

Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council

Meeting Minutes, September 3, 2020

Area Council members:

Bruce Blakely, Bob Burke, Barbara Darnell, Groot Gregory, Nathaniel Lichtin, Srdjan Nedeljkovic, Larry Rosenberg, Amanda Theunissen, Amy Wayne

Ex Officio:

City Councilor Bill Humphrey

Guests:

City Councilor Alicia Bowman, Amy Grier, Alan Schlesinger, Sonya McKnight, John Rice, Ned Crecelius, Katherine Clark, Chris Talanian, Mark Shuman, Laura Witney, Leslie Crecelius, Julius Starkman, Carol Carroll

Meeting called to order at 7:34 pm. Srdjan Nedeljkovic taking minutes. Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin presiding. The meeting was held using Zoom videoconferencing technology due to the Covid-19 health crisis.

1149-1151 Walnut Street Proposal

Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin introduced the topic of the development proposal by Talanian Realty to construct a 4 story, 48 feet high, 26-unit apartment building with first floor retail at 1149-1151 Walnut Street, replacing a single story building near Lincoln Street on Walnut Street.

Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic expressed support for the project and prepared a draft letter for the Area Council to send to City Council as the Special Permit application is reviewed. Srdjan noted in the letter that the new mixed-use building will preserve street level retail while also adding a modest amount of housing to the village center. The zoning relief that is being requested is appropriate for a project that is in a pedestrian-oriented village center next to a Green line MBTA station. Area Councilor Nedeljkovic believes that the Area Council should support the Special Permit zoning relief that is being requested, including reduced lot area per unit, the request for minimal to no side setbacks, the various dimensional variances on parking requirements, and the reduction in required parking spaces from 61 to the requested 23.

Area Councilor Nedeljkovic suggested that there are ways that the project could be further improved. These include adding an on-street parking space at the location of a curb cut to the property that will be closed, reducing the width of the access driveway to support a safe pedestrian crossing, planting an additional street tree while removing the utility pole in front of the project, undergrounding of a segment of overhead utilities, and re-assessing the plan to place fixed planters on the sidewalk, which may obstruct and discourage active use of the streetscape. Furthermore, the

project would be enhanced by adding windows to the north façade facing the Christian Science church, and improving the discordant wall treatment of the proposed building on that elevation, including awnings above street-level windows facing Walnut Street, and generally improving the architectural design on the Walnut Street façade to make it more consistent with the historical architecture of the Village Center.



Mr. Ned Crecelius, a long time residents of Newton Highlands who lives near the Eliot MBTA station commented about the proposed development. He noted that he had raised 2 children in Newton Highlands and used the Hyde Playground for many years. He was speaking on behalf of the Christian Science Church, abutting the 1149-1151 proposed project from the north. The house that is now home to the Christian Science Church was built in the 1880s. This was known for many years as the Newton Clinic. The First Church of Christ Science church was incorporated in 1912 and has been holding services in Newton for 108 years, first from a hall in West Newton, then from a location in Newtonville. Mr. Crecelius noted that for the past 12 years, the Church has been located in the former Doc Thompson house at 1141 Walnut Street. The services are currently on-line, but the Church welcomed anyone to its Reading Room before it was closed as a result of the current pandemic. The Reading Room has extensive materials for bible study, and has been used by pastors of other denominations and many others. The Reading Room is typically open every day except Sundays and holidays. The Church holds free public lectures, either at St. Paul's or at the Congregational Church. As an abutter, the Christian Science Church and its members have an interest in what happens at the adjacent project site.

