

# The Boston Globe

**Newton voters OK Northland's big mixed-use project, despite predictions of a traffic nightmare**

**By John Hilliard  
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Residents on opposite sides of the referendum on the Northland development held opposing signs outside a voting station Tuesday. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

NEWTON — After weeks of bitter debate, the city's voters gave the go-ahead Tuesday to a plan to build hundreds of apartments and new commercial space in Newton Upper Falls.

The special municipal election, timed for Super Tuesday, asked voters whether they approved of Northland Investment Corp.'s mixed-use project at the corner of Needham and Oak streets.

According to the city clerk's office, 18,565 voters backed a zoning change needed for the plan to move forward, while 13,449 cast ballots against the project.

Larry Gottesdiener, Northland's chairman and chief executive, said in a statement to the Globe that the company worked with volunteers, community activists, and city officials to form a coalition that championed "the twin existential threats of our times" — the lack of affordable housing and climate change.

"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," Gottesdiener said. "Developers don't win referendums, communities win referendums, and we are delighted that we could build this coalition together here in Newton."

Northland is expected to begin demolition at the site later this year, with construction beginning in early 2021, according to a company spokeswoman.

In a statement, the Committee for Responsible Development, which worked to rally a "no" campaign against the development, attributed the vote's outcome to misinformation funded by "Northland and its PR machine" and aided by many city councilors and Mayor Ruthanne Fuller.

The committee said "voters chose to allow a developer to reap huge profits from a massive development that could result in a traffic and parking nightmare, overwhelm local schools and cost the city millions of dollars a year more than new tax revenues."

City Clerk David Olson said that turnout among Newton's 61,083 registered voters appeared to be steady all day.

"Every place I visited today, the turnout was steady," Olson said Tuesday afternoon. "It will be a better-than-usual" primary turnout.

The special election capped weeks of debate over development in Newton. Backers praised the Northland project for offering affordable housing and commercial opportunities that would increase the city's tax base. Critics argued the development was too large and would only unleash more vehicles on streets that, at times, are already jammed with traffic.

That was one of the concerns Max Poritzky, 42, had about the project when he voted at the Waban Library Tuesday afternoon.

"I voted no. The traffic in that area is already awful, so I didn't see any real proof as I read up on it that they gave it much thought," Poritzky said.

Terrence Lyons, 60, said he supported Northland's project after reading a lot about the development.

"I voted yes. I'm a believer in good solid development of land and cities in places like Newton, and I thought that they had a decent proposal," Lyons said.

The Northland project will consist of 14 buildings on about 22 acres in proximity to Route 128 and the MBTA's Newton Highlands Station. It will include 180,000 square feet of office space, 115,000 square feet of retail and community space, about 10 acres of open space, and 800 apartments, including 120 affordable units, according to the developer.

In December, the City Council approved Northland's plan with a pair of 17-7 votes: one vote to approve a special permit, and the other to change the zoning so the development could be built. But debate over the project continued.

After the votes, opponents gathered thousands of signatures to put the project on the ballot as a voter referendum. The ballot question asked voters whether they approve the zoning change.

Supporters of the development — among them the city's mayor and advocates for housing, business, and the environment — pointed to what they said are the economic benefits and the affordable apartments.

Northland also agreed to provide money for local projects, including funding to help improve an elementary school and pay for a shuttle service to the MBTA station and a traffic management plan.

"Northland meets so many of our needs, and matches so many of our values," the mayor said.

But opponents said those measures would be inadequate, arguing that Northland's project was too large, would create too much traffic, and didn't include enough affordable housing.

Across the street from City Hall, Michelle Ocana, 47, said she voted "no" on Northland when she cast a ballot at the Newton Free Library.

The Newton Highlands resident said she often travels through the area of the project, and is concerned that Northland's project could make traffic worse. She thinks that measures like a shuttle service aren't enough, she said.

"There just needs to be more neighborhood input," Ocana said. "No one is going to take a shuttle to sit in traffic."

Donald Wright, 61, said he voted in favor of the Northland project because it includes affordable housing and open space. As housing costs increase in Newton, it's important that the city has more housing that is affordable, he said. The project also combines a variety of uses in one place, he said.

"It creates a real, new hub of activity in the city," Wright said.

At the Hyde Community Center Tuesday morning, voters who spoke to the Globe said they were aware of the Northland project before they headed to the polls.

Brandon Fong said he voted for the project, after almost voting against it.

"I think it's unrealistic for people to think there won't be growth in the city living so close to Boston," Fong said. "It's going to be more congestion but that's what Newton is now, times change and the alternative would be a worsely vetted and planned development."

Later in the day, Mike Hartman, 71, cast his vote against the project.

"I don't think they provided enough information on what they were doing as far as traffic. I travel Needham Street quite a bit, and it's a mess," Hartman said.

Since the referendum effort began, the sides in the Northland debate organized around two ballot committees: Yes for Newton's Future, which supports the project and has been funded by the developer, and the Committee for Responsible Development.

The opposition committee has also received assistance from a nonprofit critical of the scope of development in the city, RightSize Newton.

Allison Sharma, the chairwoman of Yes for Newton's Future, thanked voters for supporting the project in a statement.

"The Northland Newton project is a huge win both for current residents and for future neighbors who will now have the opportunity to join our community," Sharma said.