

Transit-oriented Development:  
It Does Not Apply to the Washington Place Proposal  
By: Members of Neighbors for a Better Newtonville

The Issue: Would the Korff Development Be a Transit-oriented Development?

The introduction to *Request for a Zone Change at Washington Place*, submitted by the developer Mark Newtonville LLC, states that the Washington Place development on the Orr Block site is a transit-oriented development:

MI, through its affiliate Mark Newtonville, LLC ... proposes to redevelop the block situated between Walnut Street and Washington Terrace into a vibrant, innovative, *transit-oriented mixed-use development*. [emphasis added by us]

This claim is not true. Newtonville Village Center does not qualify to be designated as a transit-oriented development (TOD) site, because transit-oriented development is based first and foremost on the existence of adequate public transport — which Newtonville definitely lacks.

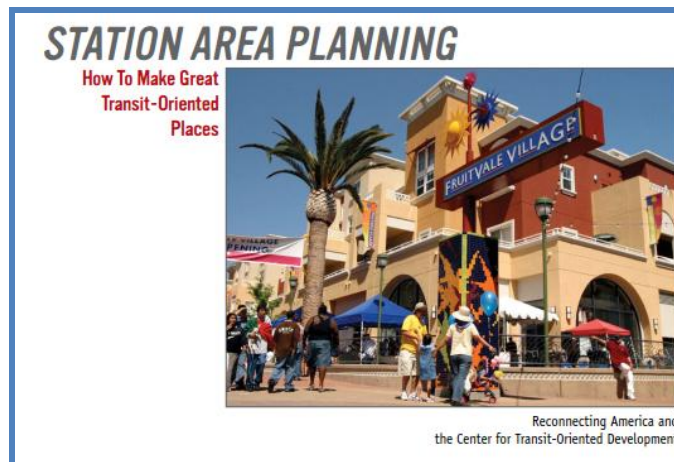
#### Authority for Our Position

Our position is based primarily on the work of an organization called *Reconnecting America* and its affiliate, the *Center for Transit-Oriented Development*:

Reconnecting America is the only national nonprofit organization devoted to promoting best practices in transit-oriented development (TOD) and development-oriented transit. Our *Center for Transit-Oriented Development*, a collaboration with the Center for Neighborhood Technology and Strategic Economics, has been funded by the federal government [Federal Transit Administration] to serve as a national TOD best practices clearinghouse.

[www.reconnectingamerica.org](http://www.reconnectingamerica.org)

In particular, we reference their "TOD202" Manual for Station Area Planning: How to Make Great Transit-Oriented Places."<sup>1</sup>



We will also reference the *Transit Oriented Development Institute* (tod.org), which is a project of the US High Speed Rail Association. This organization has a certification process for TOD areas. We used their eight certification criteria to form a judgment on the potential contribution of the Washington Place proposal to a TOD neighborhood.

#### TOD's First Principle: Good Transportation

TOD requires first of all good transit. Where adequate transit is lacking, all the other elements can be in place, but they are an empty shell. The Transit Oriented Development Institute explains that "getting the layout of the station right is one of the most important early moves that will lock in desirable or undesirable patterns, and dictate many factors including pedestrian and bicycle use, level of traffic all around the station, quality of station area development, location of cafes and retail, and overall success of the rail system."

A transit station should be a "safe, pleasant, lively environment ... [with] easy access, [and] plenty of bike parking in multiple locations" and that "provides safety of the young, the elderly, and the mobility impaired."

The Washington Place proposal suggests the opposite: that if we build the housing and other amenities, the transportation will follow. That might be true for some communities, but certainly not for Newton. The MBTA is struggling to achieve its highest priority goals and will be

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[http://media.metro.net/projects\\_studies/tod/images/Reconnecting%20America%20%E2%80%93%20Station%20Area%20Planning.pdf](http://media.metro.net/projects_studies/tod/images/Reconnecting%20America%20%E2%80%93%20Station%20Area%20Planning.pdf)

