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NEWTON

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Competing blueprints for Centre Task force takes up proposals

By Connie Paige, Globe Correspondent | August 24, 2006

``*That's the center of Newton?*''

Charles Eisenberg was gazing at the parking lot in the middle of Newton Centre two years ago when he had an epiphany: The lot just wasn't the right centerpiece for one of the most beautiful villages in one of the most desirable communities in the state.

Now -- two years, two public forums, and numerous subcommittee meetings later -- a task force chaired by Eisenberg faces the challenge of reconciling competing visions for the Garden City's crossroads.

When the task force meets Sept. 9, three subcommittees representing advocates of high, medium, and low growth will present their blueprints for the future. The working groups were formed after a contentious meeting in March.

To strollers through Newton Centre on Sunday, however, the need for change apparently came down to a single word: traffic.

``The biggest issue -- this is what most people are most upset about -- is the traffic,'' said David Stein, 40, while walking his dog through the green along Centre Street.

Mayor David B. Cohen appointed the task force a year and a half ago to examine ways to improve the commercial hub. Members have been considering ideas ranging from transforming the intersection of Centre and Beacon streets into a rotary to encouraging five-story buildings. Some want housing -- including affordable units -- built above the stores. They've also been talking about getting rid of the 120-spot parking lot at the heart of the village, replacing it with an underground garage and a park or more stores.

One of the worst spots is the intersection of Centre and Beacon streets, where a consultant counted nearly 43,000 vehicles passing each day. It averages a dozen accidents a year.

Among the options under study is converting the intersection, now guided by four traffic lights, into a roundabout. This would help cars get through quicker, but probably would be more dangerous for pedestrians and bicyclists.

Another option, which Stein pronounced ``wacky,'' is tunneling under the center. Call it Newton's Big Dig.

Stein said improving traffic flow could have the unintended consequence of drawing commuters away from other clogged thoroughfares, such as Route 9.

The three subcommittees are also pondering what should be done about housing and commercial space.

At the meeting in March, Eisenberg, a real estate consultant, suggested preliminary targets for the two subcommittees that favor construction: for medium growth, 60-75 more units of housing and 100,000 square feet of additional commercial space; for the high-growth group, 150-200 more units of housing and 200,000 square feet of additional commercial space.

Some local merchants are dead set against extensive construction.

``When you say tear down blocks and build five-story high-rises and change traffic patterns, people who live here and come here -- that offends them," said Michael Noymer, owner of Leather World, which has a branch in Newton Centre.

Sharing the minimalist view is Friends of Newton Centre, a group that broke away from the task force but still participates as part of the low-growth subcommittee, now calling itself ``Better, Not Bigger." The Friends advocate a plan ``that retains the scale and character of the village center while improving traffic, parking and the pedestrian experience," according to its website.

``We feel very passionately," said Lisa Gordon, who was among those who founded the group after the March meeting. ``I'm hoping we'll have a big influence."

Nael Hafez, who was among those interviewed on Sunday, said he feared losing what he values about Newton: its distinct villages.

``That's the character of Newton," said Hafez, 31, who lives in West Newton. ``It's small -- a small city away from a bigger city. If you get too many tall buildings, you might as well be in Boston."

Marsha Green, who was waiting with her family outside Johnny's Luncheonette for a brunch table, said rather than bigger buildings she wants more diverse stores.

``You can't buy a button in Newton Centre," she said. ``Newton Centre has become extremely upscale."

Her husband, Warren Green, said that while he opposes major new construction, he does believe Newton Centre needs some remodeling.

``What some people call architectural diversity others would call ugly," he said. ``It definitely needs aesthetic improvement."

Stein said he could tolerate modest growth, and believes that the center could be ``more lively," with more restaurants staying open later and perhaps the return of a movie theater. A father of two, he said he would also like to see affordable housing, provided it didn't strain the schools.

It was the disposition of a school that shaped today's Newton Centre. The forerunner of Mason-Rice School stood where the parking lot is today. The school was demolished about 35 years ago.

The latest push to revamp the village stems from a 2005 report, ``Newton Centre Renaissance: A Roadmap Forward," produced by the Newton Economic Development Commission. It called for a more pedestrian-friendly layout; additional housing, including affordable units; and businesses that would spur a livelier scene, both day and night.

Denser development ``would produce a more aesthetically pleasing and more usable community," the report said.

Eisenberg, who was economic development commission chairman at the time, used the report as a springboard for the current task force. ``This is fourth time since the Mason School was torn down, and the temporary parking lot put in the triangle, that the city has studied this," he noted.

If the task force can reach some consensus next month, Eisenberg said, he would like to hold a public hearing in October or November and have one or more proposals before the mayor and aldermen before the end of the year.

For more information on the task force, visit www.ci.newton.ma.us, click on ``committees" and on ``Newton Centre Task Force." For more on the Friends of Newton Centre group, visit its website, www.friendsofnewtoncentre.com, or call 617-202-9307.

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