

59 East Central St.
Natick, MA 01760
September 27, 2021

Linda Wollschlager,
Chair, Finance Committee
Town of Natick

My wife and I own the house at 59-61 East Central, where we reside. We have been notified that a proposed zoning change has been added to the 2021 Annual Fall Town Meeting warrant, as Article 32. We have been gathering data about this proposed change, and have reviewed a letter describing the action desired, and the materials submitted by the petition sponsor.

We would like to make several observations as to why we think the zoning change is not necessary or in the best interest of the town or citizens who live in this area.

The petitioner stated, in his answers submitted on a required questionnaire, that this zoning change will encourage more development of businesses and housing, as was done at the former Town Paint property. He also states it will benefit his client by allowing the developer to build according to Downtown Mixed Use (DM) zoning. Under the current zoning, a large, tall building would not be allowed. The petitioner wants to make things consistent from downtown to Union Street, mentioning underutilized properties in this area. For the purposes of my comments, I have excluded discussion of the two properties owned by the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston, as we feel the church is unlikely to desire to build this sort of project on their property.

Among the properties impacted, there are currently two businesses and seventeen residential units. If there is underutilized property, it is the two vacant lots owned by New England Telephone on Wilson St, and the property in question at 67 East Central St combined with 5 Union St. The other business, at 2 Union St., is an active take-out pizzeria. We do not feel that this change will have any impact on the available housing, as most of the units have been occupied for the entire time we have been here, which is since early 1980. There are two housing units that are currently owner occupied: ours and 4 Wilson St. The daughter of the owner of 51 East Central resides there. He and his wife plan to move into 57 East Central St. when they downsize from Hopkinton. The owner of 6 Grant St recently moved to Tennessee but does have active tenants. All others are rented or in the process of being rented and are owned by absentee landlords. Interestingly, some of the comments from the petitioner state that while they would like the ability to build larger structures and more rental units, they indicated the possibility of creating pocket parks or other open greenways.

The petitioner further stated that due to the proximity of the train, less parking will be required. If one has not noticed, there are currently more cars on the road and fewer people taking public transportation. Due to the pandemic, auto sales over the past 18 month have been brisk, as people did not wish to ride on public transportation, as evidenced by the lack of cars parking for the train. So, there will be an abundance of cars regardless, requiring any project to have maximum parking requirements instead of perhaps reduced parking. We know how busy this area can be regarding traffic, and increased development will only add to the problem. Entry and exit are frequently difficult to our own driveway, and certainly will be an issue if using Union St. or East Central St. to get into or more importantly out of the corner lot of this already busy intersection.

The petitioner stated he met with town planners informally and impacted property owners. We received a certified letter on September 17, 2021. We understand the petitioner submitted written responses to the required questionnaire on September 23rd. In his responses, it is stated that there were individuals supportive of this change. Through discussions with neighbors, we have not found enthusiasm or support for this change. We wish the developer had been more proactive and contacted us directly instead of only via a letter. Our property is only 75 feet from the property line of 67 East Central St., so we are certainly a very interested party. We are wondering if we should have been notified by the town of a possible zoning change.

The petitioner stated that if unchanged, current zoning will permit only two-family dwellings. The only foreseeable lots other than 67 East Central combined with 5 Union Street would be the two vacant New England Telephone lots on Wilson St. The petitioner seems to lament that the town is losing tax revenue. This may be true, but increased density of businesses and residences would add to the cost of public safety, potential infrastructure improvements, traffic mitigation in an already busy area in addition to the education of children who would eventually live there.

The most interesting comment made is that this zoning change is in no way required to build on this property. In this situation, we firmly believe seeking a variance is a more appropriate approach, as it would be conducted and permitted by those who know the zoning bylaws best, would lead to open and public communication and discussion, and would prevent an out-of-place building on this corner. Changing the zoning designation and then proposing a project would allow an escape from the town's watchful eye as a project unfolds. We feel a zoning change is just a matter of how much can be built here, strictly a bottom-line decision without regard to the neighborhood, or those who live here. Since the petitioner states no zoning change is required, perhaps that is the best option to keep this neighborhood enclave just the way it has been since our house was built in 1896. It is always a shame to see well-kept older homes torn down to make way for an impersonal urban corridor. The entry into downtown Natick from the west is lined with private homes. The entry into Natick from the east deserves to have what is left preserved and should be no different. If approved, it is very likely that a huge 50-foot-tall building will appear on the corner, dwarfing the remainder of the homes adjacent to it.

We ask that you NOT recommend this proposed zoning change for this small section of Natick.

Sincerely,

Sheila and Don Friswell