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Subject: More questions than answers: Washington Street updates, Riverside, STRs, & how much will we spend on a parking lot

Date: Mon, Jun 3, 2019 5:31 pm

What degree of transformation is the Washington Street Vision Plan's Fiscal Impact Analysis based on?



Today, this part of Washington Street is a hostile environment to pedestrians and cyclists. The high-speed traffic on Washington Street and the presence of the turnpike create a place that is not comfortable for anyone outside their vehicle. There are very few signals that people belong in this place with so much of the environment geared toward the automobile.

The proposed vision for this area mitigates the impacts of the turnpike by lining Washington Street with shallow commercial pavilions. These tiny buildings lined up in a long row will both improve the activity this side of the street and act as a barrier from the turnpike. New medium-scale buildings on the north side of Washington Street complement the iconic Cabot's structure and its beloved business. Washington Street itself is transformed into a slower speed street with protected bike lanes and abundant vegetation, making it clear that people are welcomed to spend time here



This sketch represents how to create new homes and small apartment buildings in a form that enhances the existing character.

If you've been following the Hello Washington Street process, you may recall that [Draft #2 of the Vision Plan](#) in February included a Fiscal Impact Analysis ("Running the Numbers," pp 176-187). Many questions were raised by both city councilors and residents about the validity of some of the assumptions that went into the analysis. In particular, the per-pupil student cost seemed to be based on only current variable costs, an approach that would be valid for small increases and a short-term time horizon, but not for permanent large-scale increases in student numbers, when costs that are "fixed" in the short term would change. Also, the Fiscal Impact Analysis assumed that upgrades to commuter rail stations and frequency of service would happen. If not, the assumptions about commercial development are invalid.

That table of estimated fiscal impacts was eliminated from [Vision Plan Draft #3](#), released on April 22. In the new "Running the Numbers" chapter (pp 186-199), there's a lot more detail on what various public improvements might cost, and on the methodology of doing a fiscal impact analysis, and then it just stops at

page 100. The plan now seems to be that we'll get to the fiscal impact when we look at the zoning, or maybe even not until we review actual projects. (Even though having a fiscal impact analysis was one of the selling points of spending \$500K on Hello Washington Street in the first place.)

I've been asking another question. **What level of transformation of Washington Street was the fiscal impact analysis based on?** Which of the buildings and businesses that we value now would be assumed to be gone, replaced with new development? What would we be giving up to get the promised fiscal benefit (assuming you believe the numbers)?

I was struck by how the Principle Group's illustrations show selected things we care about, like the West Newton Cinema, nestled amid big new development. In the illustrations above, there's Cabot's still there, and the one-story Oakley Spa building at Walker Street. Is this realistic, or just meant to look appealing? No one can say.

After reading the Methodology section (pp 197-199 of Draft #3), I asked the Planning Department for the list of which parcels in the study area were assumed would be redeveloped, and for those not, was it because the algorithm predicted they would not be, or because they were manually excluded. **I was told this information is not available.** The Principle Group's fiscal impact consultant, Tischler/Bise, had its own consultant to do the buildout analysis (which properties would likely be redeveloped under the proposed zoning), and that company will not give the city the information. It's unclear who will do the fiscal impact analysis for whatever zoning the City Council is considering, or tell us how much destruction/new building it's based on, because the Principle Group's \$500K contract has hit its maximum and is ended.

Historical Commission imposes demolition delay on three Washington Street buildings in West Newton



In the interest of brevity where possible, I'll refer new readers to my website [blog post here](#). Basically good news for historic preservation, but only temporary, until November 2020. Developers barely notice demolition delays when their project is going to take as long to review as the delay will last. The Orr Block had an 18-month demolition delay before [this happened](#).

Walking tours of West Newton Square



The West Newton Hill Preservation Initiative and Unite! West Newton have teamed up to conduct walking tours of West Newton Square for city councilors

and other interested people, to raise awareness of our historic assets and local businesses, and how they could be impacted by the Washington Street Vision Plan. More tours are being planned to accommodate councilors' schedules. Please email unitewestnewton@gmail.com if you'd like to join one. I learned from it myself!

