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B'nai B'rith Housing proposes a 79-unit condominium and retail development

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B'nai B'rith Housing recently told the city it wants to build 79 new condominium residences and street-level retail space and provide a modest amount of parking for the public at 51 Austin St. in Newtonville, the site of a city-owned surface parking lot.

B'nai B'rith Housing, which developed the highly successful 33Comm condominium residences in the Chestnut Hill neighborhood four years ago, responded to the City's request for development proposals with a detailed plan for a five-story building.

The plan is characterized by a varied design and includes one and two-bedroom residential units, 24 units accommodating residents with modest incomes, 85 parking spaces readily accessible to the public plus parking for residents and visitors, and 6,800 s/f of ground-floor retail space, enough for three businesses and the extension of the Newtonville commercial district.

"Our proposal is A-plus for Newton because we worked to make sure it includes all of the attributes that City planners and neighbors said they wanted, in addition to a number of other amenities," said Susan Gittelman, executive director of B'nai B'rith Housing.

The Austin St. condominiums and stores would fill in a longstanding gap in one of Newton's valued neighborhoods and provided needed housing for families and individuals who prefer the efficiency of multifamily buildings to single-family homes.

B'nai B'rith's submission was accompanied by a letter of support from 50 local residents who are familiar with the organization's successful practices, cooperative approach to development, and first-class record of creating housing.

"The plan builds off of the pedestrian connectivity already in the district," the proposal said, "and through a focused study creates more opportunity for active civic engagement in newly activated public spaces."

The Austin St. proposal includes plans for a green walkway on three sides, street trees, enhanced lighting, and a possible public outdoor gathering space. Working with neighbors including the Grossman Companies and the Church of the Open Word, B'nai B'rith proposes to enliven Bram Way, which intersects Austin St.

The development project would require no public funds and would generate a total estimated benefit of more than \$12.3 million for the city. That benefit includes a \$1 million payment for the land, the value of existing parking, and additional funding for off-site street or other improvements to the neighborhood.

Taxes paid to the city would be about \$320,000 annually, or \$3.8 million over 40 years. Because the land is city-owned, it generates no tax revenue now.

The residential units mostly range in size from 800 to 1,200 s/f, with market-rate prices of an estimated \$340,000 to \$550,000. "The proposed sales prices are well within the current market rate

prices for Newton," the proposal noted.

In addition, five units on the top floor will be larger, with prices estimated at \$800,000-plus.

As part of the proposal, Newton would gain 24 permanent affordable units that would count toward its inventory of units eligible for state subsidy. Twenty of those are intended for residents earning 80% of the median income for the area, and four units are intended for owners earning 120% of median income. The value of the cost-subsidized units to the City of Newton amounts to about \$750,000.

In two levels of parking, 85 spaces, about what exists today on the City lot, are reserved for the public at no cost to the city. Ninety-nine additional spaces would be added for the residences and commercial space, and six new parallel parking spaces would be added on Austin St.

"The building is designed with sustainability and conservation in mind," said Gittelman. "It is designed to take best advantage of the sunlight exposure and to maximize light to units and open space."

B'nai B'rith Housing has secured construction and other funding for the project and is working with a broker for the commercial space.

If the B'nai B'rith proposal is selected among those who expressed interest in developing the site, construction could begin in early 2014.

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