

State Gives \$400K for Traffic Fixes to Help Newton Project

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While Newton residents get ready to vote on March 3 whether to reverse their city councilors' approval of a large development along traffic-clogged Needham Street, the Baker administration this week announced a \$396,500 grant to the city to pay for two key traffic fixes in the area.

The money, from the state's MassWorks infrastructure program, will pay for design and engineering work on an extension of the Upper Falls Greenway bicycle trail and improvements to a nearby intersection, called Pettee Square.

Traffic has become a major issue in the debate over an 800-unit mixed-use village proposed by Northland Investment Corp. for the 23-acre site of a strip mall and former mill building at the corner of Needham and Oak streets. As part of the project, Northland has committed to making numerous improvements to address the issue, including a shuttle bus to a nearby MBTA Green Line and commuter rail stations that will come every 10 minutes, 16 hours a day, seven days a week. The city-wide referendum vote, occurring thanks to a provision in Newton's charter that enables council decisions to be reconsidered if petitioners gather 5,000 signatures, is being viewed in some corners of the development community as a test of whether further development will be possible in Newton.

"The MassWorks program allows our administration to make targeted investments in public infrastructure that stimulates significant private funding toward new housing production, commercial development, and job creation," Gov. Charlie Baker said in a statement. "We are pleased to support these two important projects in the city of Newton, and this important effort furthers our work together with municipal partners across the state to address the housing crisis."

These funds will improve safety, conditions, sustainability and vitality in the Pettee Square commercial district, and allow pedestrians and cyclists better access to the MBTA and Needham Street by extending the Upper Falls Greenway Trail. These two MassWorks projects are also adjacent and complementary to the \$30 million MassDOT Needham Street / Highland Avenue Complete Streets upgrades scheduled to begin this spring.

"I'm grateful that with the governor's help we can begin the design and engineering of two important transportation and neighborhood improvement projects in Newton Upper Falls," Newton Mayor Ruthanne Fuller said in a statement.

"These are two wonderful projects to extend and improve the Upper Falls Greenway and the Upper Falls neighborhood," Jerry Reilly, a Newton Upper Falls resident and advocate, said in a statement. "As with the original creation of the Greenway, it's the city and the state working together to make lasting improvements to Upper Falls. I love to see that."