

From: **Bob Burke**

Date: Tue, Oct 26, 2021

Subject: [NewtonHighlands] Do some of these thoughts from Newtonville Resonate in the Highlands?

Dear Newton Highlands Neighbors and Friends,

I recently received this paper from Peter Bruce who serves on the Newtonville Neighborhood Area Council. You don't have to agree with all or any part of what he wrote to see that it's a masterful presentation that required a lot of detailed thought and effort to put together. He asked me if it would be useful to share this Newtonville experience with folks in the Highlands. I said I would, but immediately pointed out that there are some significant differences between the two villages in terms of past and future development. The Green Line runs regular service every 20 minutes or so while commuter rail service is spotty to say the least. And nobody I know is advocating anything like Trio or Austin Street in the immediate vicinity of our village center.

Still, Peter's opening statement "Newtonville as a Critical Case Study" contends that Newtonville is the first village to see significant redevelopment of this magnitude. He argues that there are important lessons and warnings from what's happened there that other villages should be aware of--the canary in the coalmine analogy. His sections titled -- New Developments are making housing less, not more affordable -- Newton, traditionally a cultural and intellectual city, is becoming more commercial and coarser; and ---- Promises regarding the Washington Street Vision plan were broken --- are thoughtful, provocative and are obviously deeply felt by many people in his village.

Here is Peter's paper.

Bob Burke
161 Dickerman Road

From: "Peter Bruce"

Sent: Saturday, October 23, 2021

Subject: Vision Kits

Hi friends and neighbors,

The Planning and Development Department has digested the results of its zoning redesign community engagement project regarding village centers and will be presenting a report on that topic at the next meeting of the Zoning and Planning Committee of the City Council next Monday, October 25. For those interested, here's a slightly revised version of the vision kit I submitted earlier this month to the Planning and Development Department, and yesterday to the City Council.

MY VISION KIT -- Peter Bruce 11 Clafin Place, Newtonville

The most important values I'd like to see represented in my village center (of Newtonville) and Newton itself are (1) a sense of realism addressing the future and (2) respect for those of us who live here and have contributed over the years to the city becoming the fine place that it is. While the usual goals of addressing climate change, housing affordability, fiscal solvency, and preserving/sustaining our environment and our wonderful old architecture are also important, they need to be addressed with those two overriding goals in mind.

Regarding a sense of realism, it would be preferable not to be confronted with questions that seem leading and ideologically driven. For instance, the housing question asking us to stand at a transit stop and try to locate multi-family units somewhere nearby appears leading because it presumes that this is something residents want, and because that's what the city administration is pushing for. And it's downright silly in Newtonville Center since such places are already a "brooding omnipresence" on the ground. Not only do we already have recently completed large new developments like 77 Court Street, 28 Austin Street, and Trio (Washington and Walnut), but the first several blocks north of Washington Street are full of older multi-family units and the main census tract in Ward 2, Precinct 2, south of the Pike, my tract, is also mostly comprised of two- and three-family residences, the only such tract in the city. The question also distracts from the more important questions of how are the recent, new, large developments, which were built here against majority community opposition, working out? And what do these projects portend for future developments here and elsewhere in Newton?

Newtonville as a Critical Case study

Excellent concerts on Newtonville's Bram Way Plaza (east of 28 Austin Street) and the success of the upscale restaurant Mida in one of Trio's building are being touted as showing that large new developments in Newtonville are creating a better city. And, indeed, Newtonville serves well as a critical case study, since we are the first village to have had such large, mixed-use developments approved, completed, and occupied in the last few years! But, despite these community benefits, the success of these large projects is questionable. And, as canaries in the coal mine, we Newtonvillers need to let the rest of the city know the following:

Transit-oriented development (TOD) doesn't work well here. Although large developments in Newtonville are billed as "transit-oriented," even in their Board/Council Orders, they are not, as buses and trains run only infrequently. The mainstay of the area's transit, the commuter rail, makes only ~20 trips a day, with an hour between most trains. Further, the commuter rail serves very few passengers other than commuters to Boston. The nation's premier institute that certifies places as transit-oriented (*Reconnect America's* "Transit-Oriented Development Institute") requires that intervals between trains be 15-30 minutes or less, with consistent service throughout the day. By its criteria, Newtonville didn't qualify as the most basic type of transit-oriented neighborhood even before the pandemic. Our bus service is spotty as well. So, neither Newtonville, nor West Newton, meets its lowest defined level of transit-orientation (although the neighborhoods along the Green Line, with ~100 trips a day, easily do). New developments should conform to the transit we have, not what we wish we had!