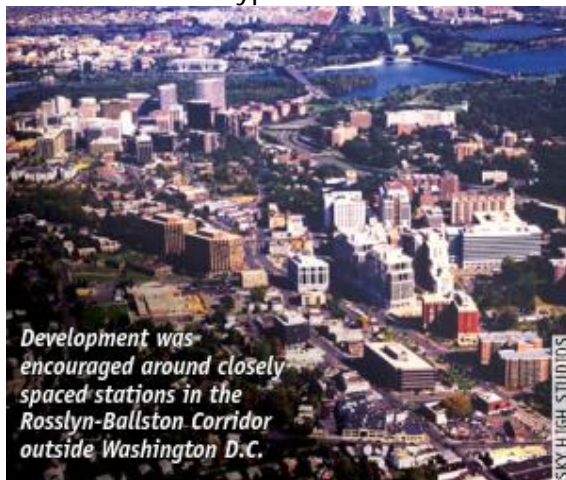
for the foreseeable future. And adding to this situation, the voters of Massachusetts regard Newton as an elite, wealthy enclave, not a prime candidate for scarce public dollars.

Newtonville Village Center: Are We a "Transit Neighborhood"?

According to *Reconnecting America*, a transit-oriented development requires that stores and buildings in a given location be appropriate for the transit capacities of that location.

The TOD202 Manual provides a classification of eight *Place Types*. For example: an Urban Center place type is very different from an Urban Neighborhood place type. These place types differ completely in the scale and type of transit, buildings, and businesses that they need.

Place Type: Urban Center



Place Type: Urban Neighborhood



The most modest place type is called a Transit Neighborhood. Newtonville Village Center (NVC) would be a Transit Neighborhood if it qualified as a TOD place.

Here are key characteristics of a Transit Neighborhood.

### Characteristics of a "Transit Neighborhood"

<b>Transit modes</b>	LRT/Streetcar, BRT, commuter rail, local bus
<b>Peak frequency of transit</b>	15-30 minutes
<b>Characteristics of the station area</b>	Predominantly residential district organized around transit station
<b>Land use mix and density</b>	Low- to moderate- residential uses with supporting commercial and employment uses
<b>Retail characteristics</b>	Primarily local-serving retail opportunity
<b>Major planning and development challenges</b>	Integrating moderate-density housing and supporting local-serving retail

*Source: TOD202 Station Area Planning manual*

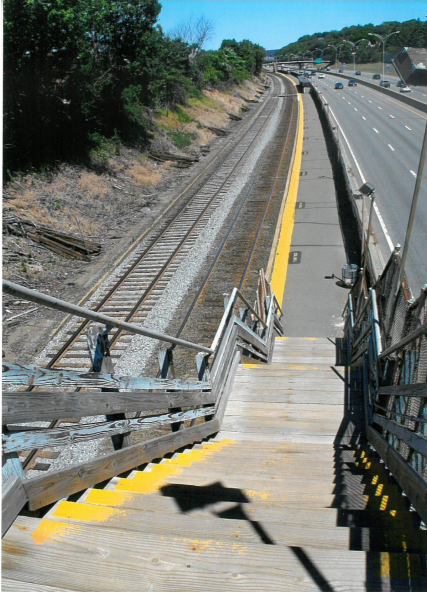
On the plus side, it's true that NVC is served by two of the transit modes: commuter rail and local bus. And the surrounding area is predominantly residential, with "supporting commercial and employment uses."

#### The Commuter Rail — Not Adequate

But having two transit modes is hardly enough to qualify. The primary requirement is adequate transit. At NVC, the prominent mode of public transit is the commuter rail service. It must be said that the commuter train ride itself is comfortable (when you get a seat) and quick. In about 20 minutes after stepping onto the train at NVC, you will be stepping off downtown. So it's particularly galling that our commuter rail service doesn't measure up in crucial ways.

First, the station is notoriously difficult to access. It is depressed from street level; the only way to get to it is by a steep 36-step staircase from the Walnut Street Bridge or a similar staircase from Harvard Street. Even able-bodied people can have trouble negotiating these stairs, especially in bad weather. There is no canopy. There is no handicapped access. Beyond the stairs is a very long platform: the distance from Walnut Street to the shelter where the train stops is 400 feet. It is 700 feet from Harvard Street.