Mr. Crecelius then asked Ms. Katie Clark, long time member of the Church and the immediate past first reader of the Church, to articulate concerns about the proposed development. Ms. Clark noted that she has been a member of the Newton Christian Science Church, joining in 2003 when she was a Newton South high school student. Generally, Ms. Clark noted that she supports improvement on the project site with a right-sized development. She believes that the planned development is too

large for the lot size. The footprint takes up every inch of the lot, right up to the shared property line with zero setback from the property line. Ms. Clark noted that the proposed project may require a 15-foot easement onto the church's property. She expressed concerns about there being a 4 story windowless wall that would create shadow and shade onto the Church property. This would have a dramatic effect on the property and visually be bad for the church and the neighborhood. Ms. Clark noted that a major issue with the proposal is lack of parking, as the special permit application calls for 23 stalls, about 1/3 of what is normally required for a development of this size. Ms. Clark asked that the Area Council express concerns about the development as being oversized for the lot.

Area Council President Lichtin noted that he understands the concerns with having the building up against the lot line. However, he generally supports the project. Nathaniel wondered if there might be a way to set back the building from the property line for the upper story or two. Nathaniel also stated that he generally agrees with the list of improvements to the plans as noted by Area Councilor Nedeljkovic.

Srdjan Nedeljkovic again expressed support for improving the north façade of the site facing the Christian Science Church with windows rather than having a windowless wall.

Chris Talanian from the development team made a few points. He noted that windows could be added to the north side façade but only with an easement agreement with the church. The development company has been in discussion regarding that easement. Mr. Talanian noted that he supports having more windows on the north façade. With regards to the zero lot line issue, Mr. Talanian noted that it would be impossible to achieve a 2.0 FAR (floor area ratio) on this site and have a 4-story building without at least one portion of the building being on a zero lot line. In terms of carrying the retail experience from adjacent properties towards Lincoln Street, the access driveway to the building was placed on the north side of the property, and the north side was made the zero lot line. Mr. Talanian pointed out that the majority of the north side of the building is not on the lot line, and that only 20 feet of the building is at the lot line. The lot line is about 100 feet in length, and about 20 feet of the building structure is on the lot line. The reason that an easement is needed in order to have windows on the north side of the building is because the portion of the building on the lot line cannot have windows on the lot line in case the adjacent property owner builds another building that is on a zero lot line, which would create a wall next to the windows.

Attorney Alan Schlesinger, on behalf of his client, Talanian Development, stated that he appreciates the support of the Area Council for this project, and that the developer will respond individually to the items that are being suggested. The response will be forthcoming in the near future. Mr. Schlesinger believes that the list of proposed improvements to the project as noted in this meeting was thoughtful and not unfair. Alan pointed out that the developer has had conversations with the church, and expressed his agreement that it is important for the developer to do as much as possible to satisfy the Church. However, Mr. Schlesinger noted that the proposal for zero lot lines is consistent with other parcels in the Highlands district, in which many commercial buildings abut each other. The developer will look at the suggested changes to the plans and respond to them individually.

Mr. Ned Crecelius presented a few clarifications to some of his earlier concerns. With regards to a zero setback line for commercial buildings, Mr. Cornelius noted that this applies to situations in

which a commercial property abuts another commercial property. In this case, the Church property is zoned residential. Therefore, requesting a zero setback abutting a residential zone would be quite different than if the adjacent property was a commercial building. Mr. Cornelius noted that the zero lot line portion of the lot line is about 30 feet, not 20 feet, and that the building is proposed to be 48 feet high. The first floor of the proposed building abutting the Church property would be the wall of the driveway to the parking area. There would not be windows in that section, a distance that is 30 feet by 10-12 feet high. Visually, Mr. Crecelius believed that the project would have a devastating effect on the Church's property value. Mr. Crecelius also asked about the implications of having a 2.0 FAR. Mr. Schlesinger responded that the zoning for this proposed project allows for 2.0 FAR (floor area ratio), which means that on a 13,000 square foot lot, a 26,000 square foot building would be allowed.