Problems with the commuter rail have only worsened with the pandemic. Due to increases in work- from-home, and many transit riders switching to Uber and Lyft, commuter rail ridership had declined 25% from 2002 to 2018 according to the Pioneer Institute. And, as of last May, in the midst of the pandemic, its ridership was down another 90% from pre-pandemic levels. By mid-summer, it had risen to 23% of pre-pandemic levels in the last reporting I've seen on this in *The Boston Globe*.

Of course, perhaps the availability of "Biden dollars" and the recent greenlighting of new, dual platforms and bi-directional service for Newton's three platforms may greatly improve our commuter rail service. But these improvements' construction costs are estimated at ~\$150 million. Both federal and state guidelines select projects for funding by balancing projected ridership versus project costs. Given the commuter rail's relatively low ridership, and the fact that competition for the state's share of federal transportation money is likely to be fierce, these potential improvements are hardly guaranteed. And ridership is not likely to return to pre-pandemic levels anytime soon. The commuter rail depends heavily on white collar workers — 40% of whom say they would prefer to work at home after the pandemic (Gallup national poll). Best case analysis, if the necessary funds come through, according to *Mayor Fuller's Update* (10/7) and the MBTA, is that construction (and much increased service) "could be completed in seven years." Meanwhile, potential, additional passengers will likely have to drive.

There is also a strong possibility that many of Newtonville's new residents will not choose to use mass transit, especially given pandemic concerns. Many will also not even have a practical option to use mass transit. Further, at 28 Austin Street, according to Newton's 2021 *Annual Listing of Residents* (over 17), it appears that there are a very large number of units occupied by only one adult, and that the ratio of adults to leased car spaces is about 1.3/1. That is not much better than the City's average of roughly 1 car per adult. [Trio opened too recently for this to be a good indicator there.] That some residents at 28 Austin don't indicate their residence on Newton's *List of Residents Age 17 and Above*, and that it only has 59 registered voters in 68 apartments, suggests that many residents may still maintain their primary residences elsewhere, quite possibly leaving their personal vehicles there as well. As in Boston, people who live elsewhere may be using these apartments as seasonal or temporary residences, or as "pieds-a-terre." As such, they may use Uber, Lyft, taxis, rental cars or transportation supplied by their companies while here and their own cars back home.

Finally, the mayor's recent promise to make NewMo freely available to anyone who wants to go to a transit station or stop, would seem to obviate the need, to a large extent, to concentrate housing around transit stops in village centers. So would the fact that despite the growth of environmental consciousness, commuting to work via transit (bus, Green Line, commuter rail) has remained stable over the past several decades at only about 12-13%, according to the MAPC. As such, it might make more policy sense for the city to invest in charging stations that can charge electric vehicles much faster than most home energy sources and do more to educate people about global warming and the advantages of buying hybrid and electric vehicles.

New developments are making housing less, not more affordable. The market-rate apartments at Trio have all been leased, according to a spokesperson at Newtonville's Village

Day (9/26). But when many apartments were still on the market there in June, here's what they were renting for and how they compare with the rest of Newtonville's rentals. The 1-Br+den, 2-Br, and 3-Br apartments all exceed affordability for households earning Newtonville's median income or less, as you can see in bold in the top chart. (This assumes households should pay no more than one-third of their income in rent.)

Furthermore, while the studios and 1-bedrooms are technically affordable by this criterion, as you can see in the lower right-hand corner, they rent for roughly double what our comparable, naturally-occurring affordable housing (NOAH) rents for, while the two- and three-bedrooms rent for about two-thirds more than the equivalent NOAH. These market-rate apartments represent 105 units, or three-quarters of Trio's housing stock.

At Newtonville's Village Day, Trio distributed a more recent list of prices for market-rate apartments now available, updated as of July 10, 2021. As with the figures in the chart, the following figures represent midpoints of ranges which vary by square footage. The newer (July) average rents for 1-Brs, 1Br+den, 2-Brs, and 3-Brs are: \$3,460, \$3,705, 4,490, and \$5,260 respectively. All, except the 3-Br price, have increased since June, making these apartments even more exclusive. For instance, to pay less than one-third of its income in rent, a household would need \$161,802 to afford a 2-bedroom apartment, while Newtonville's median income is approximately \$127,000.

