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# LFIA Position Statement on New Development at Riverside MBTA

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October, 2007

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The Lower Falls Improvement  
Association

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## 1. Executive Summary

Around mid-year proposals began to surface for a major mixed-use development project at Riverside. Newton and the MBTA have asked the LFIA and two Auburndale neighborhood organizations to develop position statements on the concerns of their communities if such development were to go forward. This is the LFIA's response to that request.

This report summarizes sentiments and states the positions of the LFIA in six major areas of concern. This document represents the LFIA approved position as of October 21, 2007.

The major areas where the LFIA wants to limit the type and scale of development at Riverside are:

1. **Traffic:** All commuter traffic to and from the site must be by direct access to/from Route 128. Parking for the new development should accommodate normal demands and a reasonable additional allowance for special events in Boston in order to minimize overflow onto local streets. Long-term parking facilities must not be accessible for vehicles entering the site from Grove Street.
2. **Scale:** Development must be in scale with surrounding residential homes and apartment complexes. Any retail business space included must accommodate businesses that will cater to residents, not to others who would have to make a special trip to the site.
3. **Infrastructure:** Development must not put demands on local infrastructure and services that they are unable to support. For example, an analysis of potential impact on school populations must be completed as part of the permitting process.
4. **Appearance:** Riverside is visually unobtrusive when viewed from Grove Street, Lower Falls, Auburndale and the Charles River. This must continue to be the case with new development. For example, new development should present a view from scenic Grove Street consistent with the present aspect. There must not be a large building façade close to the street. Design must include modern technologies and approaches to ensure no light pollution from the site.
5. **Environment:** The development must respect the needs of recreational users of the Charles River and the need for open space. Advanced technologies should be used to minimize environmental footprints.
6. **Process:** The planning process must be transparent and include ample time for input from residents. Residents feel that no other stakeholders involved in planning or development will protect their interests and, as a result, they will need to be their own best advocates.

The following sections describe: residents' views on the existing Riverside facility; residents' impressions of what new development might mean for them; and the constraints the LFIA recommends be put on the project to ensure it is in the community's and Newton's best long-term interests. Appendix A presents a summary of community design guidelines.

## **2. Views on the Existing Riverside Facility**

### **2.1. Traffic Impact**

At peak commuting times, the traffic on Grove Street into and out of Riverside creates congestion that makes travel to and from Lower Falls difficult. One aspect of this is residents' difficulty in getting onto Grove Street from side streets in Lower Falls. Traffic on Grove provides too few breaks for pulling out of Pine Grove, Pierrepont, Asheville, and Deforrest. Second, the traffic bottleneck at Riverside presents obstacles for automobile drivers trying to access Auburndale, West Newton, and other Newton villages along the east-bound corridor. Finally, Lower Falls is used by non-residents and commuters as a pass-through corridor. Because they pass through Lower Falls while rushing to work in the morning or family commitments in the evening, they travel at high speed on Grove. This has led to persistent calls over the years by Lower Falls residents for implementation of traffic calming measures to slow traffic along Grove, make Rt. 16 to 95/128 to Grove a preferred route, and otherwise channel traffic onto the Rt. 95/128 access road. The city and the neighborhood have recently agreed on some traffic calming measures designed to reduce vehicle speeds, but to date no measures have been implemented and results are still unknown.

A less discussed aspect of Riverside-related traffic is commuter foot traffic or student traffic to and from Williams Elementary School. While commuters can generally walk to the site, the sidewalks between Lower Falls and Riverside and in front of Riverside itself are not kept clear in the winter. This can result in commuters walking on slippery streets amid rushing traffic.

Parents in Lower Falls are reluctant to allow students to walk or ride bikes to and from Williams School because of the large amount of site-related traffic and the presence of MBTA buses on Grove Street. Because of these conditions, Riverside is viewed as a barrier to easy, convenient, and safe travel to and from Williams.

