

James Purdy Testimony at Land Use Committee Hearing Washington Place Zoning Petition and Special Permit Filing

1 November 2016

[These remarks have been revised and extended.]

My name is Jim Purdy. I live at 943 Chestnut Street in Upper Falls. I'm here to support the Washington Place project as proposed.

I am an urban planner. My career has focused on the relationship of land use and transportation. Sustainable transportation depends on a critical mass of density. The threshold is not all that high: Newtonville and my own neighborhood of Upper Falls can be transit oriented.

"Transit oriented development" is a term that doesn't have a precise definition, but it is a meaningful concept. The location of development near transit services reduces driving, but, more important, it increases transit use, and that helps to build better transit service as patronage increases. In the case of Washington Place, people who choose to live there will have a number of options to use public transportation: express bus, commuter rail, and the 59 bus, which provides service to the library and Newton Highlands Green Line station, as well as to Cambridge via Watertown Square. I know that I would use transit if I lived there.

The reduction in driving that results from more transit is also important, but it takes time for people's travel patterns to become more oriented to transit. (The traffic analysis for Washington Place did not assume any reduction in traffic due to transit use.)

Newton is about to roll out a Transportation Strategy and in my opinion one the most important improvements to sustainable transportation in Newton is to increase the frequency of cross-town bus service. With Austin Street, Washington Place, and the proposed housing in my neighborhood at Marshall's plaza, all of them served by the 59 bus route, we can get the MBTA to improve service frequency on this route to 20 minutes, and that will make transportation in Newton much more sustainable. MassDOT Secretary Stephanie Pollack lives in Newton and has said that supporting transit-accessible development is the way to improve public transportation. So these development projects can help the City to negotiate with the MBTA to achieve better service frequencies on the 59 bus.

I have friends who think any amount of new development is the opposite of sustainable. But urban planners are unanimous in advocating enough density to support public transportation. Washington Place and the Austin Street project both exemplify the right way to accommodate development that doesn't depend on driving, which is responsible for a third of Newton's carbon footprint.

The other sustainable aspect of Washington Place is that it is mixed use development. Newtonville will benefit from people on the sidewalks, patronizing local businesses, and creating vitality. Washington Place will add significantly to that. It's a win-win for both global sustainability and local quality of life.

Let's not forget that the Massachusetts Turnpike Extension had the biggest impact on Newtonville by dividing it. Washington Place will create a center of activity that pulls people across this gap.

I've met the developer and seen his presentation of the project. To me this looks like development done right. He understands retail and I believe he will add to the City's retail base and create real mixed use development in Newtonville, which will strengthen the village. He has the top traffic engineer in the area, and his proposal will make the Washington/Walnut intersection much more pedestrian friendly while improving traffic.

[I did not have time to say the following at the hearing:]

I'll add that permitting the development as proposed will be visually beneficial, not detrimental. Height is always the biggest issue with new development. I'm not a designer, but I've worked with architects and urban designers throughout my career, and I think they would agree. Washington and Walnut is a major intersection in a key village center in Newton. There is currently a large building on the northeast corner; a building on the northwest corner should be large enough to balance it.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.