GENERAL OVERVIEW AND RENTS

Trio is a 140 unit rental apartment community on the corner of Washington St and Walnut St in Newtonville. 35 units will be available through this lottery process. All units have high end apartment grade finishes including steel front appliances and in-unit washers and dryers. Trio offers an indoor fitness center area as well as both indoor and outdoor community space for residents. For a **description of the units and the development** please see the last page of this info packet.

# of Units	# of Bedrooms	# of Bathrooms	Approximate Size	Rent** <i>(does not include any utilities, see note below)</i>	Income Limit
1*	Studio	1	583 sq ft	\$923*	50% AMI
1	Studio	1	582 sq ft	\$1,447*	80% AMI
2*	Studio	1	570-590 sq ft	\$1,784*	100% AMI
5	1BR	1	661-837 sq ft	\$1,021*	50% AMI
5*	1BR	1	687-739 sq ft	\$1,621*	80% AMI
2	1BR	1	673-765 sq ft	\$2,039*	100% AMI
3	1BR	1	665-723 sq ft	\$2,492*	120% AMI
4*	2BR	2	942-1109 sq ft	\$1,079*	50% AMI
4	2BR	2	937-1053 sq ft	\$1,753*	80% AMI
2	2BR	2	1054-1101 sq ft	\$2,294*	100% AMI
4	2BR	2	1050-1213 sq ft	\$2,804 *	120% AMI
1	3BR	2	1285 sq ft	\$1,139 *	50% AMI
1*	3BR	2	1297 sq ft	\$2,549 *	100% AMI

*The Studio 50% unit, one 2BR 50% unit, one Studio 100% unit, and the 3BR 100% unit have Disabled-Accessible Features. One 1BR 80% unit has BOTH Disabled-Accessible features and features for the Deaf/Hard of Hearing.

Tenants are responsible for paying the full amount of rent each month. Rents are not based on each applicant's income (unless they already have a Section 8 voucher or similar). Tenants will be responsible for paying their own utilities. Tenants will pay own Gas Heat and Hot Water and Cooking, Electricity, Water and Sewer. For 50% and 80% units, one parking spot is included. **Parking is NOT included for the 100% and 120% AMI units, and parking is estimated to be \$200/mo. The rents are set annually using a calculation that determines the "affordable" rent, which is based on the Area Median Incomes for the Boston MSA.

These rents are making Newtonville and Newton overall more gentrified and less welcoming to the less affluent. Ditto for Trio's "affordable" housing available to those making up to 120% of AMI, as these 1-Brs rent for \$2,492 versus the \$1,595 Newtonville median, and \$2,804 versus \$2,550 for 2-brs. Also, for six of the 13 categories of affordable rents Trio offered, Newtonville's median rents for comparably sized units are lower. (See spreadsheet below "Trio affordable rents.") So, while the 21 units of affordable housing at the 80%, and especially the 50% of AMI levels offer substantial bargains for the less affluent, overall, this is far outweighed by the cost of its market-rate apartments, and 120% AMI apartments.

TRIO "AFFORDABLE RENTS"						
# of Units	# of Bedrooms	# of Bathrooms	Square Feet	Rent**	Income Limit	N'ville median rent
1	Studio	1	583	\$923	50% AMI	\$1423
1	Studio	1	582	\$1447	80% AMI	\$1423
2	Studio	1	570-590	\$1784	100% AMI	\$1423
5	1-BR	1	661-837	\$1021	50% AMI	\$1595
5	1-BR	1	687-739	\$1621	80% AMI	\$1595
2	1-BR	1	673-765	\$2039	100% AMI	\$1595
3	1-BR	1	665-723	\$2492	120% AMI	\$1595
4	2-BR	2	942-1109	\$1079	50% AMI	\$1595
4	2-BR	2	937-1053	\$1753	80% AMI	\$2550
2	2-BR	2	1054-1101	\$2294	100% AMI	\$2550
4	2-BR	2	1050-1213	\$2804	120% AMI	\$2550
1	3-BR	2	1285	\$1139	50% AMI	\$3200
1	3-BR	2	1297	\$2549	100% AMI	\$3200

