

Op-Ed: Too soon to throw in the housing towel [original title by authors: 'HOUSING & DEVELOPMENT: 'FRIENDLY' 40B'S']

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Though some of us have spent countless hours for almost two years fighting two proposed projects under Chapter 40B, the "anti-snob-zoning" statute, we are amused to hear accusations that we're either anti-housing or "NIMBY-ites" or both. For four decades Brookline PAX leaders and members have proudly worked hard for both diversity and affordable housing; e.g. fighting for public housing, authoring the 1987 inclusionary zoning by-law, and fighting for rent control and restrictions on converting rental housing to condominiums. We've also fought hard for civil rights and racial diversity and openness.

Last year, we urged a Community Preservation Act ballot question. The CPA, by an average tax surcharge of 1.5 percent or about \$29 (but with exemptions for low-income individuals and moderate-income seniors), would have brought in up to \$7 million in state funds for housing, open space, and historic preservation. But an all-out offensive by the selectmen and the anti-tax crowd convinced Town Meeting to keep CPA off the ballot. Instead, Brookline has a housing strategy which is over-reliant on, and mistaken as to the definition of, "friendly 40Bs."

The two recent 40Bs, 121 Centre St. and St. Aidan's, though different, share certain major flaws illustrating the town's myopia. On the former, the Housing Task Force's opposition was too little and too late; and the selectmen as a board should have officially and quickly taken the burden off the rag-tag guerilla-warriors in the neighborhood. On St. Aidan's, the selectmen very early in the process endorsed a concept which was flawed both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Both of these proposals have been widely-perceived as huge threats to neighborhood preservation, another deeply held value of Brookline's and in PAX. Balancing the needs of neighborhoods against the need for affordable housing is neither trivial nor easy. It is now clear that - especially while the town fails to adequately pursue other approaches - some new development is probably unavoidable, including selective and thoughtful density increases. We cannot simply say either "protect the neighborhoods" or "housing at any cost" or, especially, both.

We could get lots of housing, and even help the tax base, if we Manhattan-ized Brookline; but destroying neighborhoods in an effort to save us from exclusivity would be a fatal error. Part of what makes Brookline both unique and so appealing is its character as at once urban and suburban. Losing half of that equation in any large chunk of Brookline by permitting too much sprawling concrete would be a slippery slope to Brookline's ruination.

So, what makes a development acceptable? First, the town must abjure the myth that increased density is only appropriate in already-dense parts of town. We hear, e.g. from the developers, the refrain: "This neighborhood is already built-up, so what's the big deal?" But low and moderate

income housing, and some selective density increases, belong in all neighborhoods and all parts of town; and the excuse of access to public transportation is merely that, an excuse.

Second, scale, density, and design are constraints which must be carefully weighed as much as possible in all host neighborhoods. Third, in particular, North Brookline, the area under 40B siege, is already at a "tipping point." According to Open Space 2000, the "planning area" of St. Aidan's is "the neighborhood most deficient in open space. [Brookline's] inventory of unprotected, private open space includes ... religious organizations Some parcels ... are important, .. [e.g.] in a neighborhood with a deficiency of open space." Appendix H shows that the same planning area has the least open space per capita, about 24 percent of the townwide average, about 7 percent that of "Fisher Hill/Middle Brookline," and about 4 percent that of "South Brookline." It's time to declare trees, leaves, grass, air, sky, and light as "endangered species" in North Brookline, and the area as an "Environmental Danger Zone" even under current zoning.

Many locations, including in North Brookline, can handle limited increased density without further eroding precious greenspace. But the plans for 121 Centre and St. Aidan's (most recent design) could not. St. Aidan's, in particular, may be the most significant private landscaped property in North Brookline. Yet, a significant number of low and moderate income housing units are now proposed there; so it's clearly a project generally worth pursuing - especially if it maximizes (1) the units which are permanently affordable to low and moderate incomes, and (2) rental housing.

Herculean and time-consuming organizing by the neighborhood, led by many longtime affordable housing advocates, and in a neighborhood already welcoming far more of that than most, has finally and rightfully caused the town and developer to focus on the following important goals: the historic church must be preserved; the "forecourt," its venerable 150-year-old beech tree and other significant trees, and the public view of the forecourt must all be preserved. Some town officials have undervalued the importance of this astonishing greenspace gem and oasis to the environmental soul of North Brookline; and the risky idea of moving the tree seems downright ludicrous; and a scale of construction, to the extent possible, in synch with the surrounding neighborhood.

Finally, we must "push the envelope" and "think outside the box" for ways to obtain more low and moderate income housing and without destroying neighborhoods, considering, e.g.: a townwide goal, at a minimum, of 10 percent low and moderate income housing, and not just because it is the 40B threshold, below which towns are subject to 40B developments; prioritizing development which is both permanently and entirely (or at least primarily) affordable to low and moderate incomes, and especially rental housing; re-energizing the Housing Authority, which has an apparent aversion to both new development and acquisitions; increasing the 15 percent construction set-asides for new buildings; more adaptive reuse of existing buildings; legitimizing in-law or accessory apartments; more priority for housing with state and town properties (e.g. recent commercial projects at Webster St. and 1010 Commonwealth); infusion of more town money into the Housing Trust Fund; and again trying to put our money where our mouths are with a C.P.A. ballot question.

Neighborhood activists need to count on town officials to be both more proactive and more sensitive to the precise nature of the risks Brookline faces. We also look to the imminent Comprehensive Plan for future help in preserving both Brookline's diversity and its fragile ecosystem. PAX welcomes discussion about pursuing both goals, without either pitting one against the other or exaggerating the "zero-sum" nature of the choice. Maybe, in the long run, we'll discover we cannot have our cake and eat it too; but isn't it too soon to throw in the towel?

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