

# IT JUST DOESN'T FIT: WASHINGTON PLACE'S IMPACT ON NEWTONVILLE'S PARKING AND COMMERCE

Peter G. Bruce, Ph.D. September 2016

## Preface

Much of the research cited in this article was done in 2014 and 2015, at the time when the Austin Street Project (*28 Austin Street*) was being planned for development. Three different parking consultants were hired by the city during that time, and I conducted my own independent study to find out what parking conditions prevailed in Newtonville, and what the effect of development was likely to be.

My focus in this paper is the Orr Block development. But my earlier research is, with a few exceptions, equally as applicable to the Orr Block Project (*Washington Place*) as it was to the Austin Street Project. That is because the existing capacity of Newtonville's metered parking system remains the same, no matter what development is contemplated. The findings of my study and parts of the others provide recent and reliable understanding of our parking system usage. [Note: I will sometimes refer to the Austin Street Project as ASP and the Austin Street Lot as ASL.]

If we are going to adopt a policy to attract more shoppers and visitors into Newton, we need a plan to manage their coming and going. A developer's statement that they will mostly come and go by bus, commuter rail, or bicycle is not realistic. A major part of a better plan needs normative criteria by which to judge the efficiency of parking systems and their ability to facilitate commerce and handle extra stress. Other communities use such criteria, even though the practice was, to a large extent, dropped by the City's second and third parking consultants on the Austin Street Project. These criteria need to be re-established.

Let's turn now to Newtonville and the Orr Block Project.

## Parking is essential for local business



As Councilor Danberg has asserted, “Parking is the lifeblood of our businesses.” In Newtonville, this idea was endorsed by the owners of 34 local businesses who signed a **petition** against the Austin Street Project, due largely to its anticipated bad parking impacts.<sup>1</sup>

It was also confirmed by a 2014 Newtonville Area Council survey of 777 residents. These residents' primary concerns (top two out of seven) regarding the ASP were the loss of parking (69%) and additional vehicular traffic from new residential units and retailers (55%). No other issues came close, including risks of an unattractive building (30%), increased population in the public schools (24%), and increased population density in the downtown (15%), (see Figure 1 on

p. 7.)<sup>2</sup>

The Orr project does not stand alone. Newtonville has now been targeted by three major developments (Court Street, Austin Street, and Orr Block) which, if built to their proposed size, will add about 275 new units and 700 residents within a half-mile of each other, assuming Newton's average of 2.5 persons per household. How will that affect our parking and commerce?

Newtonville's **metered** public parking system is **especially important to commerce**. GPI, Newton's first parking consultant noted this.<sup>3</sup> Metered spaces are closest to businesses and key to customer convenience, and thus keeping the blood of commerce flowing. For this analysis, we'll **use the same 6 zones** as GPI, and focus especially on Newtonville's approximately **300 metered spaces** as the heart of our public parking system. Data are drawn from GPI's study in 2014, and from my replication study a year later. ( For a map of metered parking, see Figure 2 on page 8).<sup>4</sup>

## How to measure if the parking system is adequate

To test a parking system's health, and whether it is can serve the drivers who want to park there, we use the 85% rule. **85% of capacity is the level beyond which a parking system becomes overcapacity** according to top academics and the Institute of Traffic Engineers.<sup>5</sup> **This is the**

**industry standard**, and GPI's.<sup>6</sup> It's the point at which people have to start circling for parking. Up to 85%, more parking is good for business. Beyond that, people become dis-incentivized to come to the area — they start to avoid it. Some may resolve to never come back.

### **What we've been told by Newton's first parking consultant**

In its Executive Summary and on the first page of its report, GPI had headlined its finding that Newtonville's parking system was generally functional, according to the 85% rule.<sup>7</sup> After residents experienced great difficulty parking in Newtonville's metered parking in winter 2014-2015, the *Tab* published my article, "Parking Jams in Newton's Austin Street Lot," which showed, contrary to GPI, parking often exceeded 85% during the colder months.<sup>8</sup> Following that article, the Administration switched to Nelson/Nygaard as its traffic and parking consultant.

