

# The Boston Globe

[With a 'yes' vote on March 3, Newton can pave the way to fairer future](#)

The Northland project would create the largest infusion of affordable housing in the city's history and give momentum to a movement to rethink the suburbs.

By The Editorial Board  
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A rendering of Northland's plans for an apartment complex, spread over 23 acres in Newton, whose fate hinges on a March 3 referendum in the city. NORTHLAND INVESTMENT CORP.

*This endorsement is part of a series of editorials about housing in Newton that the Globe plans to publish in 2020. Read the first.*

America's wealthy suburbs need to change. They need to allow more affordable housing, so that low-income families can access top-notch public schools and the lifetime opportunities they create. They need more housing, period, to cool the real estate market that's crushing middle-class families. And they need denser housing as a way to address climate change.

In other words, they need more housing like the Northland project, a proposed 800-unit development at an old factory site in Newton Upper Falls, whose fate Newton voters will decide in a hotly contested March 3 referendum. The Globe strongly endorses a "yes" vote to approve the project — and not just for its many practical benefits for Newton and for the region, from new parks to set-asides for mom-and-pop businesses.

The greater significance of the project is that it represents a new way of thinking about the suburbs, at a time of growing awareness that the land use restrictions of that last century have exacerbated racial segregation, environmental destruction, and income inequality. The

vote is shaping up as a referendum not just on the Northland project, but also on a movement that has been gaining steam over the last decade to rethink long-cherished traditions and laws in order to forge solutions to some of the most deeply entrenched problems in American society.

Those restrictions, some of them on the books since the 1920s, have been close to sacrosanct in Massachusetts, guarded by vocal neighborhood groups and a timid Legislature. Like many other states, the Commonwealth largely defers to municipalities on local building decisions — even when their decisions run counter to broader public goals like housing the homeless or encouraging transit use to cut pollution.

The maze of local laws and rules, which one analyst called [a “paper wall” against housing](#), has had an insidious impact, making costly delays the rule and ensuring that spread-out luxury housing is often the only kind that’s feasible to build. On the whole, according to the Boston Foundation’s [Greater Boston Housing Report Card](#), the region is permitting less than half as much housing as it did in the 1980s, and about a third of homeowners and half of renters are now considered “cost-burdened.” The high price of housing is a deadweight on the economy, making it harder for businesses to recruit employees. The indirect consequences are more devastating, barring poor children from the state’s highest performing school districts and pushing development into far-flung towns where it does more environmental damage.

In Newton, though, a majority of the city council — backed by climate, religious, and housing activists — have coalesced around the 14-building Northland project, which calls for the preservation of a historic factory building; one building designed specifically for the needs of older residents; innovative low-carbon heating, cooling, and construction techniques; and electric instead of natural gas-powered appliances in all the site’s apartments. “It will be a model green building project,” said Dan Ruben, the chairman of Green Newton, which has endorsed the project. “We think this is a signature project. It’s very visible, it’s going to be influential.”

Other direct benefits to the city include 10 acres of open space (where there is now broken pavement and stubs of old railroad track); a \$1.5 million payment to the public schools; a splash park for kids; and the rehabilitation of a brook that’s been confined to a culvert for a century.

The project also includes office and retail space and 10,000 feet of commercial space that’s reserved for non-chain retailers and restaurants, a way to hold on to local businesses unable to compete with banks and other national chains for storefront space. It will be one of the first developments in Greater Boston to include such a requirement, according to Greg Reibman, the president of the Newton-Needham Chamber of Commerce, which [supports Northland](#).

The most important benefit to Newton and the region, though, is the housing itself. The project will include 140 apartments of subsidized housing for low- and middle-income renters — believed to be the single largest infusion of subsidized units in the city’s history. The market-rate units will undoubtedly be more expensive (Peter Standish, Northland’s senior vice president, said the company hasn’t decided on rents yet), but they, too, will [help by soaking up demand](#) and easing the bidding wars for existing homes. The developer also contends that many senior citizens in Newton want to downsize, which would free their

homes to be resold to young families, but haven't because they can't find any rentals in an apartment building with an elevator — a problem that Northland would help solve.

Opponents of the project say that 800 units are too many and that a smaller development with more affordable units would be preferable. They also worry — understandably — about the impact on parking, traffic, and schools.

Those are concerns that any sizable development should be expected to address — and that this one has. At the urging of the City Council, which imposed a 45-page [set of conditions](#) on Northland, the developer has agreed to provide subsidized T passes to residents; run a free shuttle to the Green Line that will also be available to the public; and charge for parking spaces as a way of limiting the number of renters who drive. They're also ponying up \$5 million to study better MBTA service and underwrite traffic-calming and bicycle and pedestrian improvements.

The city is already well equipped to handle the 138 new children the developer forecasts would enter Newton's schools if the project is built, even before the \$1.5 million the developer has promised. The local elementary school, Countryside, has an unused classroom and the city has [projected slightly declining enrollment there](#).

Regardless, the potential for more children to attend Newton's excellent schools, including children from less affluent families, actually provides the most compelling reason for voters to approve this project March 3 and for the city's leaders to then continue breaking down the barriers to more and cheaper housing in the city. The economic and racial segregation that housing restrictions inscribe into American life, and the ceilings they place on upward mobility, are simply too outrageous to ignore any longer.

Stroll through the industrial wasteland of the Northland site now (yes, it's okay to poke around, a spokeswoman for the developer assured the Globe). A yes vote would do more than turn a weedy eyesore into a vibrant new neighborhood. For Newton and other communities whose land-use decisions have contributed to America's deepening inequality, it would show the way to a fairer future.