### **2.2. Parking Facilities**

On the one hand, it appears that presently available parking at Riverside is more than adequate to meet the needs of daily commuters. It has been remarked that there frequently are empty spots in the lots during the workweek. On the other hand, parking is wholly inadequate during special events in Boston (July 4<sup>th</sup>, Red Sox opening day), when non-residents often park on the streets of Lower Falls (sometimes obstructing passage by emergency vehicles). Recently, parking has overflowed the lot for routine Red Sox games. The overall parking during special events and on weekends has led to a new city policy whereby the city implements temporary parking restrictions in the neighborhood. This remains necessary as cars fill the neighborhood during these times.

### **2.3. Appearance**

Residents find the present site "ugly", but are pleased that the site is well shielded from both Grove Street and the Charles River. Its appearance has little impact on the enjoyment of the Charles and does not present an obvious eyesore every time one drives or walks by the site.

## **2.4. Convenience**

Residents are pleased with the convenience of the Riverside facility for commuters and teenagers in the community who do not drive. They enjoy the easy access to the T and commuter and long-haul bus services. Riverside also serves employees of the adjacent office complex as well as teachers and staff from the Williams elementary school and its associated after-school program.

## **3. Existing Perceptions of “New Development”**

Very little was known about the details of the new development when this report was being researched. Generally, it was understood that discussions had taken place among Newton City Government, the MBTA and at least one private developer about possible major development at Riverside. All that was known about that development was that it would probably be “mixed use,” meaning that the development would encompass residential, office, and retail space. It was expected that the developer would contribute money and/or in-kind support for construction of a parking garage and infrastructure improvements to, at least, roadways.

What follows is a summary of resident reactions to this high level description of the potential new development.

### **3.1. Traffic**

As traffic has been an on-going concern in the neighborhood for many years, it is not surprising that residents expect that any development at Riverside will only worsen the situation. Reactions range from a general concern about traffic to “a lot of traffic in our neighborhood” to “a traffic disaster.”

### **3.2. Appearance**

In contrast to the fairly benign visual and noise impacts that the current site has on the neighborhood, residents expect that the new development will be much more intrusive, even to the extent of changing the character of the neighborhood. An analogy was made to the development that has grown up along Route 95 in Waltham. There, residential neighborhoods are adjacent to large commercial properties. Residents believe that multi-story commercial or residential development may loom over Grove Street (where the site is well screened today), and intrude on other views as well, becoming a constant presence in the daily lives of residents. Residents expect to be subjected to new noise from increased traffic to and from the site.

### **3.3. Environmental**

Residents are concerned about the potential for negative effects that development would have on the Charles River and adjacent wetlands and green space.

### **3.4. Neighborhood Character and Infrastructure**

Residents are concerned that new development will bring many more non-residents into the neighborhood, negatively impacting its character.

There is uncertainty over what would happen to residential property values if the neighborhood suddenly found itself in close proximity to a major commercial development.

Residents understand that new development will add to the tax base, but fear that infrastructure will be over utilized. One example of this is the need for schools to handle an influx of new students if the development adds even moderately to family housing stock in the area.

### **3.5. The Development Process**

In addition to the long-term impact of new development, residents are concerned about the conditions during construction.

There is suspicion that neighborhood concerns will not be addressed and that a developer will skirt the intent of applicable laws and permitting processes and get away with it – to the detriment of the neighborhood. This was implied by one participant’s remark that the City should “really enforce and penalize developers who don’t hew to the letter of the law”. The development at Woodland was suggested as an example where such enforcement did not occur, although the substance of the supporting argument was not captured as part of this research.

## **4. The Lower Falls Vision for “New Development”**

### **4.1. Traffic**

*“Include direct/dedicated access to/from the site and 128.”*

The residents of Lower Falls have long been dissatisfied with increased traffic in their neighborhood due to the presence of the existing Riverside facility. This has led to initiatives, coordinated with the City Traffic Department, to introduce traffic calming measures on Grove and Concord streets. Today intersections at Grove and Hagar and Hagar and Concord are being redesigned to slow traffic. The intersection of Grove and the Route 95 access road has also been reconfigured with new striping to slow traffic in that area.