Ms. Leslie Crecelius offered an additional perspective. She asked if someone put themselves in the Church's shoes, how would they feel about having a 4-story wall abutting their property directly on the property line. Try to imagine what that would feel like going from an open and gracious open feeling to having a 4-story wall on the property line. She expressed concern that the church has moved from being a historical anchor of the community to a parcel of real estate that will have a huge wall next to it. She expressed concern that if the property were to go on sale, nobody would want to buy it. The property line with the 4-story wall is the first thing that someone would see when looking at the Church property. It would make it a very undesirable property to have a residence. The adjacent 4-wall of the new development would be the dominant feature for anyone looking at the Church property.

Mr. Schlesinger stated that he respects the views of the neighborhood. He noted that the prior use of the lot was for a gas station, and that the Newton Historical Commission had ruled that the building not be preferably preserved. He stated that someone on the Commission noted that this property was "a site in search for a development." Mr. Schlesinger reiterated that the developer will consider how to address the north façade. However, Mr. Schlesinger confirmed that the garage entry to the property would need to stay on the north side of the property, keeping the retail component of the new building adjacent to the other retail on Walnut Street. Mr. Schlesinger noted that it is important to appreciate that the north setback of the building that is behind the garage entry will not be at the property line with the Church property.

Area Council President Lichtin pointed out that no Transportation Demand Management (TDM) conditions were noted in the Special Permit application, and asked if TDM measures would be proposed. Mr. Schlesinger responded that a set of TDM proposals will be presented for review shortly. The TDM proposals will depend on how buses and shuttles will be running in Newton Highlands, such as shuttles to Wells Avenue and Northland. The proposal for TDM will be upon receiving an update about the shuttle situation from the City Planning department. Srdjan Nedeljkovic and Alicia Bowman both mentioned that the reduced allocation of parking proposed for this site is a TDM strategy in and of itself, as people who live in this building will be less likely to own a car.

City Councilor Alicia Bowman asked a question about the proposed north-facing wall, and wondered if the wall could be made a "green" wall with plantings that may be more pleasing to the abutting neighbors. Attorney Schlesinger suggested that this suggestion should be added to the list of

improvements for the developer to consider. Councilor Bowman asked if the building could be flipped so that the driveway is next to the other commercial buildings closer to Lincoln Street. Attorney Schlesinger noted that it is more desirable to have retail adjacent to other retail without a driveway in between. Councilor Bowman remarked that the proposed development is a project that will be extending the village center experience, and that it will have greater appeal at this site than having a low level building with parking in front. Councilor Bowman stated that she agrees that the new project needs to fit in style-wise with the historical Newton Highlands neighborhood, and that the architecture needs to have a nod to the historic buildings. Councilor Bowman also expressed her appreciation for the input from members of the Church.

Mr. Crecelius made an additional comment about the parking access, and noted that the Church will have a problem with its own access considering the proximity of the driveway to the project. Mr. Crecelius suggested that a traffic study is needed to assess light cycle delays at the Lincoln and Walnut Street intersection. He noted that cars are backing up to the Church driveway as it is, sometimes blocking access to the Church driveway. Mr. Crecelius pointed out that even though the project will include just 23 parking spaces, additional traffic generated by the development will be a problem. He also noted that the retail use of the development will demand more street parking and that Newton Highlands has an extreme parking problem. Some people are paying to rent parking spaces at peoples' homes due to the lack of parking in the Highlands. Mr. Crecelius is concerned that by having a retail establishment without adequate parking, along with the addition of apartments that have less than 1 space per unit, this lack of parking supply will affect everyone who lives and works in the Highlands. This will also have a depressing effect on the new retail component, as its customers will have no place to park. Mr. Crecelius once again questioned the resistance of the developer to flip the building, stating that the wall of the proposed building on the property line will have a depressing value on other residential properties on the north side of the proposed project. Mr. Crecelius suggested that there needs to be a different proposal for the north side of the property. The solution should not be just trees or an ivy covered wall.

