

To: Members of the Land Use Committee
Members of the Newton Board of Alderman

From: Tricia Amend Bombara
32 Auburndale Ave. West Newton, MA 02465

Date: September 24, 2014

RE: Special Permit Petitions #273-14 (114 River St.) and #273-14(2) (5-7 Elm St.)

Dear Members of the Board,

I am writing in regard to the above Special Permit petitions as a 20-year resident of this neighborhood. The first petition (273-14) seeks to change the zoning of the parcel at 114 River Street in West Newton from Business 1 to Multi Residence 2. The second petition seeks to construct 4 single-family attached dwellings on the combined parcels at 5-7 Elm Street and 114 River Street.

Before commenting on the petitions themselves, I want to note for the record that a sign regarding the Public Hearing was posted at the 5-7 Elm Street property (against a hedge so it could only be viewed from one direction), but **no sign was posted at the 114 River Street parcel**. This property, located at the very highly travelled intersection of Elm Street and River Street, has been vacant since the Boston I Store burned down in 1999. Neighborhood residents have been wondering for the past 15 years what would happen with this site, and literally hundreds walk and drive by this property every day. By not posting the required sign regarding the Public Hearing on this property, **residents of the neighborhood who are not abutters (or among the small number of readers of the fine print in the TAB) were deprived of notice that a Public Hearing was taking place regarding petitions to change the zoning and subsequently develop this property for residential use.**

Regarding the proposal to construct 4 single-family attached houses on these parcels, I would strongly urge the Board to consider the recent history of development in this neighborhood. In 2007, the same developer sought and received permission to build 5 single-family attached dwellings on the adjacent parcel at 13 Elm Street (Special Permit Petition #40-07). Please note the dramatic change in 7 years in this small area of Elm and River Streets, Oak and Auburndale Ave, as evidenced in the Planning Department responses:

2007: *The block itself consists of a mix of multi-family (generally two-family) and single-family residential uses.*

2014: *The land uses surrounding the site are mostly residential, including single-family, two-family, and attached/multifamily dwellings.*

Note that in 2007, the area is predominantly a mix of two-family and single-family homes; there is no mention of attached/multifamily dwellings.

2007: *In relation to the land area, the development will be significantly larger than the average for the neighborhood (average FAR for the neighborhood = —0.2; the proposed FAR = 0.42)*

...the Planning Department has some concerns that the unit sizes differ from the existing (neighborhood) average and would recommend a reduction in the size of at least one unit...

...the Planning Department remains concerned about the project scale (bulk), which should show careful respect for neighborhood context.

2014: *...the size of the proposed project is not out of character with the surrounding neighborhood...*

...The existing uses in the surrounding neighborhood include a number of multi-family/attached dwelling structures, some of which are even denser than the proposed project.

Note that in 2007, concern was raised about the size and scale of the project, as it was significantly larger than the neighborhood average. Since that time, several multi-family attached dwelling projects have been built via the Special Permit process, tilting the neighborhood context toward more density and bulk; in effect, the Board has allowed the character of the neighborhood to be changed to one which actually encourages more density.

2007: *...One of the other goals of the Draft Comprehensive Plan is to maintain and add to the economic diversity of housing in the City, particularly for those people who cannot afford to buy housing in Newton given median housing values, but also who do not qualify for affordable housing. While the Planning Department believes that attached dwelling use can be appropriate for this site under the right circumstances, a greater diversity in the size of the units would be an added benefit. The Planning Department would recommend that the size of one unit be reduced, and the re-alignment of interior spaces be done in such a way to provide a greater variety in the number of bedrooms among units.*

...Inclusionary Units (Section 30-24(f)(3) requires that 15% of the total number of units, in this case one (1) unit, be designated for affordable housing where a special permit is required for development. However, Section 30-24(0(4), Cash Payment, allows an applicant to make a cash payment-in-lieu of providing an affordable unit when the total number of dwelling units proposed in the development will not exceed six units. The petitioner has stated that the applicant intends to make a cash payment pursuant to Section 30-24(1)(4).

2014: *...The Planning Department continues to encourage the petitioner to reduce the size of some of the units, so that the project contributes to a more diverse housing stock, which is one of the goals of the 2007 Newton Comprehensive Plan.*

Note that in 2007, the proposal was for 5 3-bedroom units each with a 1-car garage; the Planning Department recommended a reduction in size of at least one unit and a greater diversity in the number of bedrooms to better meet the goals of the Comprehensive Plan. Instead, the development as built contains 5 4-bedroom units each with a 2-car garage. The 2014 proposal is also for 3-bedroom units, and the Planning Board is again recommending a reduction in size. There is no mention of inclusionary units or cash payment in 2014. If the additional units of housing are built, the Board will have allowed a 9-unit development of \$1M+ luxury single-family attached homes, most with 4 bedrooms and 4.5 baths and all with 2-car garages, to replace 2 two-family houses with moderately priced rental units.

This is not in keeping with the Comprehensive Plan's goal to maintain and promote economic diversity of housing in the City. If the driving force behind allowing attached dwelling/high density developments in residential neighborhoods close to village centers is the desire to maintain economic diversity in housing with easy access to mass transit for commuting, the \$1M+ 4-bedroom homes with 2-car garages are not the answer.

Thank you for your consideration.