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## **PUBLIC HEARING M E M O R A N D U M**

DATE: September 6, 2019

TO: Councilor Susan Albright, Chair  
Members of the Zoning and Planning Committee

FROM: Barney Heath, Director of Planning & Development  
James Freas, Deputy Director of Planning & Development

MEETING DATE: September 9, 2019

SUBJECT: **#165-19 Washington Street Comprehensive Plan Amendment**

CC: Planning & Development Board  
City Council  
Jonathan Yeo, Chief Operating Officer

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The Comprehensive Plan Amendment to incorporate the Washington Street Vision Plan establishes a future for the corridor grounded in Newton's values and history and aspirational for improvements. The plan identifies strategic actions to enhance the vitality of each of the villages on the corridor, create a safe transportation system for all, allow for new and diverse housing opportunities, advance the City's commitment to addressing climate change, and all of this with a focus on the concept of excellence in placemaking as defined for Newton in the Comprehensive Plan. Begun in the spring of 2018, the plan has been shaped by substantial community dialogue, informed by research into state-of-the-art best practices in community planning and design, and is intended to be implementable by the City over a 20 to 30 year timeframe.

The planning process that has led up to the draft now under consideration has included numerous public meetings and a series of draft documents. There were a range of community-based meetings, most prominently a week-long open design studio on Washington Street where community members could drop in at any time to see drawings in progress and provide feedback. The Zoning and Planning Committee, and the City Council overall, has provided invaluable feedback over the last year. The process has also included multiple versions of a draft report from our consultant team, which

significantly informed the draft comprehensive plan amendment, as well as draft zoning, a revised version of which will be presented to the Zoning & Planning Committee this fall/winter.

### **Newton's Excellence in Place-making Priority**

One of the most significant attributes of Newton's 2007 Comprehensive Plan was the introduction of the concept of "Excellence in Place-making" as applied in Newton. While Newton has a 100+ year history of quality design, the plan defined excellence in place-making as a core value of the City and described how the idea could be applied as a process towards the future development of the City. The Washington Street Vision arises from this set of ideas.

The Comprehensive Plan identified five core tenets of "Excellence in Place-making":

1. Documenting a Clear Vision
2. Connecting Public Investment to that Vision
3. Connecting Regulation to that Vision
4. Thinking and Acting from a Comprehensive Perspective
5. Providing an Excellent System for Project Review

Each of these tenets is addressed within the content and recommended actions of the Washington Street vision. The fundamental question this vision attempts to answer – how do we shape and direct the development of Washington Street, its buildings, roads, and parks, to the best possible outcome for Newton? How do we preserve and enhance what is already great, improve what is lacking, and overall, make this part of Newton a better place to live and work while also responding to the needs and values of the City in such areas as housing, economic development, transportation, and the environment?

### **The Vision**

The best way to understand the proposed vision for Washington Street is to read the Comprehensive Plan amendment document. The below offers a summary of some of the major themes.

#### **Reinforce the distinct separate identities of West Newton and Newtonville.**

This idea refers to ensuring there is a break in intensity of use between each of the villages. The villages themselves are characterized by commercial and mixed-use buildings, the space between is not. Between West Newton and Newtonville, this objective is primarily achieved through preservation of the single-family style and otherwise low-scale buildings found generally between Cross and Lowell. At the other (eastern) end of the study area, the institutions and smaller scale single- and multi-family buildings past Craft offer a similar break before the rise of Newton Corner.

#### **Influence new development with the character of historic buildings, preserve the village cores**

The vision calls for preserving/reinforcing the historic core of the village centers while directing new development to the village edges along Washington Street, where large areas of underutilized commercial properties and parking lots currently detract from the quality and value of the villages. Where new development is proposed, the design, through ordinance and special permit review process, will be influenced by the historic character of the villages to present as individual buildings with varying heights, roof styles, and materials. Parking is underground or behind buildings, ground

floors are commercial, and courtyards, plazas, and open spaces are located throughout. These development areas are transit-served and large enough to accommodate new buildings while stepping heights down to meet adjacent neighborhoods.

#### Make transportation safe for all while increasing options

Washington Street must be equally safe and comfortable for people walking, biking, driving, or taking public transportation. The City must redesign Washington Street for safety, increasing the viability of all modes of transportation. The City must also be a strong advocate for improving the MBTA's public transit services, both commuter rail and bus, so that they are more accessible, frequent, and higher quality.

#### Support diverse housing choices

Expanding opportunities for diverse housing choices is happening citywide – along Washington Street it is proposed for the walkable, transit-served areas of West Newton and Newtonville. From older adults looking to downsize their home to the employees of Newton businesses, there is a dramatic need for new housing, particularly multi-family. The need for affordable housing is a major part of this housing demand and, with Newton's recently revised inclusionary housing ordinance, deed-restricted affordable units are required as part of any new housing development.

#### Address the challenges posed by climate change and improve the local environment

Like other communities all around the world, Newton is engaging in efforts to address the challenge of climate change. On Washington Street, the focus is on the environmental efficiency of new buildings, promoting new housing and commercial development close to transit and other transportation alternatives, and improving those alternative transportation options. For the local environment, ensuring access to parkspace and mitigating the effects of the Mass Pike are important issues in the plan.

#### Supporting a diverse and vital business community

The 2019 Newton Economic Development Strategy identifies the Washington Street corridor as having potential for both office and retail expansion. This potential is focused in the villages and close to the commuter rail stations. Supporting growth in commercial enterprises in these areas is important to the vitality and long-term viability of these village centers and to the tax base of the City.

The Washington Street Vision Comprehensive Plan Amendment was presented to the Zoning & Planning Committee on July 29, 2019 and can be found online at:

[http://www.newtonma.gov/gov/planning/lrplan/washington\\_street\\_vision.asp](http://www.newtonma.gov/gov/planning/lrplan/washington_street_vision.asp)

#### **Next Steps**

Incorporate comments received over the last month and at the public hearing and present a final draft to the Zoning and Planning Committee on October 2, 2019.