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MEMORANDUM

DATE: May 24, 2019

TO: Councilor Albright, Chair, Zoning & Planning Committee
Members of the Zoning and Planning Committee

FROM: Barney S. Heath, Director of Planning and Development
James Freas, Deputy Director of Planning and Development
Rachel B. Nadkarni, Long-Range Planner

RE: **#165-19 Washington Street Vision Plan**

MEETING DATE: May 28, 2019

CC: Honorable Newton City Councilors
Planning and Development Board
Urban Design Commission
Jonathan Yeo, Chief Operating Officer

Newton's Comprehensive Plan calls for creating district and topic specific plans. The Washington Street Vision Plan is the second in what is anticipated to be an ongoing series of area specific planning processes to further explore how the City can address its core public objectives while preparing for and managing development in that specific location. One of the central ideas of the Washington Street Vision is that this corridor is a place for development in Newton that will allow the City to address many of its core public objectives to the benefit of both those living in and directly adjacent to the corridor and the broader Newton community. The vision then identifies actions and strategies to ensure development in the corridor is consistent with the values and expectations of area residents and that necessary improvements can happen in a coordinated manner over time. This memo is offered as an opportunity to reiterate why the City Council has supported selective and well-designed growth and development in the past and how the Washington Street vision and Comprehensive Plan amendment lays out a pathway to continue those efforts.

As it relates to development, there have generally been five broad areas of public policy focus in Newton:

1. Housing – Creating and maintaining a diverse and affordable array of housing choices in the city.

2. Environment – Advancing the preservation and restoration of the natural environment. Increasingly, this objective has included significant attention to the issue of global climate change and therefore looked at energy efficiency in the building and transportation sectors.
3. Transportation – Endeavoring to alleviate existing transportation challenges through site specific improvements and expansion of transportation options.
4. Economic Development – Creating vibrancy and strengthening Newton’s commercial areas, especially the village centers, and expanding the commercial tax base.
5. Excellence in Placemaking – Promoting high quality building and public space design. “Excellence in Placemaking” is one of the distinguishing themes of Newton’s Comprehensive Plan with a goal to see all new projects complement and contribute to each village center or neighborhood’s unique design qualities.

Each of these areas of public policy objectives overlap and reinforce each other in countless ways. For the first four, growth and development (density and, as a result, height) offer potential solutions. The last, ‘Excellence in Placemaking’ represents our overarching guide; the notion that whatever the solution offered or the development proposal under consideration, it must be one that reflects Newton’s design ideals.

Housing

The housing discussion has been one of the most important in the City of Newton over the last many years and the issues speak directly to the question of what kind of community the city wants to be. The data has shown that, in the robust economy of greater Boston, with a growing population and increasing numbers of high-income jobs, and with the high desirability of Newton as a place to live, home costs are high and will continue to rise. Correspondingly, the valued economic diversity of the Newton community is declining. The consequences are important. Most directly, the low, moderate and middle-income people who work in Newton; the service employees, restaurant waitstaff, firefighters, teachers, and many others increasingly don’t have the opportunity to live here. They are less a part of the community. This situation directly affects businesses, making it harder to locate in Newton and it also affects the inclusiveness of the community, who community members interact with and know. The Newton community also needs to provide multi-family housing options for older residents who wish to downsize and new younger residents who might want to work in the City’s growing tech and innovation companies.

The solution set includes building new housing, to offer more multi-family options and ensure that a portion of these are reserved for affordable housing. The proposed inclusionary housing policy amendment will provide for some protected housing for middle income residents alongside housing for low-to-moderate income residents, but 15-20% of zero units is zero affordable units. Housing economics are complex and it is clear that solving the housing crisis cannot just be about building more housing units, but it also cannot be about not building more housing units. Supply and demand is not the entire story, but it is part of the story.

Environment

Climate change is the major environmental challenge of our time and it is clear that major action is necessary and that action must be taken at all levels of government. The solution is both simple and amazingly complex; reduce the emissions of carbon and quickly. Getting there will require essentially a two-pronged approach, shifting everything over to clean energy and significantly improving energy efficiency to reduce overall demand. Development will address this imperative in two ways, through energy efficient building design and through locating new development with density and height in walkable and transit-oriented locations in order to address the carbon impacts of the two major users of energy, buildings and transportation.