Tonight, Monday June 3: City Council likely to approve \$175K to design new Library parking lot, but what will the final cost be?



My initial concern for preserving trees in our public spaces has expanded to include fiscal sanity, as the potential cost to taxpayers of rebuilding the parking lot seems to be escalating with no limit in sight. [Read my blog post for background and more details.](#)

It can be very difficult in practice to remember that "sunk costs are sunk," when faced with spending decisions. I've observed that money seems to be no object for many councilors determined to replace trees with solar carports, and that no one is willing to say how much would be too much to pay for improved drainage and more parking spaces. I fear that when it comes time to approve the actual construction funds, they will argue that rejecting the project would mean the \$175K design money would be "wasted" (rather than viewing it as the cost of finding out how much construction would cost through a Request for Proposals process).

City Council meeting at 7:45pm in Council Chamber. Full agenda [here](#).

Tomorrow, Tuesday, June 4: Riverside Public Hearing, 7pm in Council Chamber



Speak Up! Speak Out!
IMPORTANT ZONING MEETING
June 4 @ 7pm at City Hall
We need your support!

Why the Riverside proposal is not "right" for Newton!

Too Big, Too Tall, Too Dense

- Dramatic increase from 2013 approved plan: 1.5 million vs. 580,000 square feet
- Would insert a high-rise urban village between low-rise, historic villages of Auburndale and Lower Falls
- Imposing buildings (18 ft 14 stories) will overwhelm neighborhood
- No designated community space, limited useable green space on site, no internal bike paths
- Not enough affordable housing to meet demand (mostly market-rate)

Traffic, Traffic, Traffic

- Project would triple site-generated traffic (4,700 to 14,500 vehicle trips PER DAY)
- Gridlock on scenic Grove Street and intersections
- Congestion within site for commuters, residents, emergency vehicles

HOD not TOD

- HOD not TOD design: highway-oriented, not transit-oriented development
- Green Line: one way, slow, unreliable, crowded
- Massive size prevents future transit improvements

City-Wide Impact

- Cumulative impact of multiple, large-scale developments will drastically change our city
- Three significant developments proposed by same developer (Orr Block, West Newton, Riverside)



Proposal: 611,437 sq. ft. office • 64,655 sq. ft. retail
675 units • 2,832 shared parking spaces



Will "some days" traffic become every day?

RightSize Riverside
NOT
Oversize Riverside
More info at:
newtonlowerfalls.org/Riverside
Contact us: lfiriverside@gmail.com
Contact your City Councilors at:
dolson@newtonma.gov

This is a joint public hearing of the Land Use Committee and Zoning & Planning Committees, **at which the public is allowed to speak.**

(Recently, the limit has been two minutes per speaker).

What happens at Riverside will certainly affect West Newton directly, and the rest of the city in many ways. The LFIA (Lower Falls Improvement Association) Riverside Committee has taken the unusual step of drafting their own proposed zoning for Riverside.

You can read the LFIA's memo [here](#), and the Planning Department's memo, which supports the developer, Mark Development's, positions, [here](#).

From the LFIA Riverside Committee:

