

## Newton residents want to ‘have a say’ on Riverside plan

By John Hilliard Globe Correspondent, April 26, 2019.



“We want to have a say in what goes there,” said Cyrisse Jaffee, about the development at the Riverside MBTA station. (DOMENIC CHAVEZ/GLOBE STAFF/FILE)

NEWTON — A community group critical of the size of a proposed development at the Riverside MBTA station is urging residents to express their views to city councilors about the plan, which could add hundreds of residential units and two towers along Route 128.

“This is our neighborhood. We want to have a say in what goes there,” said Cyrisse Jaffee, a member the Newton Lower Falls Improvement Association’s Riverside Committee, also known as [RightSize Riverside](#).

Mark Development and Normandy Real Estate Partners are [seeking a special permit](#) to build more than 1.4 million square feet at Riverside, using the station’s existing parking lot and the nearby Hotel Indigo property.

The size of the proposal has some neighbors concerned, Jaffee told scores of residents Tuesday during a presentation by RightSize Riverside at the Newton Free Library.

“We know that it is an eyesore, we know something should go there, we’re not against development per se,” Jaffee, who lives in Newton Lower Falls, said of the Riverside station. “But we feel really strongly that it needs to be the right kind of development.”

The Riverside proposal would have 675 residential units, including 524 market-rate rental apartments and 49 market-rate condos. There also would be 94 affordable apartments and eight affordable condos, according to project filings.

There would also be about 611,000 square feet of office space, a new 194-key hotel, and about 64,000 square feet of retail space. The entire project would consist of 10 buildings erected on about 14 acres.

The development also would involve investments in roadway improvements, including direct access from the Interstate 95 offramp, to address traffic. The City Council previously approved a smaller Riverside development in 2013, but it was never built.

The current Riverside proposal had to be larger to fund site improvements, said Mark Development’s Robert Korff.

“We continue to look for ways to address community concerns; that will continue throughout the special permit process,” Korff said in a statement Wednesday. “But we must also face the reality that in order to provide the affordable housing, access to Charles River and recreational space, roadway improvements and other benefits, the project does need to have a certain scale and scope.”

Residents who are concerned about the proposed development worry about its size and density, how it will affect the community when built, and the traffic it could generate, Jaffee said.

Tuesday’s session also was attended by Newton Ward 4 Councilors Christopher Markiewicz, Joshua Krintzman, and Leonard Gentile.

The cumulative effect of development on the city’s north and west sides “are very real,” Gentile said. He said Mark Development is also seeking to build a mixed-use project near The Barn Family Shoe Store on Washington Street.

Representatives of Mark Development met last month with city planning officials about a potential project near the corner of Watertown and Washington streets.

Diana Pisciotta, a spokeswoman for the Riverside development team, said Wednesday that Gentile’s comment was speculation.

“We are considering a variety of options for parcels we own in other areas of the city, but we have not filed a formal application for anything at this point,” she said.

Jaffee also criticized Mark Development and Normandy Real Estate Partners for filing for a special permit late last month, instead of waiting for the city visioning process for the area to be completed.

According to the city, the Riverside special permit application was filed March 29. Meanwhile, the third community meeting for the Riverside Vision Plan, which was kicked off in January, will be held at 7 p.m. Tuesday, April 30, at the Williams Elementary School, 141 Grove St.

“That seemed like thumbing their nose at the process,” Jaffee said.

The public forum on Riverside comes two weeks after residents faced off during a lengthy public hearing about a separate mixed-use project: an 800-unit apartment complex proposed by Northland Investment Corp. about 4 miles southeast of Riverside in Newton Upper Falls.

The scope of construction the city faces has many residents concerned, Jaffee told the crowd Tuesday.

“There is a lot of heated conversation and a lot of passionate feelings about, not just [each of these] individual proposals, but of the future of Newton,” Jaffee said. “I think people feel like it’s a reckoning at this point.”

Gail Sokoloff of Auburndale said in an interview that she attended Tuesday’s meeting to learn more about the Riverside development. She’s concerned about the proposed density of the project, including an 18-story tower and 10 buildings.

“The more I learn about it, the more troubled I am about the process the developer is using, that he is proposing an all-or-nothing approach to this,” Sokoloff said. “There hasn’t seemed to be a real earnest, a real authentic interest in working with the community to develop something that would be acceptable.”

Doris Ann Sweet, an Auburndale resident, said in an e-mail that she supports the Riverside project. It’s one of the few ways the city can create affordable housing, she said, and building dense housing near transit is an important way to help address climate change.

“I am so excited about the prospect of turning a large parking lot into much needed housing, right where there is public transit — the Green Line D train, local and long distance buses, and the commuter rail only half a mile away,” Sweet said.

Steve Cooper, a Lower Falls resident, said in an interview he is concerned about the development’s potential traffic impact on the neighborhood.

The taller of the two proposed Riverside towers along the highway would be 18 stories, according to project filings. That is two-thirds of the 27-story Encore Boston Harbor casino complex in Everett, he noted.

“I’m trying to picture the scale of two-thirds of that building right in our backyard. It’s mind-boggling,” Cooper said. “I really can’t get my mind around the scale of it.”

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