Nelson/Nygaard's brief study, submitted to the Planning Department in May 2015, was largely derivative of GPI's, whose data it cherry-picked.<sup>9</sup> It totally ignored the 85% rule and issues of how functional Newtonville's metered parking system was. So, too, did Planning Horizons, when that firm, the City's third parking consultant for the ASP, reported parking counts for two weekdays and a Saturday in mid-October 2015. It failed to note that of the days they observed, one of them had an overcapacity reading (112), another day was right on the 85% cusp (107), and the third was just a little below it (102).<sup>10</sup> They also failed to note, in the context of the Planning Department data I drew on, that these mostly weekday peak readings were all higher than the average peak Saturday readings for fall in previous years.<sup>11</sup> This suggests that parking demand was increasing and becoming less functional from year to year. (Their October data were almost identical to what I found for the ASL seven months earlier, suggesting that these findings can be generalized to fall and spring, i.e., seasons which are not unusually congested, like mid-winter, or lightly used, like summer.)<sup>12</sup>

Likewise, reviewing that latest planning study, Alan Schlesinger, ASP's attorney, asserted that no more than 112 of the 127 future spaces, or 88%, had been filled, and that this was only 70% of the existing total of 159.<sup>13</sup> He failed to note that his figures broke the 85% rule. He also, importantly, failed to point out that the total of 159 existing spaces was temporary, since 32 or more of them would be eliminated by the project. Instead, he asserted "the current parking lot is frankly dreadful," and suggested plenty of parking would be available if the project were built.<sup>14</sup>

### **Our analysis**

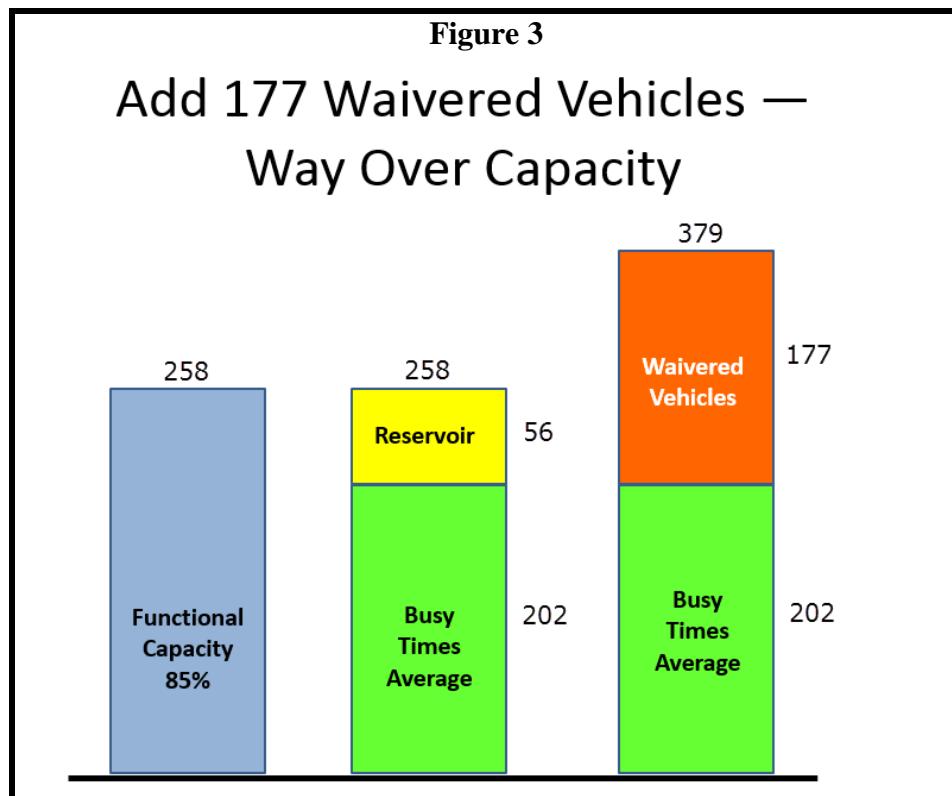
Descending into this sort of normless analysis and losing the practical wisdom of the 85% rule only makes it more likely that the blood flow of our businesses will be choked off if we don't think anew about what's best for our parking systems.

Keeping the 85% rule in mind, along with other standards embodied in the Zoning Ordinance, it seems as if Washington Place, as well as the other big new developments in Newtonville, could

undermine local commerce if it is allowed to go to maximum size and avoid the requirements of the law. Here's why.