City Councilor Bill Humphrey echoed Councilor Bowman's appreciation to members of the community for bringing their comments and feedback on the proposal. He noted that he will work to find a solution that works best for all parties. With regards to Village parking issues, City Councilor Alicia Bowman then spoke about the Newton Highlands parking pilot program. She noted that there are available parking spaces in the pilot area that are unused. Councilor Bowman pointed out that bringing 26 more households to the village will bring more people to stores and restaurants. The parking pilot involves designating street spaces on residential streets to be assigned for parking for commercial uses. Councilor Bowman will get an update on the Newton Highlands parking pilot from city Transportation Coordinator David Koses to see if there might be a few spaces on adjacent streets to accommodate business needs.

Amanda Theunissen asked the Christian Science Church representatives if the switching of the building and driveway location would actually be helpful to the Church. The south elevation shows the 4-storey building from the street all the way back to the rear property line. Ms. Crecelius stated that she will review the plans to assess if switching the building façade would be beneficial to the Church property. Mr. Crecelius asked if the developer would agree that the building is just too big for the lot. Attorney Schlesinger responded that this is not the opinion of the developer, and that the development is consistent with the Comprehensive Plan for village revitalization, with retail on

ground floor, limited parking with TDM, transit oriented development, and that the proposed project is consistent with City planning goals.

Area Councilor Bob Burke made a few points. Bob stated that he is glad that the small historic building in between the Stevens Building and the new development will be saved. Area Councilor Burke is also glad that the Stevens building will be saved. Bob made a suggestion to improve the building design to make it more consistent with the roofline of the Stevens building. Overall, Mr. Burke feels that this project will be better if the changes that were recommended earlier in the meeting are implemented. Bob stated that is on board with the proposal, and that it is better than what he thought it would be.

Area Councilor Bruce Blakely noted there is a fundamental problem in that the developer is putting a village center building next to a residential lot, and that conflict between uses is inevitable without a transition zone. Alan Schlesinger noted that this point had come up in prior Planning Department discussions. He pointed out that there is currently an office use across the street, and that the outlier in this case is the residential property, as it is surrounded by non-residential uses on two sides. Ms. Crecelius responded that visually, the St. Paul's church is a very pleasant existing adjacent property, and that the office building across the street is a converted house.

Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin suggested that the Area Council takes no action on this matter at the present meeting. Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic requested that the Area Council should take action at this meeting, as it is unlikely that new facts will emerge or opinions will change. Area Councilor Bruce Blakely requested to see a print version of the proposed Area Council letter supporting the project before a vote is called. Other Area Council members concurred to have the letter distributed to the Area Council for further review. The matter of the Area Council's support for the project will be brought up at the October meeting of the Area Council.

Selection of Winners of the Newton Highlands Trivia Contest

Area Councilor Amy Wayne thanked everyone for helping organize and execute the Trivia Contest. The contest consisted of 37 questions. Feedback was that people liked the contest, and that many people enjoyed the questions and learned about Newton Highlands. The most difficult question that nobody answered correctly was the location of the last trolley pole in Newton Highlands. Therefore, there was no single winner, as nobody answered all the questions correctly. The answers for the entire quiz have been posted on the Area Council website.

Amy suggested that all prizes should be placed in one pool, and therefore all contestants would be eligible to win a prize. Area Council President Lichtin then picked names of contestants from a jar, picking out a name and then picking out a prize from another jar.

The winners are as follows: Kathy Heller (\$20 Buttonwood), Bruce Henderson (\$20 Grapeleaf), Annette Seaward (\$25 O'Hara's), Benjamin Bayes (\$25 Grapeleaf), Jason Benoncourt (\$20 Walnut Grill), Rowan Larson (\$25 Sichuan Gourmet), Vicent D'amico (\$25 Indulge), Rachel Kern (\$25 Walnut Grille), Dena Levin (\$20 O'Hara's), Marie Adams (\$25 Anna's Taqueria), Sharon Kern (\$25 Walnut Market), Jason Park (\$25 O'Hara's), Diane Prunte (\$20 Walnut Market), Risia Berma (\$25 Buttonwood), Mark Shuman (\$25 Walnut Market), Amy Lieberman (\$20 Anna's Taqueria), Lisa

Gordon (\$20 Walnut Grille), Lisa McClellan (\$20 O'Hara's), Jessica Klibanar-Shiff (\$20 Sichuan Gourmet), Amanda Stauffett (\$20 Indulge) .

