

## Feldman and Zukerman: A smart growth future for Newton Centre

By guest column by Russel Feldman and Anatol Zukerman

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Newton — Newton Centre has been a subject of many studies during the past 30 years, including the Village Study of 1984, the Newton Centre Task Force of 2005-2007, Newton Comprehensive Plan of 2000-2008 and many proposals and ideas in between. All these activities stem from a very simple problem: the village of Newton Centre has no center of social, commercial and recreational life. The remnants of a few magnificent churches stand next to one- and two-story concrete boxes built in the 1950s. Most of the stores that served the community were replaced by banks, beauty salons and parking lots. These existing lots and buildings create environmental and visual pollution and undermine the quality of life in Newton Centre village. The existing fire station and the Fire Department headquarters buildings are severely deteriorated and require substantial investment. Traffic and parking problems are widely understood. With a single exception of Casselman House, moderately priced housing is non-existent.

All these problems were considered by the Newton Comprehensive Plan and Newton Centre Task Force, and opportunities to solve them have been identified. Following these recommendations, our team has produced various conceptual drawings and business plans for a new development in the Firefighters Triangle between Centre, Lyman and Willow streets. We consider this project to be an impetus for further development of Newton Centre. Our program includes the following:

- One of the three recommended parking garages for both private and public parking, housing approximately 300 cars;
- 92 one- and two-bedroom condominium apartments;
- 40,000 square feet of new commercial space fronting Lyman Street;
- A landscaped public open space over the MWRA easement that currently is a steeply sloping hill;
- A new state-of-the-art Fire Station 3 and Fire Department headquarters in one structure, significantly improving their operations.

We propose to accomplish this in an energy-efficient, ecologically friendly and architecturally excellent development, planned and implemented through a public/private partnership. We are working with the community, the aldermen, the mayor and the city's professional staff to accomplish these goals in a financially feasible manner.

### Traffic and parking

The current traffic and parking problems in Newton Centre have intensified and will continue to do so until the city of Newton finds a way to solve them. Centre and Beacon streets and Langley Road have a failing level of service because of extremely complicated intersections and multiple conflict points. The existing on-street and surface parking cannot accommodate all vehicles, so drivers invade neighboring streets and keep circling the entire area further impeding road capacity. We have designed a partially subterranean garage that will have extra parking. Many suburban municipalities such as Needham, Natick, Wellesley, Waltham, Framingham and Marlborough have constructed parking structures to solve similar problems.

Another traffic improvement involves installation of roundabouts at key intersections. These circular traffic nodes have a proven record of pacifying traffic, eliminating traffic signals and providing more security for pedestrians. During our task force study two such roundabouts at the Centre/Beacon and Beacon/Langley intersections were provided by a traffic consultant and supported by Newton Planning and Traffic Departments. At their suggestion we have also considered changing directions of travel on the adjoining Willow and Sumner streets and a left turn lane for northbound Centre Street traffic to turn on Homer.

Our participation in advancing traffic-related solutions is limited to following the expertise and judgment of professional traffic engineers. Indubitably, our project will create additional destination traffic but it will also reduce local driving by creating new stores within a walking distance for residents and workers of neighboring streets. We estimate that about 360 people will be able to walk to our project within a 600-foot radius. Providing community-serving businesses in Newton Centre village is one of the principles of "smart growth" and community preservation — and one of our ambitions for this project.

### Student generation

Many Newtonians are concerned that new residential development will overpopulate Newton schools, particularly Mason Rice. Statistics produced by Newton School Department based on Avalon Bay on Needham Street and Arbor Point at Woodland Station indicate that 1-bedroom units effectively generate no students. Market-rate two-bedroom units range from 0.1 to 0.2 students per unit and affordable two-bedroom units house between 0.5 and 0.9 students per unit. We propose 74 one-bedroom units and 18 two-bedroom units, three of which will be affordable. Based on the School Department data, our development will generate between three and six students overall, in all grades. Since it's reasonable to assume that not every student in our project would be of elementary school age, the total impact on Mason Rice appears to be very modest.