As noted, several studies have shown that during the busiest hours on Saturdays the system is usually overcapacity, especially in the coldest half of the year.<sup>15</sup> Some people, mainly proponents of large-scale development, argue that these are rare times of inconvenience that people should simply put up with. Even granting that point for the sake of argument, if we look at the five hours of highest usage every weekday and Saturday, the prognosis is still bleak.

So to assess the health of our parking system and how much added stress it can absorb, let's look at more typical "busy times," in our village, that is, the 30 busiest hours during weekdays and Saturdays. Based on GPI's research and my own, Newtonville's metered parking system has a functional capacity of 258 spaces, which is 85% of its full capacity of 303 total spaces<sup>16</sup> (see Figure 3, blue bar). The system can withstand 56 more vehicles during "busy times" before becoming overcapacity (Figure 3 again: busy times are colored green; the reservoir is yellow).<sup>17</sup>



But the developers of Austin St. and Washington Place have requested waivers (80 for Austin Street and 97 for Washington Place) giving them permission to ***not*** create 177 spaces.<sup>18</sup> That means **177 more vehicles looking for parking – 3.2 times** what our reservoir could functionally accommodate. (The Orange bar is 3.2 times Yellow bar.)

Newton Centre, with its waiving of requirements for numerous parking stalls, already appears to have such a dysfunctional system that frustrates many potential customers.<sup>19</sup> **Constraining the size of Washington Place within current zoning would mitigate this problem in Newtonville.**

As for Washington Place's new parking demand, some experts have claimed that Washington Street's metered parking zone will handle it. Indeed, GPI noted that apart from the ASL, which has since had its excess capacity largely filled by Star Market's closing its lot to "public parkers," Washington Street has the largest reservoir of surplus capacity in Newtonville's public parking system. But that area is already almost two-thirds full in "busy times,"<sup>20</sup> and can only handle another 20 or so additional vehicles before becoming overcapacity. Parkers exiting and entering in rush hours will further congest traffic around the Washington/Walnut Street intersection, recently graded "D" by an impartial agency.<sup>21</sup> That's little better than a "rolling parking lot."<sup>22</sup>

### **Dubious assumptions**

As noted, by requesting waivers for 177 parking stalls for these projects, developers are asking permission to avoid providing spaces they would otherwise have to provide. They argue these parking waivers will not create serious problems; however their argument is based on the following **dubious assumptions**:

- 1) That residents at Washington Place (like Austin Street) will need only 1.25 vehicles.<sup>23</sup> Usually Newton households need two or more.<sup>24</sup> And with renters, especially Millennial roommates, often doubling, tripling, or quadrupling up to save money, this is not likely to change, given the inadequacy of transit in Newtonville. Furthermore, if Washington Place's residents are only allowed one space, and can't park another vehicle on the street in cold weather months when overnight parking is banned, they will likely park their second vehicle elsewhere in cold season, and then bring them back to park on Newtonville streets or in the ASL in months when the ban is lifted.
- 2) That flooding Newtonville with more vehicles for which there is inadequate metered or developer-provided parking will not intensify and worsen parking congestion on side streets.
- 3) That Newtonville has great mass transit. Walkscore.com gives it a 36, the third worst score in Newton.<sup>25</sup> The MBTA provides very little service inbound after 1:26 pm — including one stretch of six hours without a single train.<sup>26</sup> Newton emphatically does not have great public transit, and we cannot expect help from the MBTA or the Commonwealth in the foreseeable future. For details, see the presentation on Transit Oriented Development.
- 4) That resident and customer vehicles will gladly park in smaller spaces, sometimes a foot shorter than the parking section in our Zoning Ordinance requires.<sup>27</sup>

- 5) That people won't mind parking in lots with less room for maneuver than required by our Zoning Ordinances.<sup>28</sup>
- 6) That they also won't mind not having the interior landscaping, lighting, setbacks, bollards, wheel stops, guard rails, and curbing that are normally required by our ordinances to enhance our parking lots' aesthetic appeal and safety.
- 7) That the new businesses accompanying new developments won't generate many more customers than anticipated. They could. And this, along with other parking problems, could squeeze out customers for existing businesses.
- 8) And that their new employees won't park in public metered parking. When people are likely to be late or have things to carry, they often cut corners and park in whatever space is most convenient, even if they're not supposed to. That includes employees.