**Tenants are responsible for paying the full amount of rent each month. Rents are not based on each applicant's income (unless they already have a Section 8 voucher or similar). Tenants will be responsible for paying their own utilities. Tenants will pay own Gas Heat and Hot Water and Cooking, Electricity, Water and Sewer. For 50% and 80% units, one parking spot is included. Parking is NOT included for the 100% and 120% AMI units, and parking is estimated to be \$200/mo. The rents are set annually using a calculation that determines the "affordable" rent, which is based on the Area Median Incomes for the Boston MSA.

Source: Trio Information Packet for May 22, 2020 Housing Lottery
https://sebhousing.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/InfoPack_Trio_Lottery_2020.pdf

Note: Red figures indicate Trio "affordable" rents exceed Newtonville median rents.

Units	"Affordable," deed-restricted	(all AMI levels)	N'ville median rent
35	Combined average		
	Trio apts.	Trio rents	
4	Studios	\$1484	\$1423
15	1-BR	\$1650	\$1595
14	2-BR	\$1938	\$2550
2	3-BR	\$1844	\$3200

Finally, as noted on the spreadsheet for the 100% and 120% of AMI apartments, and for all the market-rate apartments, there are extra charges for gas heat, electricity, water and

sewage, as well as a \$160/month fee to lease a parking space and a \$50-75/month pet fee which further add to costs and decreases the affordability of the vast majority of these apartments. With these extra charges, a 2-bedroom household with the most recent (July) rent, a leased car stall, and a cat, would need an annual income of more than \$169,000 to live at Trio. And that doesn't include the cost of utilities. (See attached Screenshot "****" section.)

Similar high rents (medians of \$3200/mo. for a 1-BR, and \$4,100/mo. for 2-BR) were featured at 28 Austin while it was attempting to rent large numbers of apartments the previous year. But, to its credit, one-third of its apartments, as opposed to 15% (at Trio), were affordable by state standards.

Also, to the extent, as noted, that people in our large new developments retain primary residences elsewhere, this impedes the "trickle-down effect" assumed by those asserting that expanding housing supply helps moderate prices at all levels.

Newton, traditionally a cultural and intellectual city, is becoming more commercial and coarser.

Newton is largely a cultural and intellectual city. This is clear from the occupational and industry-sector breakdowns of where people work, and which businesses are the largest employers here, i.e., especially healthcare/medicine, education, scientific research, high tech, and the arts. Some years ago, one of the local papers also reported that Newton was exceptional in the number of people who work in the non-profit sector.

But Newton is taking on a new look. As Plato once noted, aesthetic change indicates cultural change. We see this especially at night, as a lit billboard alongside the Pike invites people to come to Newtonville to conveniently buy recreational marijuana. The electrographic architecture continues, as one drives into Newton Corner to see neon signs light up buildings in which nothing is happening at night. Then, one gets another dose of neon at Trio, with the lighted ring on top of what looks like a bellhop's cap at the corner of the building. All of this looks more like 1960s Los Angeles than the north side of Newton, with its 19th century ambiance.

As for our new developments' architecture, Trio's buildings' style clashes with the historic look of other large buildings in the neighborhood, lacking the sort of turret or spire that had been promised, which would have resonated with the other classically-styled building in the area. It is also massive, arguably ugly, and looks like an army barracks out-of-scale with the residential neighborhood from which it protrudes. In fact, Trio's design is generic, and looks more like the architecture of recent developments in neighboring towns than Newtonville. Where is the "sense of place" planners like to talk about? And the equipment and pipes on its roofs look like clutter.

28 Austin is a better fit. But it suffers from unattractive, generic design features not in keeping with Newtonville's architecture and from what appears to be synthetic construction materials.

Promises regarding the Washington Street Vision Plan were broken. For more than a year (mostly 2018-2019), residents on the northside of Newton, community groups, the Principle Group, and the personnel in the City's planning institutions devoted a great deal of time and energy to community engagement events, regular meetings, and conducting and

analyzing surveys, with the City Council eventually approving the *Washington Street Vision Plan*. The plan's early iterations were accompanied by draft zoning documents and "drop-in" zoning for the whole corridor was supposed to implement it. According to City Council President Albright, however, that zoning was never finished because the Planning and Development Department regarded it as "too controversial." (She said that to Emily Norton, Tarik Lucas, me, and others at a recent "Vision Kit" meeting.)