Stairs Down To The Platform



Standing Beside The Train



One doesn't have to be officially disabled to have trouble with this station. Even able-bodied people may experience some vertigo going down and breathlessness climbing up. The station about as far as it could be from providing for the "safety of the young, the elderly, and the mobility impaired."

For those who can manage the 36 steps, there is an additional problem. Will there be a train to take? TOD202 tells us that peak frequency should be 15-30 minutes between trains. Like safety, the frequency standard is very far from our station's reality. Here are the number of minutes between trains for the morning (inbound) rush hour.

Train arrival times	Minutes wait before next train	Meets standard?
6:38 - 7:19	41 minutes	No
7:19 - 7:46	27 minutes	Barely
7:46 - 8:23	37 minutes	No
8:23 - 9:13	50 minutes	No

Non-peak periods of the day are far worse. Here is the complete weekday schedule. Going inbound, *you will wait six hours* if you miss the 1:26 pm train. Coming outbound, there is a *five-hour gap* in the morning. In both directions there are big gaps elsewhere.



Inbound	Outbound
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5:59 – 6:19 am</li> <li>• 6:38 – 6:59 am</li> <li>• 7:19 – 7:38 am</li> <li>• 7:46 – 8:07 am</li> <li>• 8:23 – 8:44 am</li> <li>• 9:13 – 9:34 am</li> <li>• 9:54 – 10:12 am <i>[Flag]</i></li> <li>• 11:53 – 12:11 pm <i>[Flag]</i></li> <li>• 1:26 – 1:36 pm <i>[Flag]</i></li> <li>• 7:37 – 7:55 pm <i>[Flag]</i></li> <li>• 9:13 – 9:31 pm <i>[Flag]</i></li> <li>• 12:33 – 12:51 am <i>[Flag]</i></li> <li>• 1:33 - 1:51 am <i>[Flag]</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5:00 – 5:19 am <i>[Find conductor]</i></li> <li>• 10:15 – 10:35 am <i>[Find conductor]</i></li> <li>• 11:55 – 12:15 am <i>[Find conductor]</i></li> <li>• 2:00 – 2:20 pm <i>[Find conductor]</i></li> <li>• 3:40 – 4:00 pm</li> <li>• 4:35 – 4:55 pm</li> <li>• 5:15 – 5:35 pm</li> <li>• 5:50 – 6:11 pm</li> <li>• 6:45 – 7:05 pm</li> <li>• 7:45 – 8:05 pm <i>[Find conductor]</i></li> <li>• 8:30 – 8:50 pm <i>[Find conductor]</i></li> <li>• 9:35 – 9:55 pm <i>[Find conductor]</i></li> <li>• 10:30 – 10:50 pm <i>[Find conductor]</i></li> <li>• 11:30 – 11:50 pm <i>[Find conductor]</i></li> </ul>

And making the situation even less customer-friendly, over half the trains (colored red) don't even stop at NVC unless you flag them down (inbound) or find a conductor to stop at the station (outbound). Flagging can be difficult and unpleasant. One of the pictures above shows how it feels to stand beside one of these trains. And coming outbound, it's not always easy to find a conductor to stop the train. These trains are long and conductors are few. They can be many cars away. On the outbound trip, people do sometimes miss the station because they couldn't find a conductor in time.

## T and Bus Service

Newtonville has no T subway stop. The nearest T Stations are in Newton Centre and Newton Highlands, both some two miles away.

However, we are served by four bus lines. (Information below is for inbound buses. Outbound times are similar.)

- The 59 bus goes north and south, between Watertown Square (north) and Newton Highlands (south). This bus is handy because it cuts across the transportation spokes that go into downtown Boston. However, one has to wait at least 34 minutes between busses. The #59 schedule does not meet the TOD criterion of 30-minute interval or better at peak periods.