Since these assumptions are largely false, Newtonville's parking system will frequently be overcapacity, and scare away business and customers.

### **Conclusion**

It could be self-defeating for a developer to make oversized buildings that could choke off parking and access to his own commercial space. But developer-owners may want to build large to sell a property soon after it has been built, or even before it is finished, for a higher profit. In that case, the social costs of a dysfunctional parking system would be shifted onto the community.

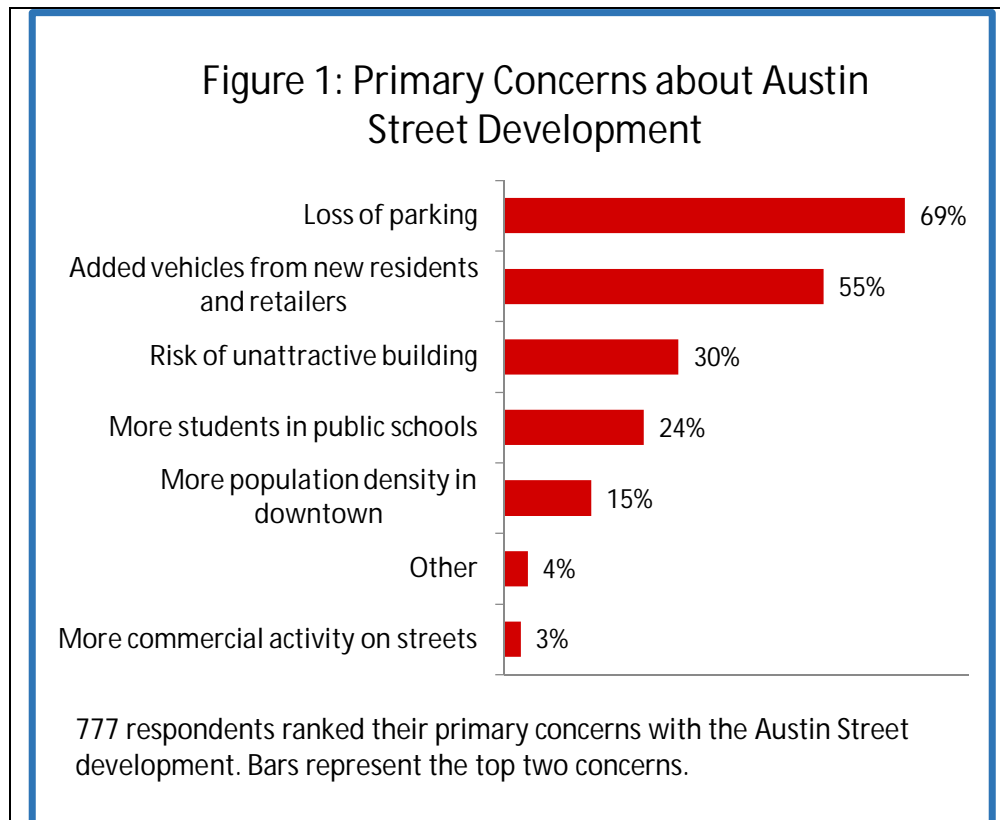
If we brush aside the practical wisdom in our Zoning Ordinance and the 85% rule, we'll choke our local commerce's "blood flow," and sentence many local businesses to death. These losses will be added to the suffering of those residents and businesses already displaced by the original purchase. Likewise, the many local businesses displaced by the original purchase will likely be replaced by bland, undistinguished national and regional chain stores – the only stores that can afford the much higher rents. Is that good for Newtonville's remaining businesses? For Newtonville's distinctive atmosphere?

To reduce the risk of a commercial heart attack, we request that the City Council refuse to re-zone the Orr Block properties.

## Chart and Notes

Further details about how the study was conducted are available upon request. Contact me at

Peter G. Bruce  
[pgbrb@rcn.com](mailto:pgbrb@rcn.com)



**Figure 2: Newtonville's Metered Public Parking System — from GPI study**



<sup>1</sup> “Businesses sign petition against Austin Street Project,” Jonathan Dame, *Newton Tab*, 10/16/2015.

<sup>2</sup> “Austin Street Development Public Survey,” Newtonville Area Council, March 4, 2014, p.4.

