

**LFIA Riverside Committee Remarks
Land Use Committee Meeting March 14, 2019**

SLIDE 1

Intro by Liz Mirabile:

I'm Liz Mirabile and I'm here on behalf of the Riverside Committee of the Lower Falls Improvement Association, a neighborhood association formed in the 1960s. We want to thank Greg Schwartz and the other members of the Land Use Committee for giving us an opportunity to speak.

Our committee's role is to educate and represent Lower Falls regarding Riverside. In some ways this is easy, our neighborhood already knows what would work at the site. When the Normandy plan was proposed, we devoted thousands of hours to shaping it over the course of four years. When it was approved in 2013 at 580,000 sq. ft., we accepted it even though it was bigger than what we wanted.

In other ways our task is hard - our community wants to know why we are now facing a proposal that is more than twice the size of what was deemed appropriate for the area. Many are angry. We've been told that part of the answer is that the old plan wasn't economically feasible. We've also been told that the political environment has changed. What's troubling is that what the site and the surrounding villages can handle remains the same. As you listen tonight and over the coming months, we ask you to keep that in mind. The site will still significantly impact two villages. Please be realistic about what it can handle and what those of us who live next door to it can be expected to endure.

Despite our serious concerns, we believe the best way forward would be to build consensus. We've met with residents, city councilors, the mayor, advocacy groups, experts, and with Mark Development. We learned that we share many of the same goals: to increase affordability, inclusivity and municipal revenue and to decrease our impact on the environment. Our neighborhood is not against development at Riverside. But any development needs to be the RIGHT SIZE.

SLIDE 2]

I'll now turn things over to my neighbor Erin who will share the concerns we've heard about the size of the proposed development and the impact this size will have on community, traffic and the future of public transportation in the area. Thank you.

Erin Kandamar

Good evening. My name is Erin Kandamar. I currently serve on the board of the LFIA. And I also love Newton. I moved to Lower Falls 10 years ago from Cambridge because my husband and I wanted a more **suburban** setting with more space, access to great public schools and raise our kids in a welcoming and diverse neighborhood setting.

The size of this proposal is shocking. And size drives two other critical concerns for us as neighbors: **community impact** and **traffic**.

People in Lower Falls have many different ideas about what they would like to see at the Riverside site – which stores and restaurants are desirable, for example – but the concern that unifies us is **size**.

The Mark Development proposal is for **1.5 million square feet** of development on just 14.4 acres of land. It comes with two towers: one 18 stories and 229 feet high, and the other 14 stories and 217 feet high. What that means for the neighborhood is hard to visualize, but it is huge, dense, and very tall.

Slide 3

One reference point is Boston Landing in Brighton. Many of you have probably seen it, at least from the Mass Pike on your way to or from Boston. It houses New Balance, WGBH, the Bruins and Celtics practice facilities along with retail and residential space. It was built in a part of Brighton generally considered to be an area of urban blight. It is a **big, tall, and very dense** place.

Boston Landing is a little bigger overall than Riverside, at 1.7 million square feet on about 14 or 15 acres. But the 18-story tower proposed for Riverside would beat the tallest building at Boston Landing and of course, be the tallest building in Newton, too.

We don't think Riverside would be an appropriate location for Boston Landing, and it isn't an appropriate location for the current proposal. Both are entirely at odds with the low-rise, suburban character of the surrounding Newton villages.

Slide 4

As you know, the city, the community, and BH Normandy spent years discussing and debating what is appropriate at Riverside -- and arrived at the plan approved in 2013. We understand that plan fell through because it lacked funding solutions for the MBTA garage. But that approved project remains an important reference point because of the lengthy process and extensive involvement of so many stakeholders.

This chart shows we are looking at much more than covering the cost of the previously unfunded garage. The amount of new construction now proposed is **2 times** what was approved in 2013.