- The 556 bus begins in Waltham near Rt. 128, comes to Newton via Moody Street and High Street, continues through Newtonville and Newton Corner, then takes the Mass Pike downtown. It squeaks in to the TOD criterion, having 30-minute intervals during the earlier part of the morning rush hour. But for the rest of the day, the intervals are 60 minutes or more. And most runs do not include all the stops.
- The 554 bus begins in Belmont, curls around through Waltham, then through Newtonville and Newton Corner, and like the 556 takes the Mass Pike downtown. Only one run meets the 30-minute interval criterion.
- The 553 bus starts near Brandeis University in Waltham, curves through Waltham and goes through Newtonville and Newton Corner, then takes the Mass Pike downtown. This line has the most frequent runs of the four bus lines, with times of 25 minutes and 30 minutes in the morning rush hour. However, the rest of the day, the intervals are generally 60 minutes.

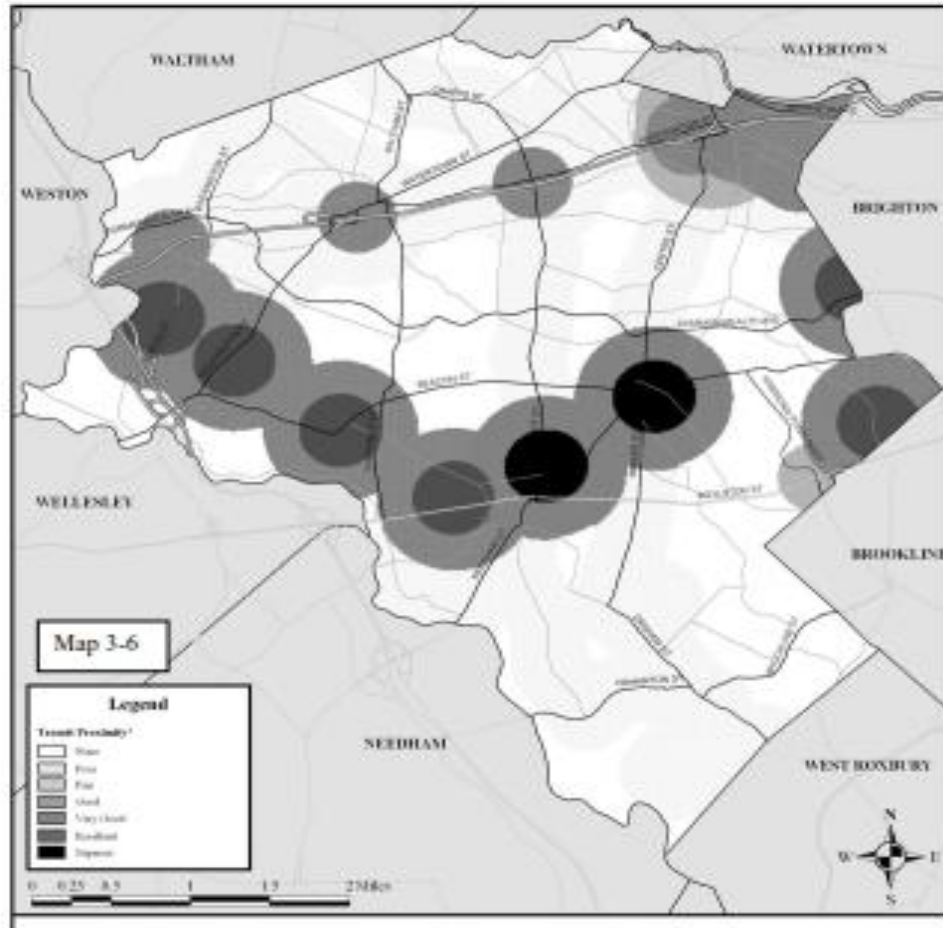
### Summarizing the Situation

Service on each of the bus lines is not very frequent, even in rush hours. If we consider all the buses together, plus the commuter rail, a Newtonville resident can get downtown and back in rush hour periods. However, the commuter rail is useless for handicapped or mobility impaired residents, as pointed out earlier. And trips to locations in Waltham, Watertown, and Belmont are not easy to make because the buses run infrequently and the routes do not overlap much. Trips to other towns require transfers.

Newtonville Center is not devoid of public transportation, but it does not meet the requirements of a Transit Neighborhood TOD.