<sup>3</sup> Greenman, Pedersen, Inc. *Parking and Traffic Engineering Study: Village of Newtonville*. July 2014. Submitted to the Planning Department, Newton City Hall. See pp. 2, 29.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* Map on unnumbered introductory page.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* See Executive Summary and p. 8. For an academic perspective, see See Donald Shoup, *The High Cost of Free Parking*. Chicago: Planners Press, 2005, Chapters 11-13.

<sup>6</sup> *Op. Cit.*, pp 8 and 33. See also *Parking Generation Handbook, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition*; Institute of Transportation Engineers (ITE); 2010. And *Trip Generation Handbook, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*; Institute of Transportation Engineers (ITE); June 2004.



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<sup>7</sup> *Op. Cit.* GPI “Executive Summary,” and p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> “*Commentary: Parking jams in Newton’s Austin Street lot;*” Peter Bruce, *Newton Tab*; posted online 2/27/15. It was also published in the paper.

<sup>9</sup> “*Memorandum: 28 Austin Street – Transportation Impact Study;*” Nelson/Nygaard Consulting Associates, Inc. Submitted to Austin Street Partners and the City of Newton. This memo was “Attachment A “of a document submitted to the Land Use Committee dated May 12, 2015. See especially p. 22. “Existing Parking Supply and Utilization.”

<sup>10</sup> Memo to the Land Use Committee, “28 Austin Street, Newtonville Square, Mixed Use Development,” addressing parking in the Austin Street Lot. Lou Mercuri, Planning Horizons, Weston, Ma. 10/19/2015. Submitted as Attachment H with Austin Street Partners submission to the Land Use Committee “Austin Street is a great project,” 10/23/2015.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Bruce, “Newtonville’s Parking Needs and the Austin Street Project.” Report submitted to Newton’s Board of Aldermen, May 2015. See Charts 1 and 2, p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid. Op. Cit.* Mercuri, Planning Horizons, pp. 3-4.

<sup>13</sup> Alan Schlesinger, testimony before Land Use Committee, 10/29/15. On audiotape available on LUC website, minutes 9-12.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Op. Cit.* GPI, p. 12. Even GPI’s data show this, especially if its parking counts for 3/22/14, a day representing half of GPI’s peak-hour Saturday data for that month, which it rejected as an outlier, are retained. As I argued in “Newtonville’s Parking Needs...,”(pp. 1-2) that data should be retained as valid, since it is consistent with other cold weather counts available in Newton’s Planning Department that GPI neglected.

<sup>16</sup> 295 metered spaces, plus 8 handicapped stalls located amidst them. *Ibid.* GPI, pp. 9 and 29.

<sup>17</sup> 205 is an average of GPI’s 2015 hourly average (203 vehicles) and my own (207 vehicles) for 2015, for “busy times.” These times are 10 am to 2 pm, and 5 pm to 7 pm every weekday. See Bruce, “Newtonville’s Parking Needs...” Appendix, and its Tables.

<sup>18</sup> See Austin Street Board Order, and Washington Place Special Permit Application.

<sup>19</sup> Nelson/Nygaard, “Newton Centre Parking Strategy Draft 2.”  
<https://www.hightail.com/download/ZWJXWmdwTIE0b0JMWE5Vag>

<sup>20</sup> *Op. Cit.* GPI, p. 29.

<sup>21</sup> “Technical Memorandum: Washington Street Sub-regional Priority Roadway Study in Newton.” Chen-Yuan Wang. Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization. 1/22/15.

<sup>22</sup> Discussion with former Department of Transportation traffic expert Ron Mauri. 7/12/16.

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<sup>23</sup> “Zoning Review Memorandum.” City of Newton, Department of Planning and Development. 5/12/16. P. 4.

<sup>24</sup> See, for instance, <http://datausa.io/profile/geo/newton-ma/> and <http://www.clrsearch.com/Newton-Demographics/MA/Number-of-Vehicles-per-Household>.

<sup>25</sup> See: <https://www.walkscore.com/MA/Newton>

<sup>26</sup> See: [http://www.mbta.com/schedules\\_and\\_maps/rail/lines/?route=WORCSTER](http://www.mbta.com/schedules_and_maps/rail/lines/?route=WORCSTER)

<sup>27</sup> *Op. Cit.* City of Newton, “Zoning Review Memorandum,” p.5.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*