Slide 5

Putting aside **traffic**, which we will discuss in a minute, **the size and scale of this project will overwhelm Lower Falls**. We have heard people say they think Riverside is an ideal place for a large development because there is no immediately abutting neighborhood. That simply isn't true, and it isn't the experience of those of us who live in Lower Falls. **Riverside is PART OF our neighborhood.**

As you can see on this slide, the span over the highway from the Indigo Hotel property to the houses in Lower Falls is about 400 feet. Remember that the highway is well below the grade of those points. For us, Riverside is **just down Grove Street**.

It can be hard to visualize 400 feet, so here is a point of reference. From the front door of City Hall to the far side of Walnut Street is about 445 feet. If 18 and 14 story towers were proposed for where City Hall now sits, would anyone suggest that they would be separate or isolated from the neighborhood on the other side of Walnut Street?

Slide 6

With that reference point in mind, it becomes clear that **the height of the towers alone** is completely **inappropriate** and out of scale for this location. And of course, those towers come with hundreds and thousands of square feet of additional, densely packed buildings.

Slide 7

Density brings us to Grove Street. The city has designated it a Scenic Road. It is a narrow, two-lane road lined with trees. This photo shows the stretch in front of Riverside, which is on the right. Although the existing parking lot behind the trees is certainly ugly, it is not a blighted area needing urban renewal.

As you can see in the architectural rendering on the right, the proposal also calls for a wall of buildings, primarily 6 stories tall, running right along Grove with very few breaks, varied setbacks, or openings. We urge the Council and the developer's team to consider the impact this project will have on people who walk, drive, and cycle along Grove Street. Surely there are other design solutions that would give the project more "breathing room" and make best possible use of open and community spaces to bring our communities together, rather than walling them off.

SLIDE 8

We would like to see the buildings significantly **set back** so they do not hover over the road. The **Riverside office center**, down the street from the Riverside site, is a good example of this, with a significant setback and plentiful landscaping around it. A pedestrian or driver barely feels the presence of this office complex, except for the additional traffic that it brings.

SLIDE 9

The villages of Lower Falls and Auburndale have long been **connected** to each other, both physically and socially through the Williams Elementary School, afterschool programs, and more. Any development at Riverside should continue to connect them – and encourage ways of building community with the people who live and work at Riverside. **That is how we make Newton stronger.**

SLIDE 10

Riverside is **not an isolated property**. It is an essential link between our two villages, and we urge the Council to consider the impact any development at Riverside will have on us all. Grove Street is a critical part of this equation. **Crushing traffic** from an oversized development with more traffic than the road can bear will surely isolate Lower Falls from Auburndale and the rest of Newton. This would be devastating for our village.

And now my neighbor **John McElduff** will talk about TRAFFIC.

John McElduff

Good Evening. My name is John McElduff, I live in Newton Lower Falls, and appear before this committee again after a five year break. We hope that we can again work together as unified stakeholders and get to a plan that will not adversely affect the neighborhood, which is a special permit requirement.

SLIDE 11

We have heard from the developer that Riverside will be a great **TOD**, "transit oriented development". We do **not** agree. The Green Line ends here, thus a terminus. It has no stations up line, it lacks connectivity to other rail service and has limited connectivity to buses. In actuality it is more of a HOD, "Highway Oriented Development". This development puts a real TOD at risk, **it walls off all future transit potential.**

I would like to point out several transportation challenges with the current proposal that will **strain** our villages beyond the tipping point.

SLIDE 12

VHB's 2012 future traffic studies were based on their prediction of annual traffic growth rate at **0.4%**. We objected to this rate, but the City's peer reviewer, and everyone seemed to accept that growth rate. We will see if VHB is any more realistic this time around, but we now know that they were way off. Last year, 300,000 highway cars passed Riverside daily at the Pike-128 interchange. This means that traffic at that location grew at a rate of **2.9%**. This is **7 times** greater than VHB's 2012 growth rate prediction. So we need to be very careful about the reliability of the new traffic study.