The Area Council thanked Amy Wayne for all of her hard work in putting together this contest. Amy thanked everyone for their teamwork and support as well.

Donation to the Hyde Community Center

John Rice noted that Village Bank had made a \$2000 donation for Village Day. Even though Village Day was cancelled due to the pandemic, Village Bank graciously offered this sum as a donation to the Hyde Center on behalf of the Area Council. The Hyde Center is requesting a \$1000 donation of this amount for renovations. Renovations include sanding of floors, staining of walls, and updating the storage rooms. The floor work is estimated to cost \$15K. In the last 2 weeks, work has been done to restore the floor, replace boards, and to sand the floors. The last time the floor was sanded was in 1991, and since then about 55 coats of polyurethane had been placed on floor. The floor is now being lined, and will be covered with two more coats of polyurethane. The Hyde will be operational in about 10 days. The storage rooms have been painted, and windows have been redone. At this point, due to the pandemic, the Hyde has been shut down for 6 months. The Village Bank has given the Hyde Center \$20K which is being used for these renovations. The emergency doors will also be replaced. About \$15K will be spent for the floor, \$9K for painting, \$3K for the storage rooms, and \$2K will be spent for windows.

Area Council Treasurer Groot Gregory pointed out that Village Bank intended that we use the Area Council Village Day donation for community programs. John agreed that the Area Council donation to the Hyde Center could be a donation to co-sponsor next summer's concert series. The Hyde Center organizes and pays for the concerts, with a typical budget of about \$15K per season. The Area Council donation could certainly be used to support these community events. John pointed out that the income stream of the Hyde for rentals has been reduced since March. The Highlands After School program has also been shut down due to the pandemic. When Newton Public Schools decided to have only virtual middle school, there was no need for an after school program. The Hyde continues to receive support from the Taiwan Culture Center.

Srdjan Nedeljkovic stated that he supports the Area Council making a \$1000 donation to the Hyde Center to continue supporting community programs. Treasurer Groot Gregory also stated that he supported the proposed donation. A motion was made to donate \$1000 to the Hyde Center, and Area Council members voted 9:0 in favor.

Discussion about the Halloween event

In discussing the Hyde Center donation, a separate discussion ensued regarding the annual Halloween Party that is held at the Hyde Center and supported by the Area Council. John Rice noted that it would be unlikely to have a Halloween Haunted House this year due to the pandemic. Area Councilor Amanda Theunissen wondered if an outside parade could still take place, or if a submission of photos or video clips of costumes could take place.

John Rice noted that window painting will still be taking place in the Highlands. Area Councilor Barbara Darnell also asked about having the children's Halloween parade, with everyone practicing safe practices and social distancing. Amanda Theunissen noted that a pet parade could also take place. John Rice pointed out that any outdoor event that involved more than 50 people was prohibited. John was ready to start outdoor concerts at the Hyde, but these were not allowed to happen since having more more than 50 people at any outdoor event is not allowed.

Area Councilor Amy Wayne floated the idea of a car parade, but then it would be difficult to see costumes. Amy also mentioned posting photographs for Halloween. Amanda suggested that a YouTube video could be created of kids and their costumes. There was a discussion on how to publicize any event, as the Parks and Rec department will not be sending a mailing about Halloween. Then it was pointed out that in order to post pictures of kids and families, releases might be needed. Amanda asked if the community could walk informally on Lincoln Street, even without an organized parade. Amy expressed concern that because some of the businesses are down 70% in their sales, they may not have the capacity to participate in any Halloween events. John recommended that any ideas regarding activities for Halloween should be run by the Health Department to make sure that regulations are being followed. Area Councilors Barbara Darnell and Amy Wayne will continue this discussion and see if any children's events might be organized for Halloween.