### Transit Oriented Development Could Be Better Pursued in Other Villages

Although Newtonville is not suitable for transit-oriented development, there are other villages where true TOD is currently possible. The following figure in Newton's Comprehensive Plan of 2007 (p. 63) shows where in the city concentrations of public transit are located.



The most transit-rich locations are those where the Green Line stops. Newton Centre and Newton Highlands take first honors, but all the other stops are suitable as well. This is because the Riverside Line frequency is well within the 15-30 minute TOD202's guideline.

### Weekdays

	First Trip	Rush Hr	Midday	Evening	Late Nite	Last trip
<b>Riverside</b>	4:56am	<b>6 min</b>	<b>8 min</b>	<b>8 min</b>	<b>9 min</b>	12:05am
<b>Govt. Ctr.</b>	5:40am	<b>6 min</b>	<b>8 min</b>	<b>8 min</b>	<b>9 min</b>	12:49am

### Weekends

	First Trip	AM Peak	PM Peak	Evening	Late Nite	Last trip
<b>Riverside</b>	4:55am	<b>12 min</b>	<b>8 min</b>	<b>10 min</b>	<b>10 min</b>	12:05am
<b>Govt. Ctr.</b>	5:34am	<b>12 min</b>	<b>8 min</b>	<b>10 min</b>	<b>10 min</b>	12:49am

If you live in walking distance from any of the Riverside Line stations, you will get a train quickly, at any time of the day until closing. And these trains provide many more connections than the Newtonville commuter rail. The Riverside Line stops at 14 locations between Newton and its



final destination of Government Center. By contrast, the NVC commuter rail stops at just one station (Back Bay) on the way to its South Station.

### A Faulty Assumption: People Won't Need Cars

The developers would have us believe that people who reside in Washington Place will need fewer cars: 1.25 cars per unit versus the zoning ordinance standard of 2 cars per unit. That claim is consistent with TOD's aim of making public transit, walking, and bicycling into attractive alternatives to driving. But is it true that residents of Washington Place would own fewer cars?

People in very transportation-rich places like Manhattan sometimes do dispense with car ownership. In Manhattan, public transportation is cheaper and often more convenient than a car. Many people, even those with plenty of money, may decide that owning a car is just not necessary. When they occasionally need a car, they can rent one.

But Newtonville is no such place. It's true that we have residents who get to work and back during rush hours using the existing rail and bus service. But what happens when these same people want to go to the theatre in the evening? They take a car because public transportation isn't adequate in the evening. What happens when they need to go shopping after work? What do they do when they want to take their kids to school in the morning?

We don't know of any study that has asked Newtonville residents specifically how many cars they own and how they use them. Our experience is that most adults who live in Newtonville own a car unless they just don't have enough money.

We have many examples. Here is one from a post by Karla Heiler on September 8, 2016:

"Currently the T has failed to keep its promise of adding additional 59 bus runs later into the evening. My daughter in law is starting her commute into Simmons for grad school tonight and will also have to drive into school because of lack of T service to Newtonville after 7 pm. Now picture the Court Street development, Austin Street development and the proposed Washington Street development adding to that driving necessity.

"I would like to see the City Council put a moratorium on large scale development of Newtonville until the T and MassDot make Newton a priority for public transportation instead of saying they meet the current guidelines and we're not a priority. (And as far as the Newtonville commuter rail station goes - I'd like to see someone from MassDot get to that platform when they're on crutches."

Most of the residents in the Washington Place development will be paying 'market-rate' rents, meaning they would have the money to own a car and they would in fact do so.

#### TOD Designation Is Not an Allowed Use in the MU4 Zoning District

In addition to the common-sense observations and the guidelines from *Reconnecting America* and the *Center for Transit-Oriented Development* (presented above), there are statutory reasons why the Orr Block cannot be classified as a transit-oriented development.

Newton Ordinance, Chapter 30, Section 4.2 regulates the Mixed Use Zone Districts. Section 4.2.1 B, provides that *transit-oriented developments are allowed in a Mixed Use 3 Zone District*. But the next section, 4.2.1 C, describes the uses allowed in a Mixed Use 4 District: *A transit-oriented development is not an allowed use in an MU4 Zone*.