Our engineering and traffic consultant, TEPP, LLC, agrees with us that "project generated traffic" will be **very problematic**. Our committee estimates that it will grow from **5,000** to **13,800** trips per day. **I repeat, the old project generated 5,000 trips a day and we estimate the new one will generate 13,800 trips a day.**

Our estimate is based on VHB's 2012 study, which was produced when ride-hailing technology was in its infancy. Recent studies show, wealthier urban residents are relying more on ride hailing and less on transit and walking. When a "**carless**" tenant **hails** a ride, that activity, to-and-fro, requires double the number of trips compared to the tenant driving him or herself. Also, internet sales deliveries are on the up. We recommend these new trends should be a focus in the new traffic study.

The Mark Development plan proposes ramps to bring northbound Rt. 128 traffic in and out of the project. The old Normandy plan included a ramp out of the project to 128 North, but a northbound ramp into the site was ruled out because of safety and economics. We look forward to reviewing the engineering and economics for the proposed ramp but have strong concerns about it. The ramps connecting to 128 North will carry approximately **20%** of the new project's volume. They won't help with the other **80%** that will travel on Grove Street and through our two villages. **Lower Falls and Auburndale** intersections will be subjected to these new, much higher flows, which will be compounded by the effects of regional growth. We anxiously await the traffic study, because predicted delays were unsatisfactory even for the much smaller 2013 plan.

Traffic generated by this project isn't just a local issue. As we all recently saw in the press, **by** a specific metric, Boston has taken over as the most congested city in the US. Doubling the project size will certainly double the project traffic. We don't think this helps Boston's congestion issue because it will limit access to Riverside, a key Metrowest multi-modal transit facility.

With respect to the Green Line as a **foundation** for a transit-oriented development, we offer the following: We are pleased that the new trolley design for the so called **T10 trains** increases capacity by a third, and pleased about track, signal and accessibility improvements occurring right now. However, we have learned that the T10 trains will require additional storage space at the Riverside yard. We insist that the all stakeholders on this project assure that the yard has adequate storage capacity.

We are pretty sure there are people in the 300,000 trips that clog the Pike & 128 interchange daily, who will be happy to hop on an **improved** Green Line, or other new transit options that will hopefully come to Riverside. It's important to plan parking for these cars.

We are very concerned that the density of the project will limit transit growth. Especially if transit is improved, there is a huge risk of congestion forming inside the proposed T garage, and along Main Street, where it is unavoidable that there will be double parking, delivery vans, and people on the lookout for kids. There must be a study of the internal functioning of this site that looks at functioning under current conditions and also what will happen if there is better and more transit in the future.

On March 5th I attended a MASSDOT Rail Vision presentation in Boston. Sure enough, urban rail was included in 2 of the 7 alternatives to transform Boston's commuter rail. Riverside **is** a major component of the Urban Rail plan. It would connect us to the three Newton train stations, South Station, Cambridge and North Station, and it would run every 12 to 15 minutes. Nothing should be approved at Riverside that will **forever** preclude this crucial future mode, which will give us **cleaner air, increased mobility**, and enable the region to reduce traffic congestion.

SLIDE 13

Parking is a critical piece of this. We acknowledge trends to reduce parking but minimizing it at a multi-modal transit facility is a bad move. The Pike and 128 can't accommodate more vehicles, so let's get some of them off the road and into cleaner transit modes via at Riverside. The only way to do that is to make sure Riverside has adequate current and future capacity.

Thank you, and now our final speaker, Randy Block.

RANDY BLOCK

SLIDE 14 AFFORDABLE HOUSING

My name is Randall Block. I live at 45 Lafayette Road in Newton Lower Falls. I am chair of the LFIA Riverside Committee.

There is one final piece of information we want you to know about Newton Lower Falls. Of the 499 residential units in Lower Falls, 83 or 16.6% qualify as affordable housing. This compares with Newton's affordable housing percentage of 7.5%.

We do not tell you this in order to oppose additional affordable housing units in our neighborhood. On the contrary, residents of affordable housing enrich our neighborhood and we would gladly welcome more of them at Riverside. But not at the price of the massive development proposed by Mark Development. We are convinced that a more thoughtful, more creative way of building affordable housing and workforce housing is possible. Thank you for your time. We look forward to further discussions regarding Riverside.