Despite these measures, residents are still unhappy with traffic patterns in the neighborhood including:

- High speed traffic along Grove and Concord Street (with its direct access to the Mass Pike)
- Use of Grove as a cut-through to go from Route 16 East in Wellesley to Riverside
- Difficulty turning onto Grove from DeForrest, Pierrepont, and Asheville at peak commuting times
- The bottleneck at Riverside, preventing easy access to Auburndale and other north-side Newton villages

The LFIA believes that any new development at Riverside must include plans to take existing traffic off of Lower Falls’ streets and channel it to roads designed to take traffic directly from

Routes 16 and 95 into and out of the site. Traffic redesign must refocus the use of Grove Street on the access needs of existing residents and businesses.

While the LFIA is familiar with the use of comprehensive traffic studies associated with new development, our experience with the existing facility and a project on Washington Street some years ago, both of which have brought unwanted parking to our streets, have led to a loss of faith in the process. The LFIA seeks more effective means of protecting against negative impacts of new development.

## **4.2. Appearance**

*“Shouldn’t be visible from the street.”*

The residents of Lower Falls moved to the neighborhood because it offered a nice balance among a wooded, residential setting, convenient access to major traffic arteries, public transportation, and locally available businesses and services.

The LFIA feels strongly that any new development in the area must preserve the residential feel of the area, including but not limited to:

- Present a front to the neighborhood that is at least as aesthetically pleasing as the current screening of Riverside Station.
- Use best design practices and lighting fixtures to prevent light pollution or degradation of the nighttime sky
- Include significant open space and emphasize pedestrian access and use

## **4.3. Environmental**

*“A walking park. A wild meadow with flowers.”*

*[Two possible outcomes of new development at Riverside as suggested by Lower Falls residents.]*

Lower Falls derives its name from its position on the Charles River. Its history is linked to the river which once supplied power to local paper mills. Today, many residents appreciate the recreational value of living close to a wonderful natural resource and would like to see the river protected and access to it increased. The LFIA insists that no project that would damage or encroach on the river even be considered. In addition, improved pedestrian access to the river from the site should be an integral part of any proposed site plan.

Generally, Lower Falls’ residents are environmentally conscious. For 18 years they have twice annually held Lower Falls Planting Days when they gather at Hamilton Park to beautify it by planting trees, shrubs and flowers, weeding and mulching. This concern for the environment includes awareness of the dangers of overdevelopment and “business as usual” in planning and building for economic growth. Residents of Lower Falls recognize the need to conserve and preserve natural systems that cleanse and restore our environment. They understand the need to fight global warming. A damaged environment is not a legacy that they want to leave their



children. And they believe that individuals, governments and businesses must do their part to minimize carbon and other environmental footprints. Therefore, the LFIA insists that new development at Riverside lead in sustainable design including but not limited to:

- Energy self sufficiency to the maximum extent possible through use of active and passive solar, geothermal or other renewable sources
- Energy conserving designs
- Extensive use of recycled materials
- Preservation of normal volumes and cleanliness of local aquifers
- Self-contained water collection for on-site reuse and replenishment of local aquifers

#### **4.4. Neighborhood Character**

*“This is a village and any development should be consistent with a village concept”*

The residents of Lower Falls agree with neighbor quoted above. Consistency with the village concept includes:

- Quiet
- Modest scale
- Public open space
- Facilitation of close, personal communication
- Services cater to the needs of residents
- Safety
- Size and scope that infrastructure can support

In order to preserve the residential character of the area, development of new living units should encourage permanent, not transitory, residency. The size and density of new residential population on the site should be consistent with those of other attached-unit-style complexes (e.g., apartments or condominiums) in the Lower Falls and Auburndale communities. To ensure that new residents become integrated into the adjacent communities, the design should incorporate elements that foster easy, safe and aesthetically-pleasing pedestrian access to and from Lower Falls and Auburndale.

The design of the site should not foster the perception of Lower Falls as a pass-through neighborhood. The goals of this section are intended to ensure this and the LFIA opposes any major influx of people or traffic that would disrupt the village feel enjoyed by residents today.

#### **4.5. Desired Services**

*“Shops included in the development should meet the needs of the people who live here”*

Suggestions for specific services and business establishments at Riverside abound, but they can be summed up by the above quote.

