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Subject: Undecided on Northland?; Cheesecake Brook restoration; Dunstan East 40B site visit

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Undecided on Northland? Hear the "No" side today, Sunday, Feb. 23, 2pm at Emerson Community Center

Only two weeks remain until Presidential Primary Day and the Northland referendum on Tuesday, March 3. Early voting starts on Monday, Feb. 24, and people have been asking me for my thoughts -- on Northland.

You've probably seen the big budget "Yes" campaign -- multiple mailings featuring an idyllic Village Green, and the double-page ad in the Newton Tab. If you're undecided, or wondering how anyone could oppose a project that passed the last City Council 17-7, I'll explain some of the reasons I'm voting No below. But please also bring your questions to this forum sponsored by the Committee for Responsible Development and RightSize Newton:

A Conversation about the Northland Project
Sunday, February 23, 2-3:30 pm | Emerson Community Center,
45 Pettee Street, Newton Upper Falls

Wondering what to believe about the Northland Referendum? Come join a conversation about the Northland project, the upcoming vote on March 3rd, and Newton's future.

You'll have the opportunity to hear from Land Use attorney/40B expert, Dennis Murphy, as well some of your City Councilors, fellow residents, and neighbors.

Here are some of my reasons:

1) For me, and as many of the seven councilors who voted against the special permit pointed out, it does not meet the standard for approving a special permit, of no adverse impact, no nuisance to traffic or pedestrians, and adequate access over streets, as specified in the city's Zoning

Code: <http://www.newtonma.gov/civicax/filebank/documents/69436> (pg 7-4).

Proponents spoke of the good features of the project, including: 120 units of officially Affordable housing (countable on the Subsidized Housing Inventory), and 20 units of "workforce" housing, meeting requirements of the city's Inclusionary Zoning ordinance; a shuttle every 10 minutes to the Highlands T stop; three buildings meeting "passive house" standards, and other environmentally friendly features; and the Village Green, spray park and other open spaces.

But the ordinance does not say to weigh benefits against risks, or weigh the negative consequences (e.g., traffic congestion) against another possible alternative. (Either course would introduce an even greater level of subjectivity!) Councilors are supposed to be evaluating the project before them.

2) I'm not persuaded that the shuttle to the Highlands T plan will make much of a dent in the traffic impact of 800 housing units, plus office and retail. It really only affects commuting trips, not all the other trips in people's lives. Not everyone works in Boston; even those who do may find driving faster or more convenient, and once Riverside is built and occupied, seats will be harder to find by Highlands.

The Maximum Trip Count targets that Northland is required to meet or else pay for further Transportation Demand Management (TDM) measures, will only include residents and office trips. They exclude trips by outsiders, to the retail businesses (which we want to be successful), and to the parks, visitors to the residences, Uber and Lyft trips, and deliveries, which are considered harder to predict, and harder to influence with TDM. Total trips counts will also be done semiannually, then annually, but without financial penalties for excessive levels.

I also don't put much stock in special permit conditions, like this shuttle, that can be reversed by a future city council vote if they become inconvenient to the developer, or that require indefinite monitoring, instead of being physically built in. We saw the 'no banks' condition at Washington Place reversed before the building was even half finished, just because the developer wanted to rent to a bank and requested to have the condition changed.

3) Northland proponents have tried to scare people with very speculative scenarios of multiple 40Bs, or by-right commercial that would, they say, generate more traffic. Personally I would prefer either maximum commercial for better fiscal impact, or housing development by 40B, where the percentage of affordable units would be higher, most likely 25% of units. (Most developers seem to choose 25% affordable at 80% of Area Median Income, as opposed to 20% of units at a deeper level of affordability, 50% of Area Median Income.) And with a 40B, if they are apartments, which seems to be the preference of developers, all units would count on the Subsidized Housing Inventory.

That, combined with other big projects like Riverside, the Dunstan East 40B and the Riverdale 40B, would put Newton over the 10% of housing units threshold for "safe harbor" that allows the Zoning Board of Appeals to reject unsatisfactory 40Bs. That's important because Mayor Fuller has not shown any interest in challenging the state's guidelines on calculating whether we meet another safe harbor -- the 1.5% Land Area Minimum devoted to Affordable housing. (Those guidelines were arbitrarily changed by the state after communities like Newton and Waltham began asserting 1.5%.) So until we reach 10% of units, slowly via Inclusionary Zoning at only 15% of

projects approved.

4) The Northland proponents also say that under another development scenario we wouldn't be getting things like the open space (of which the most celebrated is the Village Green), or the shuttle to the Highlands T. I'm not convinced. Those are amenities that will benefit the residents and tenants of the project, more so than nearby neighborhoods. Whatever Northland might decide to do if the No vote prevails (other than sitting on the land for a few more years, as they've been doing), they will have to make the location appealing to prospective tenants, who would be put off by traffic gridlock or lack of green space. And if they do residential units, they're competing with [Avalon at Newton Highlands](#) up the street, which is closer to the T.



The "Yes" mailings like to show this view across the Village Green looking toward the historic Saco-Pettee mill building, instead of the overall view in which the Village Green is just the square at center-left in the top photo. This is what it looked like in Northland's 3D video, before they populated it with people for the mailers.

Northland discussion on Common Ground (and landmarking in West Newton Square)



Northland was the second topic of discussion, beginning at 25:30, on the February taping of Ken Parker's Common

Also this afternoon: restoring Cheesecake Brook?



Cheesecake Brook didn't always have walls -- obviously! Someone had to build them! But what if there were no walls? Would there be less flooding? How would trees fare? Would we be allowed to wade? (Cleanups might be easier.) At 3pm today, Sunday, 2/23 at the Albemarle Field House (next to Gath Pool), the Charles River Watershed Association will be holding an information session about a conceptual redesign for [naturalizing the brook to improve climate resilience](#).

Yet another instance of competing meetings making me wish I could clone myself. I'll be going to the Emerson Community Center event, because I want to hear 40B attorney Dennis Murphy's thoughts. But if you've already made up your mind on the Northland referendum, pro or con, this should be an interesting event to go to instead! I hope there will be a followup.

Dunstan East 40B ZBA site visit, 8am Monday, Feb. 24



hearing on the Dunstan East 40 application, will be tomorrow morning, beginning at 8am at The Barn. Interested parties are invited to attend, as it's a [posted public meeting](#).

More info on the Planning Department's [Dunstan East page](#).

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