Transportation

Transportation planning over the last couple decades has shifted from a focus on building road capacity for cars to one of expanding transportation options for people. Effectively, what the industry has come to recognize is that road congestion is inevitable where demand is high (driven by a strong economy) and the service is free (ie. there is no or little cost to driving). The primary solution then is to expand the range of choices an individual has that will allow them to effectively and conveniently avoid or manage their experience of congestion. Expanding mode choice is one of the most effective avenues in this regard. Development, particularly in dense, mixed-use walkable, and transit-served environments is essential to expanding mode choice because it maximizes those choices available. In that kind of environment, an individual has all modes of transportation available, depending on their destination. Many destinations are a short walk away, others reachable by bike or a longer walk, and still others by transit. That density also improves the viability of car sharing for those other destinations that must be reached by car.

Creating the Walkable Environment

The foundation of a multi-modal transportation system is a walkable environment. Walkability is achieved through a combination of factors, the first being a sufficient density of residents and workers that there are a range of useful destinations within walking distance and the second being a list of urban design features that serve to promote and encourage walking. Two of the important urban design attributes are building facades that offer visual interest and engagement to passers-by and sufficient building height to enclose the streetscape so that a person does not feel as if they are out in the open. In measuring walkability, it is important to remember that we are aiming to create places where people are actively choosing to go to walk; that they want to be there as opposed to those walking through a place out of necessity. The highest quality places Newton offers, those found in parts of Newton's village centers, exhibit a desirable degree of walkable design attributes – places like Union Street in Newton Centre and Lincoln Street in Newton Highlands. These places were also designed at a time when the prime audience was someone who arrived by walking rather than driving. The Washington Street Vision recommends that when parking is provided that it be placed underground and behind buildings to ensure that the streets can be shaped with walking comfort as a top priority.

Economic Development

A significant defining characteristic of Newton is the diverse village centers. These are assets to the community. Similarly, other commercial areas, from offices to industrial sites play an important role in providing essential commercial tax revenue. Commercial land of all types is limited in Newton, such that an effective strategy to reinforcing and adding value to these assets is through density and height.

The market study completed as part of the Washington Street process found that there is excess buying power available in this area that is going out of the City, an idea referred to as retail leakage. This study concludes that the area could support additional retail square footage. Ensuring the long range success of Newton's village centers though will also require that they outcompete other regional and online destinations, and their greatest competitive advantage will come from proximity to large numbers of shoppers (ideally those who can walk to shopping) and a high quality design environment that promotes walking and draws attention and interest.

Excellence in Place-Making

How we ensure that, in meeting the policy objectives identified above we don't lose those qualities of place that make Newton *Newton* is the focus of the Washington Street vision effort and discussed in depth below. The Washington Street vision process has been a year-long effort to find the right solutions for addressing these major issues that would work for the immediate Washington Street community. Necessarily, there is a balancing as the vision recommends the strategic use of density and height to achieve the objectives above while also reflecting in those recommendations the "Newton approach." Specifics of this balancing are highlighted below.

Separate Villages

One of the important concepts in the Washington Street vision is that West Newton and Newtonville be recognizable as distinct villages; that these two places should not appear to blend together into one continuous development along the length of Washington Street. Much of Newton's identity derives from having separate and individually unique villages. With Newton's strong housing market, and the policy objectives above, one could easily have planned for six story buildings along the entire length of Washington Street as has been seen in other nearby municipalities. For Newton though, the appropriate place to focus new, denser development is in the village centers, consistent with the City's historical development patterns.

Village Center Scale

Notwithstanding the note above, there is an aspect of the historic, defining character of Newton in the generally lower height of many of Newton's villages. In the Washington Street corridor, the center of West Newton is a federally designated historic district, its character derived from several important civic buildings, a handful of historic commercial buildings, and overall, the general two to four story heights. Newtonville is similar in both of these regards. The Washington Street vision arrives at two solutions for

respecting the scale of these village centers while also accommodating density to support the policy objectives above.

First, the plan targets density and height towards areas of underutilized land just outside of the village cores but well within the walkable and transit served areas of the villages. In West Newton, this area includes the MBTA parking lots and the “Cheesecake Brook lots.” In Newtonville, this area is primarily at the intersection of Crafts and Washington Streets. Essentially, the vision calls for transforming these areas that are currently less reflective of the ideal of Newton placemaking excellence. The vision proposes that these portions of the corridor could realize the important policy objectives while also incorporating the same quality of design that define the West Newton and Newtonville village cores.

Second, the plan specifically limits the heights in the village core areas to three stories while allowing for a fourth floor where historic facades are preserved. In order to have the additional story, the new portion of the building would be required to be set back from the front façade, significantly reducing the influence greater building height has on the sense of the character of these village centers.

