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MEMORANDUM

DATE: October 11, 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: October 16, 2019

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

CC: Planning & Development Board
City Council

On October 2, 2019 a new draft of the Washington Street Vision comprehensive plan amendment was submitted to the Zoning and Planning Committee. The Committee offered a number of comments and questions, responses to which are provided below.

1. 10-story buildings – An allowable height of 10 stories had been included in two areas of the corridor in order to support economic development. Based on Council and community feedback, the area by Craft Street was removed entirely and the area adjacent to the West Newton train station reduced in size to only the MBTA-owned parcel. It is anticipated that any eventual sale or lease of that MBTA parcel would happen only after considerable public process with both the state and the City. It is also recognized that the extensive infrastructure improvements necessary to integrate that MBTA parcel into the village area will be expensive and, given the precedent set at Riverside and other locations, there will be an expectation that the development project will cover those costs. Staff requests advice from the Committee on whether to show the allowable height for this site at 10-stories or reduce it to the medium height category of 6.
2. Medium Height Category – The proposed medium height category identifies an allowable height of up to six stories. This design choice is the result of many different factors. Such

height allows accommodation of greater densities of residential and commercial space, which directly address identified needs for both housing and economic development. That greater density also supports greater utilization of transit. The densities represented by buildings of that height also support the redevelopment of currently underutilized lands at the edges of the existing villages and allows that redevelopment to include significant public areas and underground parking, responding to the need for such public spaces and the community desire to not have large, boxy developments such as generally result when a development includes above-ground structured parking. Finally, there was a strong indication from the community that development include a variety of heights, but the full range of desired outcomes identified above are unlikely to be achieved in a project with varied heights if some of those buildings are not six stories.

Recognizing the concerns raised about the potential of six story buildings in some parts of the Washington Street corridor, the plan identifies a number of design strategies to be incorporated into the zoning for this area. Above all, the most important factor is that buildings over 3 stories should require a special permit with clear criteria related to these height related design strategies. First among these design strategies is the idea, mentioned above, that heights should vary, preserving the sense of buildings that have been built individually and incrementally over time. For larger, multi-building projects, this requirement will be directly in the zoning ordinance. For individual buildings though, it will have to be judged on a case-by-case basis as a special permit criteria. The zoning will also clearly require that heights step-down adjacent to residential areas. If there is insufficient space on a given property to accomplish a step-down in height, then that lot will not be able to achieve the maximum allowable heights.

Another factor supporting the proposed heights along Washington Street is the urban design principle that a pedestrian's sense of safety and comfort is enhanced when the street has a sense of enclosure. That sense of enclosure is primarily provided by appropriately scaled buildings set close to the sidewalk. Understanding this principle is important to the design review process. That being said, this principle is a guideline and not determinative of the final outcome. For example, the vision plan recommends that the central part of the Washington Street corridor, where the street is characterized by single-family scale buildings, maintain that scale. Clearly, in that area, given the width of Washington Street, there will be less of a sense of enclosure provided by the buildings and the street design will need to further enhance other attributes supportive of pedestrian safety and comfort. In this location, other design objectives, most importantly maintaining a sense of distinct separation between West Newton and Newtonville, outweigh the principle of defining the public space with taller buildings.

As the above discussion makes apparent, there is no single factor that is determinative as to the appropriate heights along Washington Street. Each lot will be addressed individually as a designer works with their client (the developer), within the constraints of zoning and the guidance offered by this plan, and through discussions with the City and community. All of the above objectives and concerns will, through the design and permitting process, be

addressed. Overall, the outcomes desired for the Washington Street corridor, ranging from housing and economic development to attractive and vibrant buildings and village centers, depends on allowing building heights that can accommodate these outcomes, which staff recommends include up to six-story buildings.

3. Washington Street Design – The vision plan places safety for all users as the number one design objective for the redesign of Washington Street. The plan then describes what the likely design outcomes would be with that priority in place, which could be some form of boulevard with separated bike lanes. The plan provides some sample cross-sections but does not represent a detailed study of the corridor, instead offering a set of design principles and objectives with accompanying visuals while speaking to how a boulevard approach could be beneficial.

The next step in the process is detailed design. This process will work with a transportation planning and engineering company, work from surveyed plans of the road, include study of the existing conditions, trials and demonstrations, and, as with all City projects, a great deal of community engagement. Good planning and engineering practice includes that this work will look at a number of different alternatives.

Next Steps

Staff will take comments from the Committee and prepare a final draft of the Washington Street Vision comprehensive plan amendment. Based on existing comments received, amendments will be made to those pages describing the height issue, including addressing that language directly to objectives and removing technical language such as that around the building height to street width ratio. Amendments will also include some discussion of how zoning and special permit review will influence heights and emphasis on the varying heights principle and the step-down heights rule.