Hyde as an educational facility for Zervas elementary school

John Rice informed the Area Council that space at the Hyde Center will be used to support educational activities related to the Zervas Elementary School. With elementary school being held in a hybrid model, the Zervas after school program will be extended to run during the school day. As part of this program, elementary school children will be doing virtual lessons with staff in different cohorts at the Hyde Center. Starting on or just after September 16th, the Zervas after school program will move 40 kids in 4 different blocks to the Hyde Center. This will take place 5 days per week, 8 hours per day. Parents will be paying the Zervas After School program for this service, which in turn will pay a rental fee to the Hyde Center. The Hyde Center gym will be sectioned into 4 quadrants that will have 4 cohorts of 10 kids each with a staff of 7 people. Each side of the gym will be divided into two sections, and each section into 2 smaller sections. Each group of students will stay separate from the others. This program is licensed by education authorities and there are significant regulations that have been met in order to get this program started. There will also continue to be Zervas after school programming at the Zervas School itself.

Local and City Updates:

NewCal Senior Center:

John Rice updated the Area Council about the City's plans to build a new senior center, called the Newton Center for Active Living (NewCAL). John has been a participant of the mayor's New Cal committee as a city councilor, and is now a citizen representative. The city is recommending that NewCAL is to remain at the existing Senior Center in Newtonville. The mayor and the Council on Aging have approved this site selection. A process has been initiated to review design options and to determine if this will be a renovation project or a demolition. Also, funding mechanisms are being identified.

City Councilor Bill Humphrey noted that there was a robust discussion conducted between choosing the Newtonville site and the Newton Centre triangle parking lot site. Because of fiscal realities, the Newtonville site was chosen. The actual size of the building and the programming are being discussed. Most of the desired programming will be able to be included at this site. Based on construction issues, it seems likely that the existing building will be replaced with a new building. The cost may be in the range of \$16 million. Bob Burke noted that many seniors prefer the Newtonville site. Bill Humphrey also noted that the Newton Centre site would have been more complicated and costly to implement.

Cold Spring Park Update

Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin provided an update about renovations at Cold Spring Park. The Waban Boy Scouts have moved some of the newly constructed boardwalks to new paths. New boardwalks have been built by the Friends of Cold Spring Park, which is now a 501(c)(3) organization that is accepting donations.

MBTA update:

The MBTA will be doing more work on the D line in September, but there won't be any work done in Newton Highlands. There have been no updates on the ADA accessibility project at Newton Highlands. The D line will be running buses in evenings in September.

Newton Public Schools

Area Council President Lichtin updated the Area Council on the situation with Newton Public Schools on account of the pandemic. The reopening plan for schools is complex. Elementary school will be meeting on site 2 mornings per week in person. For the foreseeable future, middle and high school will be holding all classes on line.

Beacon Street bike lanes

City Councilor Andrae Downs sent a notice that there will be a meeting at Traffic Council at 7 pm on September 17 to discuss Beacon Street bicycle lanes. The bicycle lanes will run from Washington Street to Newton Centre. Parking will be removed in most of the route, except for within Waban village. Anyone interested in this project may wish to tune in to the Traffic Council meeting on September 17.

Administrative Items:

Approval of August Minutes: The amended draft minutes were submitted for review. The minutes were approved 9:0.

Treasurer's Report: Area Council Treasurer Groot Gregory reported no transactions. Srdjan Nedeljkovic asked about payment for maintenance of the Hope Fountain. Groot Gregory noted that

payment was made for the pump in April 2020. Amanda Theunissen noted that payment will be needed to distribute the Area Council postcards.

New Business:

Bob Burke is collecting information from the Newton Graphic newspaper about the historical buildings in the Highlands. He will provide an update at the next Area Council meeting.

Meeting Adjournment:

The meeting was adjourned at 9:30 P.M.