

*Good evening. Welcome to Talking Points PM for Friday, September 6.*

## **CHESTO MEANS BUSINESS**



**Seeking the right size for Riverside:** Good luck finding a better spot for transit-oriented development than the sea of parking spaces at the Riverside station in Newton.

At first glance, the Green Line terminal property seems like a no-brainer: an asphalt lake bounded by Route 128, train tracks, a golf course, and an office building.

Maybe not. Mark Development unsuccessfully tried to push a 1.5-million-square-foot complex through the Newton City Council during the past year. The [project's size](#) sparked an outcry among upset neighbors in the nearby Lower Falls and Auburndale villages, rallying under the ["RightSize Riverside" banner](#).

So Mark, a Wellesley firm led by Robert Korff, will present [a modified plan](#) to councilors on Monday. It has been scaled back to 1.2 million square feet across 15 acres: 525,000 square feet of offices, a 154-room hotel replacing the Indigo next door, 526 residential units across six buildings, and 71,000 square feet of restaurants and shops.

Critics say the Riverside project is still far too large, nearly twice the size of a previous developer's plan for the site. And they see the potential for a bad precedent, for future projects in the city. The fight underscores the challenges of getting big projects done in Greater Boston – another tug of war between the crushing demand for additional housing and new growth to support the economy, and the concerns over congestion and overcrowding on local roads.

The Newton fight has played out like similar sagas in many other communities in the region. Korff tried negotiating with neighbors and their councilors this summer, without much luck. So he's taking his chances with the full council. He will need 16 out of 24 votes there, per the state's two-thirds supermajority requirement for

zoning-related changes. Assuming he clears that hurdle, he'll likely face another one. Opponents have vowed to capitalize on a little-used charter bylaw that allows certain council decisions to be challenged through a city-wide referendum.

Korff has already earned supporters and detractors in Newton, for [his controversial efforts](#) to reshape a major swath of Washington Street. He sounds like he's ready for battle over Riverside. Much is at stake. The land deal could net as much as \$30 million for the cash-starved MBTA through a long-term lease, for a 12-acre portion of the T's land there. It could bring new apartments and offices to a city badly in need of them, plus \$5 million in annual property taxes. This is one of the last blank-canvas properties along rapid transit in Greater Boston.

Korff seems determined to avoid what happened to his predecessor, Normandy Real Estate Partners. Normandy eventually won over critics by agreeing to a nearly 600,000 square foot, mixed-use complex. That was in 2013. That project, which didn't include the three-acre Hotel Indigo site, turned out to be economically infeasible at that size. (Normandy, however, remains a partner in the new Riverside proposal.)

Korff has support in City Hall, but the two-thirds council vote is not a sure thing. The most significant antagonist on the council could be Lenny Gentile, an Auburndale resident who helped hammer out the original Normandy deal. He says he's frustrated that his colleagues want to push through the special permit for Mark's project on a parallel track to broader zoning amendments for the site. To him, the property's zoning should be done first before any specific project is considered. Yes, Mark scaled back the project, in part by dropping a maligned 18-story tower from the plans. (The tallest building is now 13 stories.) But Gentile says it's still far too large, and will exacerbate traffic in the two adjacent villages.

Then there's the [Lower Falls Improvement Association](#). Randy Block, who leads the neighborhood group's Riverside committee, says his organization will push for a referendum to challenge the council if it approves the project's zoning in its current form. He says he's particularly worried about the amount of commercial space -- it represents more than half of the project now -- and the cars it will bring to nearby residential streets.

As the Riverside saga plays out, Governor Charlie Baker continues [to push for legislation](#) at the State House that would reduce the two-thirds requirement for many land-use votes to a simple majority, to get more housing built. If not for the current threshold, Korff argues his project would already have council approval.

Could the region's housing crisis become the tipping point needed for this change at Beacon Hill? Controversy, Korff says, is sometimes necessary to draw attention to problems, to make meaningful reforms happen.

For that reason, Korff says part of him wanted this Riverside project to be controversial. Regardless of how it fares at the council, he has already succeeded in that regard.

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