

Newton Voters Back Northland Project in Referendum

By James Sanna
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Northland Investment Corp. is proposing to replace a retail plaza with 800 housing units 180,000 square feet of office space and 115,000 square feet of retail space. Image courtesy of Cube 3 Architects

Newton voters gave a proposed 23-acre project a decisive “yes” in a referendum held alongside Massachusetts’ presidential primary Tuesday night.

Zoning changes to enable the 800-unit, 1.1 million-square-foot mixed-use project from Northland Investment Corp. was previously approved by a two-thirds majority of the Newton City Council, but community groups used a quirk in the city’s charter to force a referendum on the council’s decision.

Voters backed the zoning change by a wide margin of 58 percent to 42 percent, according to unofficial results posted to the city’s website.

Northland’s project would see offices and apartments – 140 of them affordable – built on the site of a former mill and shopping plaza along the congested and largely transit-less Needham Street commercial corridor in a “Main Street”-style mixed use development. To deal with traffic concerns, which featured prominently in opposition to the development, the company proposed to create a \$1.5 million shuttle bus service open to tenants and area residents to connect the development to mass transit. Since being initially proposed, the project square footage had shrunk 45 percent through negotiations with the city and neighbors.

Newton affordable housing groups, the business community, “yes-in-my-backyard” groups and many city leaders joined forces with Northland to campaign for the development, which was widely seen as a test of whether the city would be open to development in the future. The campaign pitched openness to development as important for the city’s future health and for helping address the region’s housing prices.

“Thank you to the thousands of Newton residents who voted in favor of bringing affordable housing, new open space, sustainable design and smart growth to our city. The Northland Newton project is a huge win for both current residents and for future neighbors who will now have the opportunity to join our community,” Allison Sharma, chair of the pro-Northland campaign, said in a statement.

“This is the future – a new paradigm, thoughtful developers, communities, and city leaders partnering to create a 21st-century built environment that solves these and other pressing issues,” Northland Chairman and CEO Larry Gottesdiener said in a statement. “Developers don’t win referendums, communities win referendums, and we are delighted that we could build this coalition together here in Newton.”

Opponents, including the group RightSize Newton, said the project and its 800 units was too big, would cause a burden on the city's school system and questioned the dependability of the Green Line and proposed shuttle bus system given the lack of bus lanes on Needham Street.