put on the market. The problem, to me, is that the buildings hardly fit the lots, let alone the general aesthetic of West Newton's diverse, older and historic housing stock. When I see the giant multi-occupancy developments built by developers, not families, that seem to have no regard for green space or general population density patterns, I can't help but think: Greed.

How can it be anything else but greed? I'll take an educated guess that the developers typically are not the ones living in the homes they've created. They slap them up, build them out and leave, earning hundred of thousands of dollars at sale. In return, existing neighbors are left feeling closed in with the new buildings mere feet from property lines and resulting in far less mature trees and grass to enjoy. Obviously, the new buildings hardly match the scale and type of existing houses on the block. No one says we need a block of cookie cutter homes, but certainly an eye toward matching, generally, the size and type of neighboring buildings is preferable to keep a neighborhood feel.

It's interesting that two of the units remain for sale at Elm Gardens (of which I live within 300 feet), one available at least since September, four months ago, according to Zillow.com. That's unheard of for Newton, which attracts plenty of people who can afford that price point. So, that doesn't necessarily fit in with an otherwise "booming" real estate market. It doesn't, indeed, seem that many people want to shell out that huge amount of money for no lawn and to share walls with four other neighbors, does it? If that's the housing stock that's here, why move to the suburbs? A decent patch of lawn, good schools and a shot at home ownership are reasons my family specifically moved out of Brooklyn, N.Y. to come here, but now it feels Brooklyn is in sight. As another example, the new 4,300-square-foot condo at 25A Oak Ave. still remains for sale at \$1.2 million. Of note, at a combined 8,600 square feet, 25A and 25B Oak Ave. have recently replaced a lovely roughly 2,000 square foot single family home and hulk over the Cape Cod style and split ranch homes to its left and right. "Eye sore" isn't even close to the correct description.

I can't help but think of how the families, including mine, who can't afford over \$1.3 million (that's roughly a \$7,000 monthly mortgage payment assuming a 20% down payment—certainly far from "low income" and I would argue far from "middle class," too) but who could benefit from the same amount of space if it were two (or three?) market rate or affordable housing rental apartments as just one unit in the existing Elm Gardens. That's where these developers could help make a difference and show that they are not just greedy. Why should only those who can afford a \$1 million home be able to easily get into Newton? We need a little perspective put into the argument here that lots of people need housing—not just the needs of well off, which seems to permeate the mindset of Newton developers.

Meanwhile, I am aware that the long empty lot at 114 River St. is up for rezoning regarding the proposed large, multi-unit development of 5-7 Elm St. adjacent to it. I find this proposal so disheartening. While I obviously would like to see the ugly lot I drive and walk by several times a day be replaced with something prettier, I certainly don't feel the effort to change its zoning into residential from commercial makes any sense. Why do we need another housing monstrosity? If it remains commercially zoned, it could become a café or corner store, another amenity to serve the neighborhood. It would sit catty corner to the hairdresser and dry cleaner, which obviously do well in that area. Plus, obviously the people who live or move into the existing Elm Gardens would help support it.

I hope you'll strongly consider voting down these two petitions and do what's right for the neighborhood and what the neighbors are clearly telling you they want. The existing footprint of 5-7 Elm St. is a perfectly lovely size for a two-family, affordable home that West Newton needs.

Sincerely,

Meredith Berg