If zoning had followed the Vision Plan, it would have limited the height of any new building next to the iconic Masonic Hall to four stories. But lacking that zoning, we are left in a weak position to retain the prominence of the iconic Masonic building against a proposed five-story building there. The payment of \$500,000 to the Principle Group is now commonly seen as a waste of money and a squandering of the community's time and good will. While the Vision Plan was incorporated into the city's Comprehensive Plan, which is a good thing, and at least gives us some leverage to retain the principles and guidance we fought for, we do not have the legally enforceable rules that zoning would have given us.

Mayor Fuller, herself, pointed to the imperative of creating zoning for the *Washington Street Vision Plan* in an article by John Hilliard, in *The Boston Globe*, on May 4, 2018:

"I understand completely that in the past, too often, here in Newton, and in too many other communities, we're not genuinely listening and creating the zoning based on what people want. Instead, there's kind of a hidden agenda," Fuller said. "This is the genuine real deal of listening to people and creating the zoning based on that." [ii](#)

With the failure of her administration and the City Council to follow through on this promise, it is not surprising that so many people in our area declined to participate in the more recent community engagement projects for Zoning Redesign and say "fool me once shame on you, fool me twice..."

She broke that promise, just as she did the one in her mayoral debate, in which she promised that a democratic commission, not the Planning Department, would formulate the goals that would guide planning and development. The Somerville example which she used as a model was, candidate Fuller stated, "produced by the community, for the community...directed by a steering committee of 60 Somerville residents, advocates, elected officials, and business-people.... It was not led by the Planning Department."

Beyond that, Mayor Fuller's signed pledge, along with 14 other local mayors, to create 185,000 new units of housing in and around Boston arguably contravenes the city's *Comprehensive Plan*. That plan foresaw the need for Newton to increase its housing supply by ~15% to maintain a stable population. With all the new developments recently built, and in the pipeline, however (about 3500 new units altogether), we are already going to be most of the way there once these projects acquire building permits. (This might take several years where highways, major roads, and other infrastructure need to be redesigned and rebuilt.) But, with Fuller's unilateral signing of the 15-mayor pledge, proportional to population, Newton's share of that 185,000 would require that we build another 7,000 more units. Altogether, that ~10,500 units would be one-third of Newton's total housing supply in 2010, and more units than were built in the last 50 years — a deviation from the Comprehensive Plan that is so gross that it points for the need for a new one, if we are to avoid flying blind into building.

This high-handed, unilateral behavior is not only ethically reprehensible, but it explains why our policy-making around planning, development, and zoning reform has seen a series of false starts, reversals, and drift, all wasting taxpayers' dollars, time, and good will for much of the past decade. I see three major false starts:

- 1) The *Pattern Book*, and especially the Form-Based Zoning (FBZ) which was supposed to be based upon it, along with FBZ's major goal of reducing non-conformity between buildings and zoning, appears to have been largely diminished in status by President Albright, the Zoning and Planning Committee, and the Planning and Development Department.^[ii]
- 2) The *Washington Street Vision Plan's* zoning has been abandoned.
- 3) The proposal to allow multi-family homes to be built, by right, almost anywhere within one-quarter or one-half mile of all transit stops, and the related idea of abolishing single-family-only zoning have been "pivoted" away from, perhaps permanently.

All these reforms were, at least initially, aimed at radically increasing height, density, and development, changes that simply aren't popular on this side of town, and perhaps in most of Newton. To paraphrase Abraham Lincoln, with public sentiment, everything is possible. Without it, nothing is possible. Mayor Fuller and many on the City Council have consistently misread or ignored public sentiment on these issues, which violates principle (2), that the people who already live here, and their interests and opinions should be respected.

^[ii] "Washington Street has divided Newton for years..." May 4, 2018. <https://www3.bostonglobe.com/metro/regionals/west/2018/05/04/washington-street-has-divided-newton-for-years-can-city-build-consensus/efleyd2gCU4T6lBjK8OybL/story.html?event=event12&arc404=true>

^[iii] See her memo to Chief Planner Zach Lemel, #88-20, September 9, 2020.