Stepdown Height to Adjacent Neighborhoods

The transition from the denser and taller mixed-use areas to adjacent lower density residential neighborhoods is an important part of retaining neighborhood character. The plan recommends, and the zoning would ultimately require, that building heights drop adjacent to residences in order to be complementary to the neighborhood scale.

Building Variation

A distinguishing characteristic of both West Newton and Newtonville is that the buildings in these villages developed incrementally over time and are therefore distinctive from each other, varying in height, width, materials, and other aspects of their design. These building patterns are another essential feature that defines the unique sense of place of Newton. The vision recommends that zoning for Washington Street require that new development reinforce these building patterns. In particular, where a larger new development is proposed that might include multiple buildings or stretch over an entire block, that such a development reinforce the idea of multiple buildings with varying heights, materials, and other design distinctiveness.

Recognizing Financial Feasibility

An important part of planning for the future is recognizing that for development to play a role in accomplishing Newton’s public policy objectives, the development opportunities must be financially realistic. Without creating true financially realistic options, the future is to maintain the status quo. The vision process identified a number of priorities for development that come with significant financial costs to the projects: underground parking, creating civic spaces on site, high standards for design, energy performance, and transportation service. In building the draft zoning, particularly for density

and related heights, the Principle Group considered the financially realistic density that would be needed to deliver these public priorities.

The current zoning of Washington Street for the most part does not offer the opportunity for financially viable projects. Notably, each of the recent major projects to come to the City Council have required a rezoning. This approach has led to a corridor that for significant portions does not reflect the quality design standards of Newton as a whole and promotes uncertainty for neighbors and property owners where development is proposed not according to the existing zoning, but instead according to individual rezoning requests. A key objective of this effort to plan for and zone the Washington Street corridor is to create greater predictability, so that neighbors and property owners can understand the potential parameters of new development and so that the City can coordinate investments over time. Again, getting to predictability requires realistic assessments of feasibility.

Ten Story Buildings

Tall buildings, which for Newton at this time range from 8 to 16 stories, are an important part of Newton's evolving character as the City retains its quality of place while also responding to its public policy objectives. Such tall buildings exist now in Newton Corner and Chestnut Hill, responding to the high value of these locations and offering important economic development and housing purposes. Taller buildings will be an important part of Newton's future as the incredible value of its location continues and the need for commercial and residential options remains. The Washington Street vision identifies two distinct locations on the Washington Street corridor to achieve public policy objectives with tall buildings.

At Crafts Street, the vision anticipates the potential for one tall building of up to 10 stories, but only if dedicated to office or lab space. Residential buildings in this location would be limited to a maximum height of 6.5 stories. The objective in this location is to support economic development and realize the value of a transit served location with highway visibility. The tall building would anchor a cluster of office, lab, and industrial buildings, existing and new, to create a node of economic activity in the eastern part of Newtonville.

At the West Newton MBTA parking lot, the vision anticipates developing the surface lot into a project that includes commuter parking, village parking, and a grouping of buildings that may include two tall buildings (up to 10 stories), or possibly three with very good design, with a mixture of residential and office or lab space. Tall buildings in this location serve all of the public policy objectives identified above and further, can afford to contribute to the significant infrastructure investments necessary to redesign the highway interchange and bridges that surround the site into roads that are consistent with the high-quality design expected as a part of Newton. To simply put buildings in this location without reconfiguring the infrastructure to integrate the MBTA lot into the village would be to ignore the design and character of Newton and consign this area to be separate and apart from the West Newton community.

Heights in the Draft 3 Washington Street Zoning

To better understand the Draft 3 Washington Street Zoning proposal, staff has distilled the Draft 3 Washington Street Zoning map into two height maps – one showing what building heights would be allowed by right and what building heights would be allowed by Special Permit. Alongside this, staff has put together a similar height map showing what is allowed by right and by Special Permit under the existing zoning ordinance.

In the Draft 3 proposed zoning, anything taller than 5.5 stories (5 stories with occupiable space under the roof) would require a Special Permit. All buildings, whether by right or by special permit, would have to meet the very detailed design requirements of the zoning ordinance. These design standards are intended to ensure that all buildings meet the excellence in placemaking objective and lead to buildings that integrate and contribute to the high-quality design environment in Newton.

Washington Street Comprehensive Plan Amendment

Based on feedback from the City Council at the May 9th meeting, the Planning Department will be creating a more concise Washington Street Vision Comprehensive Plan amendment document for the Council's consideration for adoption. This document will draw on the Hello Washington Street: Washington Street Vision Report submitted by the Principle Group and will be modeled on the document created for the Needham Street Area Vision. The Planning Department staff is targeting the delivery of a first draft of this new document in early July.