Retail establishments brought onto the site should cater to the needs of a local, residential population, not people who would have to make a special trip to get to the site. As an extreme case, the LFIA would categorically oppose placement of a “big box” retailer on the site. Services that are already provided by establishments in Auburndale and Wellesley Lower Falls should also be discouraged. In fact, with two nearby, small-retail centers already, the need for additional small retail space at Riverside as well is unproven. The LFIA recommends a careful analysis of what type of retail would be most beneficial to residents and commuters, including extensive dialog with both groups.

The LFIA stresses the need for development on the site to invite pedestrian traffic including access to the river. The design should incorporate open space, including pedestrian or mixed use paths for children from Lower Falls to walk or ride to Williams School on their own.

#### **4.6. Mitigation Strategies**

*“There should be no negative impacts.”*

Mitigation strategies only come into the discussion if Riverside development will result in degraded quality of life for residents. The LFIA does not accept that development will necessarily degrade quality of life. Instead, we believe local politicians and other public officials should ensure that development improves existing conditions for residents of Newton Lower Falls.

Nonetheless, to the extent that there is honest disagreement between residents and other parties, the LFIA requests consideration of the following mitigations of impact and strategies for settling disagreements:

- Work with the DCR and help fund a multi-use (bicycle, pedestrian, etc.) path along the Charles River instead of the more contentious proposed route that runs through Lower Falls.
- Dramatically shorten the time needed to travel by T into Boston
- Improve access to the commuter rail from Riverside
- Endow the LFIA generally and the Beautification Committee in particular
- Implement pedestrian access to Wellesley Lower Falls over the abandoned rail bridge
- Implement noise abatement for Route 95 and improve the quality of pedestrian access to Riverside from Lower Falls year round
- Pay for fees associated with legal actions the community may choose to take against the City, T or developer or other fees required to pay a professional neighborhood advocate

#### **4.7. The Development Process**

*“There should be a comprehensive city-wide long-range planning initiative concluded before [Riverside development] goes forward”*

It is generally believed that Riverside development is being pursued to address revenue shortfalls in the city and MBTA budgets. For the City these shortfalls come at a bad time, particularly in light of the decision to build a very expensive new high school.

In the case of development at Riverside, residents fear that the primary goal will be to increase revenue and all other priorities or concerns will be secondary. Specifically, residents anticipate the following:

- Conventional wisdom will trump development tailored to the site and surroundings: Because of the desperate need for new revenue, city officials and T planners will only view Riverside through the lens of what its potential is for enhancing city coffers. Instead, the analysis ought to start with a study of the site, its surroundings and potential uses. After taking an open-minded look at the possibilities, a statement of goals for development should be published and used to evaluate proposals. The LFIA hopes that this type of process will avoid development of yet another generic mixed use complex with nothing tying it to its surroundings, its environment, or the history of the area.
- The spirit of local zoning laws will be compromised: Developers will try to wring as many concessions out of the city as possible in order to reduce financial risk and maximize profits. City officials, afraid of losing the potential property tax revenues included in budget predictions, will rationalize decisions that subtly violate zoning laws to the long-term detriment of the neighborhood. We want all zoning laws applied consistent with the letter of the law and the developer penalized immediately and to the maximum extent for violations.
- Conditions in the neighborhood during construction will be lower priority than getting the job done on time and under budget: Whatever the outcome of decisions about what development will happen at the site, residents and the children of Williams School want to know that they will not be subjected to noise, dirt, toxins, disruption or inconvenience during the construction period. Because this is predominantly a residential area, construction and movement of construction related equipment into and out of the site must only occur during normal business hours, not evenings or weekends except in cases (if any) where public safety is a concern. For example, contractors should not expect to work weekends to avoid schedule penalties built into their contracts. All construction traffic must be channeled to the major arteries and must respect the Grove Street truck exclusion in Lower Falls.
- Developers and officials will talk about communication and cooperation but not follow through: Anyone involved with the new development must come and talk with the

neighborhoods to keep them constantly informed and solicit feedback. Developers and city officials must establish a continuing, two-way line of communication for any questions or concerns that may arise during implementation of a development plan.