In our second column we will discuss housing, local business, environment and economic stimulus of our project within the constraints of Newton Centre.

*Anatol Zukerman and Russel Feldman are Newton architects.*

## Feldman, Zukerman: A smart growth future for Newton Centre, part 2

By Guest column/Russel Feldman and Anatol Zukerman

Wicked Local Newton

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Newton — Last week we discussed the traffic and parking impacts of our development as well as the student generation effect on Newton schools. Today we discuss housing market, village businesses, economy and environment. Our project calls for 92 condominiums, a commercial floor, a new fire station and a parking structure. We designed it in response to the Newton Centre Task Force report that was submitted to the mayor and the Board of Aldermen two years ago.

### Housing

The village of Newton Centre is one of the most expensive areas of Newton. Generally, its housing stock consists of either high-end single-family households or subsidized multifamily units such as Casselman House. Most younger couples can't afford to buy a house in Newton Centre, and the shortage of available apartments forces them out of the city. Long-term residents who have problems maintaining their houses have few options for staying in Newton. Our project allows these groups of citizens to live in apartment-style housing within walking distance to public transportation, services and stores.

The Newton Comprehensive Plan projected that in order to maintain the Newton population at the year 2000 level its housing stock must grow by 15 percent. Obviously, even this modest growth cannot be achieved only by construction of single-family houses — there's simply not enough land in the city. By placing compact, mixed-use, multifamily developments in village centers we can preserve the historic single-family neighborhoods elsewhere.

### Impact on local businesses

Some local residents who don't own businesses in Newton Centre expressed concerns with our project's potential competition to the existing stores. We contacted several business owners around the Central Triangle for their views about our proposal. They uniformly appreciated more residential and commercial space for the simple reason that bringing more people to the area would bring more customers to their stores.

Some of them opposed removing the central parking lot because it provides convenient customer parking. However, the only physical change that achieved consensus by all three groups of the task force was the removal of this lot. While this conflict needs to be resolved in a creative way, the area is located beyond our site. Regardless, our project will provide new public parking for the Centre's businesses.

### Economic stimulus

Two years ago, the city of Newton allocated \$3 million for a much-needed renovation of Fire Station 3. According to Fire Chief Joseph LaCroix, the price tag has grown to as much as \$5 million of the taxpayers' money. We propose to build a new, combined state-of-the-art fire station and the Fire Department HQ with private funds in exchange for a special permit to build a commercial and residential building behind it. The city could save up to \$5 million and receive a substantial new facility at no capital cost.

The proposed parking structure will strengthen the commercial center of our village. New commercial space will create jobs. Moderately priced housing will bring new clientele for the existing and new businesses and help retain our city's population. In addition to this economic stimulus, our project will generate between \$850,000 and \$950,000 in annual tax revenues for the city of Newton in this time of financial constraint.

### Environmental concerns

Currently, the largest open space in the Firefighters Triangle belongs to the state and slopes too steeply to be used by the public. In agreement with the MWRA we proposed to level this north-facing hill and create a usable open space along Lyman Street. On Centre Street, we propose a new Mustering Grounds Park that commemorates a historic facet of our history. We designed a green buffer strip along Willow Street instead of the existing asphalted paving.

We plan to install vegetating planters on most of the roofs of our building that will absorb rainwater, moderate thermal fluctuations and purify the air. As a result of these changes, the site's net open space will be increased by 30 percent. Also, we designed a translucent structure on the roof of the new fire station to lower the city's operating costs and provide rental revenues. This structure can be used for growing fresh produce for food stores and restaurants that are interested in moving to this prestigious location. We are exploring other energy-efficient techniques such as geo-thermal heating and cooling (as it was done in the recently built condominiums near Cold Spring Park). On July 7, the Boston Globe printed a story about roof gardens on a Dorchester restaurant and many high-profile restaurants in this country. We aspire to follow these examples.

Currently, we are in the middle of the approval process prescribed by the Real Estate Property Reuse Committee. We are looking forward to discussing this important project with the city and the community in further detail.

*Anatol Zukerman from West Newton and Russel Feldman from Newton Centre are both architects.*