



City of Newton, Massachusetts
Office of the Mayor

Ruthanne Fuller
Mayor

#392-21

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Honorable City Council
Newton City Hall
1000 Commonwealth Avenue
Newton, MA 02459

Honorable City Councilors:

The 150-year old Walker Center for Ecumenical Exchange, covering 2.2 acres at the Grove & Hancock Street intersection in Auburndale, went on the market for sale in spring 2021. The institution sits directly adjacent to the Williams Elementary School and playground/ballfield. Public Buildings Commissioner Josh Morse, Chief Operating Officer Jonathan Yeo, Director of Planning & Development Barney Heath and Newton Public Schools reviewed the possible benefits of acquiring some portion of the property for the future needs of the Williams School and for potential affordable housing and then contacted the real estate firm working for the Walker Center.

The Williams School and playground area sit on a constrained property making any future improvements difficult. Given the sale of this long-held Walker Center property, the City determined that increasing the amount of land (Lots "A" and "B" on the attached map) next to the school and playground will be helpful to both. The two lots total approximately 36,360 square feet (0.83 acres).

In addition, this purchase allows us to add permanently affordable housing. The four houses (Howard, Hume, Harding West and Harding East) on these lots total about 7,400 square feet and currently have 14 bedrooms. The addition of affordable housing as a part of this acquisition is a significant benefit, especially given that the homes are family-sized units next to an elementary school and playground, in walking distance to three forms of mass transit, and are nestled into a residential neighborhood. (Please note that the Walker Center property is located in the Auburndale Local Historic District.)

I am pleased to submit this docket item to this Honorable Council requesting authorization to acquire, whether by purchase or "friendly" eminent domain, the real properties marked as Lots A and B (shown on the attached map) which are portions of 136-144 Hancock Street and 169 Grove Street, known as The Walker Center for Ecumenical Exchange. The acquisition of the property serves two important purposes. The first is to allow for future flexibility for the Williams Elementary School building and site planning. The second is to preserve the four existing homes on the property to use as affordable housing (after a Real Property Reuse Committee process).

The approval of this acquisition by the City Council is required pursuant to M.G.L. Chapter 79. The Newton Public Schools and School Committee leadership have been informed of the

proposed acquisition and are very supportive. The City kept the Ward 4 councilors informed about the possible acquisition over the summer and fall during negotiations, and also held a community meeting of neighbors to discuss the City's interests in the property.

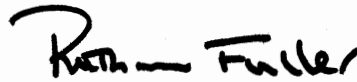
The City will use \$2.45 million of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds for the acquisition. The purchase price resulted from a negotiation between the City and the Walker Center after examination of appraisals.

It is our understanding that the Walker Center is working with a team regarding the remainder of the property to create a residential project that preserves the existing buildings and likely requires a special permit.

Please see the attached memo from Commissioner of Public Buildings Josh Morse.

Thank you for your consideration of this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ruthanne Fuller". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "R".

Mayor Ruthanne Fuller