

## **Thoughts on Needham Street and Development in Newton**

*by Leslie Burg, Alderman at Large, Ward 3*

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Two weeks ago the Tab featured an op-ed by my colleague, Alderman Mitch Fischman, describing the many problems of Needham Street. In fact, the Needham Street corridor is an excellent example of a street that “grew like Topsy”. I doubt it’s an exaggeration to say its development occurred by happenstance with little planning and no vision as to what might be desirable there. Consequently, Needham Street is a hodge-podge of retail stores and businesses, and one rather large housing development. It is afflicted with too many curb cuts, and too little attention to traffic concerns. It is a prime example of bad development.

There is presently, serious interest on the part of at least one owner of a substantial parcel on Needham St. to redevelop its property. This firm wants to create a mixed-use development, ostensibly with a combination of residential units, retail shops, and commercial space. Their concept reminded me of what I thought Avalon Bay on Needham Street should have been. That was before I learned that Avalon Bay developers don’t build mixed-use projects. So AB residents have to get into their cars and drive to a market should they unexpectedly need a bottle of milk! Clearly not convenient for them, not helpful in reducing traffic congestion, and not healthful for our environment.

It was also before I learned that it is currently impossible for developers to construct mixed-use projects in our only two mixed-use districts that fall on either side of Needham Street. Sounds a bit like Alice-in-Wonderland, doesn’t it? Zoning in our mixed-use districts contains only a “by right”, 10,000 square foot per unit dwelling provision, and no way for a developer to acquire a special permit that would allow a more reasonable square foot allotment per dwelling —say 1200 feet or so! For some unknown reason, our mixed-use districts are the only ones that lack a special permit provision. If we rectify this omission, I believe that the redevelopment of Needham Street to include well-designed mixed-use projects will eventually result in an attractive, pedestrian-friendly corridor.

It will also provide an opportunity to build more affordable housing, something we need to do if we wish to preserve the diversity that Newton has always valued. With small homes being transformed into much larger and more expensive ones, it is imperative that we provide housing for people living on modest incomes—our older citizens, young couples, and professionals who work in our city and would like to live here. Otherwise Newton will lose what diversity it has, and the character of our neighborhoods will be permanently altered.

An early action item from our draft Comprehensive Plan calls for a resolution of this zoning issue, and several of us are working on such a proposal. The Board of Aldermen will address Newton’s draft Comprehensive Plan this fall. Its passage is extremely important, as it will provide the city with a much-needed new set of tools and a structure within which to consider development not only on Needham Street, but also in all of Newton. With the Comprehensive Plan as a guide, we should be able to be more proactive in our city planning.

Many people think “development” is a dirty word. However, development can be good or bad, and good development can be a positive force in a community. It can revitalize older, neglected areas of a city, and make vibrant newly or re-developed ones. And, lest we forget, it generates revenue for the city. Good development is carefully planned and therefore, appropriate to its surroundings in scale, design, appearance, and function. It is an integral part of its neighborhood, whether residential, or commercial. Today the development we want also incorporates sustainable, green technology, and is based on “smart growth” principles. When a community has a vision for itself that informs planning, development becomes a significant means through which that vision may be realized.

Whether one believes development is good or bad, the inescapable truth is that it is inevitable. Small scale or large, by right, or by special permit, development is happening. What we must do is shape it so it becomes what we want it to be and truly enhances the quality of life for us all.