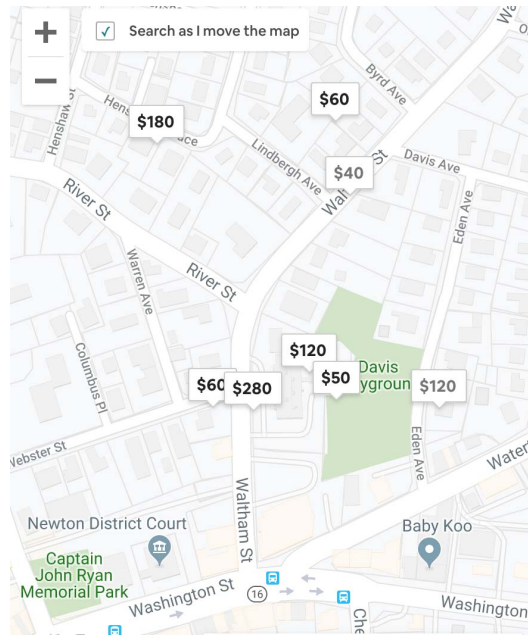
If you care about the size and density of what will be built at Riverside, come to this hearing and tell the City Councilors what you think. We need to fill the chamber and the City Council needs to hear from us. The meeting will focus on the proposed amendments to the existing zoning ordinance for the Riverside site:

- Mark Development filed for an amendment to the existing zoning to increase the density and height from what is currently allowed.
- LFIA Riverside Committee filed amendments to the existing zoning that would limit the height and density of the proposal overall and would limit the building height along Grove Street, require

studies on air noise, traffic, and visual impacts of the project
would also require more useable open space and civic space.

Monday, June 10, 7pm, 2nd floor: Public Hearings on Inclusionary Zoning and Short Term Rental (e.g. Airbnb) Ordinances

Short term rentals are defined as rentals of less than a month duration. If you have opinions on such issues as how many days per year an Airbnb should be allowed to rent, or whether investors/absentee owners should be allowed to rent houses or units as short term rentals, or whether owner-occupants or two- or three-family houses should be allowed to use their extra units for short term rentals, this is your opportunity to speak.



This is a joint public hearing of the Zoning & Planning Committee, and the Planning & Development Board. Depending on turnout, it could be in the Council Chamber, or a meeting room. Agenda [here](#).

This docket item:

#128-19 DIRECTOR OF PLANNING proposing to amend Chapter 30, City of Newton Zoning Ordinances, in order to create a short-term rental ordinance that defines the short-term rental and bed & breakfast uses, identifies what zoning districts they would be allowed in and under what criteria, conditions, limitations and permitting process

would create an ordinance where none currently exists, to set conditions and limits for short term rentals (STRs). (A separate docket item, #136-19, would require registration of STRs with the Inspectional Services Department, and fire safety inspections.)

I have heard from people concerned about multiple houses on a street being purchased by investors to be turned into STRs. This has been an issue in many

larger, destination-type cities, with units being taken on the regular rental market, and changing the nature of neighborhoods.

City councilors have heard the same concerns. I listened to audio of the May 13 Zoning & Planning Committee meeting. Audio available here:

<http://www.newtonma.gov/gov/aldermen/committees/zoning/2019.asp>

One member specifically mentioned a resident's concern about possibly three such investor-owned rentals on Warwick Road, and there were gasps of disbelief. The ZAP members were not inclined to allow absentee-owner STRs, voting 7-0 with one abstention, not to recommend that option. The also voted not to allow owner-occupants of two- or three-family houses to use a unit they don't occupy as an STR.

A motion by councilor Lisle Baker to limit STRs rentals to 30 days per year failed to pass, so the version recommended to the full City Council has a 45 days per year limit.

All of these conditions and limits are subject to change by the full City Council, so please attend the hearing or write to the City Council via dolson@newtonma.gov or citycouncil@newtonma.gov if you feel they are too strict or not strict enough.

First ever Fix-It Clinic at Newton Free Library



The Newton Recycling Committee held its first ever Fix-It Clinic on Saturday in the Makerspace (which needs more space!) at the Newton Free Library, in an effort to

leg, and a lamp in need of a new power cord. That's my HP printer being diagnosed, unfortunately, as not repairable due to a broken plastic gear. But after two months of not wanting to give up on such a heavy item without resolving what seemed to be a "false paper jam" message, it was good to actually know.

There's no set schedule yet for these clinics, but if you'd like to be notified of future ones, or are good at fixing things and would like to volunteer, email

newtonrecycling@gmail.com

Everyone there seemed to be having a good time!

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