

# A Newton that is Truly Welcoming and Sustainable

by Kathleen Hobson | Originally published Dec 1, 2019 on Village14.com

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Tomorrow night, we as a community, through our elected representatives, have an opportunity to breathe life into a vision of Newton that is truly welcoming and sustainable. As our City Councilors engage in final deliberations on the **Northland development**, I hope they stay focused on the enormous benefits that so many residents and local organizations—Engine 6, Green Newton, 350Mass, the Newton-Needham Chamber, the League of Women Voters, Mothers Out Front see in this project.

The benefits have been enumerated many times and from various angles, but briefly, the project will transform 23 disjointed acres of an obsolete industrial tract into a walkable, environmentally sensitive new neighborhood with the following features (list not exhaustive):

- 800 new homes, 140 of them affordable—the most ever created in Newton by a single development
- 10 acres of public open space, including 8 new parks, and new connections to the Upper Falls Greenway
- Significant new retail and office space, generating millions in new revenue
- Ample parking for cars and bikes, plus car-share and bike-share infrastructure
- A **"mobility hub"** with free public shuttle service to the Newton Highlands T station every 10 minutes (plus free T passes for residents!)

Cutting-edge sustainability, including **LEED for Neighborhood Development** certification and 3 **Passive House**-certified residential buildings, making it the largest Passive House multifamily project in the state.

At this point, all foreseeable impacts—on traffic, parking, city finances, the environment—have been evaluated. Plans for their mitigation, inscribed in the Council order, are strict, comprehensive, and enforceable (see **11/14/19 Planning memo**).

Nevertheless, opponents of Northland complain that they haven't been "taken seriously" and "a compromise balancing different points of view has not been reached"—and so **have given notice** that they're moving forward with plans for petition drives to reverse Council approval (should this happen) not only of the Northland project, but also of the Washington Street Vision.

The threat is no joke. Even so, it's hard to take seriously the notion that development negotiations should always come to rest at some magical midpoint between thoughtful, far-sighted planning informed by a wide range of community needs and constructive feedback (on the one hand), and

(on the other) the short-sighted views of "neighborhood groups" who seemingly would be happy if nothing ever changed. What opponents are asking for is not a balanced "compromise" but special treatment—or else.

Claims **reported recently** in the Boston Globe—that councilors have failed to "meaningfully address traffic [and] the financial impact"—are simply untrue. In fact (as Councilor Auchincloss explained in his **Nov. 19 newsletter**), traffic "was the subject of a dozen surveys or reviews and intensive negotiations," and now "traffic control measures are robust." The project will have a "net-positive fiscal impact (including school costs)" and comes with "almost \$10 million to upgrade area infrastructure," including \$1.5 million for a new Countryside school.

Some opponents, stuck in their own nightmare visions of "mega-development," have argued that denying the Northland rezone and special permit, and forcing the developers to "go 40B," would produce a better project: smaller in scale but with a greater number of affordable housing units. My pro-housing **Engine 6** colleagues and I reject this argument, which fails to recognize (a) that the housing crisis is largely due to extremely low overall supply, and (b) the current proposal's manifold other benefits.

The Northland developers have shown themselves to be open-minded, reasonable, and willing to try new things in the face of daunting challenges (climate change, housing shortage). As they told the Globe, they are at the end of a process that began three years ago and has included hundreds of community meetings. They have "engaged with anyone and everyone who wished to meet with [them] to provide feedback." In return, they have made major changes to a project that started out looking pretty good, but now will truly be a "landmark green development" (see **Green Newton endorsement**) that makes a significant dent in our housing shortage (see **Engine 6 housing explainer**).

So: It's time. I hope our City Councilors set their sights high tomorrow night and approve this game-changing project. I hope they can steer clear of the trap we sometimes find ourselves in: the idea that Newton—in the midst of a region desperate for more homes—is somehow finished, closed, without room for any more people. This is not a welcoming vision. I don't think it's who we're meant to be.