The LFIA believes that the “development process” has already begun but has skipped a critical initial phase that should have been dedicated to discovering the best long-term use and configuration of the Riverside site. Everyone recognizes the importance of the role played by the facility in supplying public transportation and its commercial value as a large, undeveloped parcel along Route 95. But it is also a large, undeveloped parcel along the Charles River and abutting two quiet residential areas. It is one of the few remaining parcels of this size left in Newton. In the rush to consider and place generic “mixed use” development on the site, is the city missing an opportunity to leave a different legacy?

#### **4.8. The Citizen’s Role**

*“Don’t be lulled into thinking that the developer is your friend.”*

It should be clear that the LFIA is under no illusions about the situation regarding new development at Riverside. We understand the overwhelming pressure public officials feel to find new revenue. We understand the pressure real estate developers feel to find new opportunities and maximize revenue from those they identify. And we understand that the state can no longer find the will to fund needed infrastructure improvements and is willing instead to resort to cutting deals with developers who can throw in cash or services in exchange for development rights on public property.

But the LFIA also understands that these conditions are in direct conflict with our values and rights. We do not believe in a “growth at all costs” public policy with respect to new development. We do not believe that city planners or developers have a right to impede public access to, and enjoyment of, natural resources. We do not believe that it is a foregone conclusion that “progress” must result in fundamental changes to the character of our, or anyone else’s, neighborhood. And we do not believe that grasping for quick tax revenue today is in our best interests or the interests of future generations of families in Lower Falls.

In response to this perceived clash of interests between proponents of new development and the residents of Lower Falls, the LFIA requests that development proponents execute a highly participatory process beginning immediately. Such a process should include:

- Respect for residents by elected officials and developers.
- Inclusion of residents in conversations at all stages, beginning with open presentations of preliminary plans by developers, and transparency in evaluations of these plans by city departments.
- Early and thorough communication of related presentations and meetings and scheduling of meetings at times when residents can reasonably be expected to be able to attend.

- Willingness on the part of the T and developer to modify and adjust plans based on community input, resulting in minimization of impacts to the neighborhoods and quality of life if not improvement in these areas.
- Effort by all parties to tailor the development to the unique character and needs of the surrounding communities.

For their part, the LFIA does not plan to take a passive wait-and-see attitude towards these proposals. We intend to start a thoughtful and comprehensive review of our legal options. We will also contact environmental organizations who might be able to be more informed advocates for the Charles River and the preservation and intelligent use of open space generally.

Hopefully the way forward to an improved Riverside facility will not be an adversarial situation. But, as mentioned earlier, the LFIA is under no illusions about the situation regarding new development at Riverside.

## **Appendix A. LFIA Community Design Guidelines for Development at Riverside**

The following is a summary of points made in the body of this position paper.

- A task force which includes neighborhood representatives must be formed to study the best long-term use and configuration of the Riverside site before evaluation of developer proposals.
- Exit and entry to the site directly from Route 95/128 must be provided. No access to long-term parking for vehicles entering from Grove Street.
- Development in scale with existing residential character and available infrastructure. For example, the size and density of new residential population on the site should be consistent with those of other attached-unit-style complexes in the Lower Falls and Auburndale communities.
- Well-landscaped pedestrian amenities. The streetscape and public areas should be attractive and pedestrian-friendly. Final project should not present solid, fortress-like walls to pedestrians. Best design practices and lighting fixtures used to prevent light pollution.
- Site design to include access to the Charles River if possible and project must not impose its presence on the river or adjacent green space.
- Project should decrease noise pollution experienced by residents of Lower Falls, pedestrians, or people out to enjoy the Charles River or adjacent green space.
- Development should be a showcase of sustainable design and development.
- Awarding of contract to a developer with a good track record of dealing with community groups and neighborhood concerns.
- Community involvement, including public hearings, on special permit requests that require approval by the Newton Aldermen.
- Sufficient parking to accommodate special event parking.
- Street level retail spaces with small floor area to encourage local businesses.
- Local retail operations only—no national chains with pre-determined areas and floor plans or big ‘destination’ shopping venues.

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- Ongoing design review with community groups during entire development and approval process, to include the working out of pedestrian and traffic issues.
- Construction mitigation plan agreed on by neighborhood associations with 24-hour access number for emergencies, access to project managers and frequent, regular meetings during construction.