It is also interesting to note that Section 4.2. 3 of the Newton Zoning Ordinance requires that a transit-oriented development site must contain *at least nine acres of land*. The Washington Place project contains less than three acres.

While the use of the term *transit-oriented development* may be appealing, it is clearly an error in the developer's petition.

If the Transit Were Adequate, Would Washington Place Contribute Positively as a TOD?

The *TOD Institute* has a certification process for TOD. Although the NBN is not in a position to submit the Washington Place project to them (the price would be \$6500), we can use their eight criteria as a rough guide to evaluating the TOD-worthiness of the project. Keep in mind that this is a “what if” exercise. As things stand now, Washington Place cannot be part of a TOD neighborhood because the transportation isn’t adequate — but suppose it were.

The TOD Institute awards three stars (the highest rating) to entrants who fulfill seven of the eight criteria, two stars for meeting six criteria, one star for meeting five criteria, and no stars for meeting less than five criteria. Here are NBN ratings and rationales:

Criterion	Contribution of Washington Place
<p>1) CLOSE PROXIMITY TO RAIL STATION</p> <p>Ideally, the walk needs to be a <u>high quality, pedestrian-friendly</u> experience. Walking across large parking lots or along a busy 6-lane road with little or no protection from traffic is not an acceptable walking experience, and will discourage walking, even if it’s within the 1/4 to 1/2 mile distance. The walking route needs to be safe, comfortable, and pleasant to encourage widespread walking and bicycling to and from the station.</p>	<p>Can't tell yet</p> <p>People have to cross major streets, but this might be mitigated by good signaling</p>
<p>2) WELL-DEFINED PUBLIC SPACES - OUTDOOR ROOMS</p> <p>Successful public spaces have a sense of enclosure by attractive, human-scaled buildings that wrap a space like walls wrap a room. Active uses line the perimeter activating the space. Together these work as gathering spaces that bring people together. The combination of beautiful architecture with great public space creates exceptional places to live — places that express a life of richness and tradition.</p>	<p>Marginal</p> <p>The space would be wrapped. However, the design allows for little if any uses on the perimeters (very small setbacks) and the architecture is not inspiring.</p>
<p>3) MIX OF USES - LIVELY, VIBRANT PLACES</p> <p>Appropriate mix of uses includes commercial, retail, offices, shops, hotels, residential, institutional, and civic. Ideally, the uses are mixed within each neighborhood, block, and building, and are physically and functionally integrated with direct pedestrian connections.</p>	<p>Can't tell yet</p> <p>What sorts of businesses will go there? Local stores won't be able to afford the rent. Developer needs expensive stores, but would such stores get enough business? There are already empty storefronts in N'ville. The space will be primarily accessible from an internal lot, so it may not connect well with the neighborhood. And parking will be severely limited.</p>

<p>4) PEDESTRIAN SCALE - COMFORTABLE, SAFE, ENJOYABLE</p> <p>Buildings and spaces sized to make humans feel comfortable and safe. A variety of uses in close proximity provides a comfortable balance for people to meet daily needs within a short walk. Uses include grocery stores, cafes, delis, bakeries, newsstands, coffeehouses, personal services, vegetable stands, open-air markets, and public parks and plazas. Project should have a minimum Walk Score of 70.</p>	<p>Can't tell yet</p> <p>N'ville Village Center (NVC) as a whole has a walkability score of 80, according to walkscore.com. However, the specific corner of Washington and Walnut is not highly walkable. The developer promises to change this. We will see.</p>
<p>5) ACTIVE GROUND-FLOOR RETAIL</p> <p>The most successful places have a variety of store sizes with many small shops and narrow store fronts in each block. Larger stores are incorporated by tucking partly behind a line of smaller storefronts, and/or by going up to the second floor. Smaller spaces add more variety to each block and attract the unique, mom &amp; pop type businesses — so important to giving places a unique character.</p>	<p>Probably No</p> <p>Stores will be relatively large, definitely not 'mom and pop.' And as noted elsewhere, the developer has not identified specific tenants.</p>
<p>6) SIDEWALK CAFES</p> <p>Cafe districts create a special ambiance. Outdoor cafes offer front-row seats to some of the best people watching in a city, and encourage people to spend more time socializing and enjoying, and return more often.</p> <p>The more cafes and the larger the total outdoor seating area, the more people the district attracts. Some of the most successful cafe districts have more than 8 blocks of continuous sidewalk cafes totaling hundreds of seats!</p>	<p>Yes, but weakly</p> <p>Cafés will not be on the sidewalk, though that is permissible. But they will not integrate with other cafes to form a continuous line.</p>
<p>7) TREE-LINED STREETS</p> <p>Trees add beauty, grandeur, and a humanizing feeling to streets, spaces and places. The power of trees to add life to a place by providing pedestrian comfort and urban livability is beyond measure. Trees add a unique living, moving element of beauty that complements the architecture while lifting people's spirits.</p> <p>The beneficial psychological healing effects of trees have been well documented. Trees increase property values and retail sales, and slow cars and improve the sense of enclosure of street space with their canopies.</p>	<p>No</p> <p>The project does propose some trees along the street, but not enough to create the kind of pleasant tree-lined street that is meant here. There are too few trees and little setback and the roar of traffic on two busy streets.</p>

<p>8) REDUCED AND HIDDEN PARKING</p> <p>Clustering parking in strategic locations can encourage walking and focus pedestrian activity along important commercial streets.</p> <p>Successful TODs utilize reduced total parking numbers, and incorporate central shared parking between different uses, thereby reducing overall parking numbers further compared to conventional development.</p> <p>Hiding the parking behind buildings, or wrapping parking structures with active uses helps create safe, appealing, walkable places.</p>	<p>No</p> <p>Although the project would have hidden parking, that parking would be insufficient. The net effect would be more traffic congestion and more parking demands on the surrounding streets, making for a negative impact on the TOD goal.</p>
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The final scores: We score one category as Yes and three as No. The remaining three categories don't appear definitively on either side. At this point, we don't believe that the project would earn even one star.

### Conclusion

Transit-oriented development is a wonderful concept. Where it is well implemented, TOD is a boon to the community and to the environment.

Can TOD happen in Newton? Yes, in the villages that have Riverside Line stops — though we must never forget that it would have to be executed in a way that preserved and enhanced the unique qualities of each of those village centers. TOD is not a cookie-cutter approach.

For Newtonville, the concept of TOD does not apply. The requisite transit simply isn't there.

## Appendix

Shortly before completing this paper, we received the following post from Councilor Jim Cote. It speaks to directly to the difficulty of getting help from the Mass Department of Transportation and the need for the city of Newton to be more demanding when developers talk about "Transit Oriented Development."

Date: Thursday, September 8, 2016 at 11:23 AM

Subject: [WNewton] Public Safety Meeting with Secretary and CEO Stephanie Pollack-One more item

Hi all,

One other item that was addressed last evening with Stephanie Pollack, the Secretary and CEO of Mass DOT was the pedestrian access points to the West Newton and Newtonville Commuter rail stops. Some of the comments made by Stephanie, and the councilors in attendance:

1. Access: The state has met all of the Federal and state guidelines for system access and is not obligated to do more.
2. Newton Access: Having said 1 above, Stephanie understands that we have poor access and limited train service which will have to be addressed through the budget process. None of our stops make the priority list for "must do" next status.
3. Train cost: As they have a commuter rail services contract, Mass DOT knows exactly what it will cost to add trains, but there is no established need for more paying customers at this point.
4. Transit oriented development: Mass DOT is aware that the current service is not suitable for this type of development, but see above.
5. Partnerships: This is an area in which the Secretary seemed to throw the ball in our court. She noted cases (New Casino), wherein Mass DOT and either of a municipality, or a developer assists in financing new commuter projects. In our case, in Newton, as Councilors we have to be vigilant in projects such as Austin St, the Orr Building, Court St, etc in seeing that the Developers financially assist in this area that so greatly benefits their projects. We can talk Transit Oriented Development, and the developer can talk it, but unless we pursue ways to finance the trains this concept cannot work. As a City Councilor I can assure you that we can do better here.