

March 1, 2021

Dear Maria,

Hopefully, you have been doing well since the virtual meeting on the 500 Harvard Street building last week.

You probably understand that many neighbors in the five-street area (Harvard, Verndale, Kenwood, Russell, and Columbia Streets) around the Coolidge Park area are disappointed that the building's height was not reduced. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, we collected signatures of 110 neighbors for a petition to limit the height of the building to three floors in line with the neighboring buildings. As we talked about before, most neighbors would probably compromise and can be convinced by the idea of building a four-story building in line with the zoning regulations on Harvard Street. But it is frustrating that despite the neighborhood's overwhelming support for a smaller building and even the ZBA Board's charge to lower the building's height, the developers continue to push a design of a six-story building. It looks like to them only their own opinions matter, and everybody else's opinions are simply ignored. People living in the neighborhood feel that the oversized building is jammed down our throats, and neither Brookline authorities nor us can do anything about it.

**Questionable Claims:** During the call, the developers claimed that they couldn't make money on anything lower than a six-story building. Somehow, every other developer that developed buildings on Harvard Street managed to do this. *How did every developer manage to make money building two-and-a-half and three-story buildings in the five-street area around Coolidge Park?*

There is only one six-story building (adjacent to the Kehillath Israel Temple built recently) on Harvard Street. All units in that building are affordable, and the Hebrew Senior Life runs the building on a non-profit basis. There are no six-story buildings even at the intersection of Harvard Street and Commonwealth Avenue, an eight-lane street (if you count T tracks or six-lane street for regular traffic.) A number of neighbors do not understand how it would be OK to build a six-story building on the intersection of two-lane and one-way streets, both of which are already overloaded in terms of traffic and parking.

**Cannot Reduce the Height of the Building but Added a Gym:** Ironically, the developers claimed that they could not reduce the building's height but added a gym inside it. Just for 25 units? All current neighbors in our neighborhood either use parts of our houses/apartments for small gyms or attend local gyms outside of our houses. You are more familiar with this topic. But I doubt that people in the affordable units of the other 40-B buildings in the area require gyms in their buildings. In all likelihood, by adding the gym, the developers are simply trying to raise rents for "non-affordable" units to increase their profits. But as I said on the call, they want to get all the benefits. But we, the neighborhood's current residents, would be stuck with the costs of having an oversized building that does not fit into the neighborhood and significantly increases safety concerns for our children and us.

*By the way, can somebody associated with the Town of Brookline look at the developers' financial projections to make sure that they cannot make money on a smaller-sized building?*

**Still a Tower:** An architect's chart depicting the 500 Harvard Street building's view from TJ Max from the ground level showed that the building would tower over the adjacent buildings. The aerial view from the back presented by the architect showed that the six-story building would blend better into the neighborhood. But very few of us would be looking at the new building from the helicopters. Most of us would be looking at it from the ground level. Also, I was very concerned when such an experienced architect as Clifford Boehmer questioned whether it would be possible to build such a tall building on such a small site. I worked in the engineering and construction business. For me, the architect's concerns are a serious warning, even if finally he decided that theoretically the design MAY work. We did not move into the neighborhood years before to become the subject of the experiment aimed at allowing developers to maximize their profits by building an oversized building.

**Serious Safety Concerns:** People who live in the vicinity of 500 Harvard Street are still very concerned with the proposed building's height and size.

- **Cars and Truck Driving in the Wrong Direction:** The more cars travel to and from the building, the higher the probability that some of them would drive in the wrong direction. Even without the new building, I see cars driving in the wrong direction on Kenwood Street every day. Unfortunately, the existing "Stop" signs on Kenwood Street do not prevent this from happening. Even if the developers put a "Wrong Way" sign at Kenwood and Harvard Streets' intersection, it is unlikely to prevent all drivers coming to and from the proposed building from driving in the wrong direction. The heavier traffic on Kenwood Street increases the likelihood of accidents at the intersection of Harvard Street and Kenwood Street. As a father of two kids, who lives four houses away from the intersection, I am very concerned about the traffic safety for my kids and neighbors.

When the new building is built, the probability of cars and trucks driving in the wrong direction from the building's garage will increase. The vehicles would have to travel ten yards back to Harvard Street rather than travel half-a-mile using predominantly narrow one-way or two-lane streets to get to Harvard Street: via one-way Kenwood Street and one of three streets – Columbia (narrow two-lane), Russell (one-way), and Verndale (one-way) - that allow them to return to Harvard Street legally. Also, there would be very little space for cars and trucks servicing the building on Harvard Street, especially that a Bus 66 stop will be in front of the building. So, many of the vehicles servicing the building (i.e., Amazon, grocery store, restaurant delivery, cable company, plumber, Uber, and other trucks and cars) are likely to park or idle on Kenwood Street. Many of them would drive from Kenwood Street to Harvard Street in the wrong direction judging by the existing driving patterns.

- **Reduced Visibility for Drivers:** The large size of the proposed building would reduce visibility for the vehicles driving from Allston before their right turn onto Kenwood Street. This situation will be especially perilous if other vehicles drive simultaneously in the wrong direction on Kenwood Street. Even without the proposed building, I had a very unpleasant experience several months ago when I turned onto Kenwood Street. Another car driving in the wrong direction from Kenwood to Harvard Street almost hit me head-on.

Of course, the developers would not want to agree with my projections that I made based on the traffic patterns that I observed over the years of living on Kenwood Street. *I wondered if the Town of Brookline can put cameras at the intersection of Kenwood and Harvard Streets. Every time a car exiting the garage of the 500 Harvard Street building or servicing the building drives in the wrong direction, the developers would have to pay \$500 to the Town of Brookline's Transportation Division. These payments would somewhat align the interests of*

*developers and residents of Kenwood Street and the other four streets around Coolidge Park: both groups would REALLY be against drivers driving in the wrong direction.*

- **Narrowing Sidewalks Increases Risks to Pedestrians:** The large size of the building would lead to narrowing sidewalks on both Harvard and Kenwood Streets. The narrowing would lead to crowding and potential safety problems as people would be stepping into the traffic lanes on both streets to avoid other people. Notably, the developers' plans and designs do not show the Bus 66 stop on Harvard Street. There are often people clustering around the metal bench, which I suppose would continue to be at the new building's border with an adjacent building at 514/516 Harvard Street. I am attaching two photos demonstrating how just two people can block the sidewalk even without the new building.

On the call last week, I mentioned that this summer, I was verbally attacked by a belligerent intoxicated homeless person, who camped on the bench for several weeks on and off. At the time, he directed outbursts at other people passing by, some of whom looked terrified. The narrower sidewalk on our side of Harvard Street would make potential situations like these more problematic, especially when the metal bench on the other side of Harvard Street, where the sidewalk is very narrow around the Bus 66 stop in front of the spirits store that is housed in the TJ Max building, is also occupied by other drunk people. It happened on a number of occasions this summer and fall. My wife stopped going in the direction of Commonwealth Avenue after it became dark to avoid potential danger.

By the way, just this weekend, we received a letter advising us that the medical marijuana dispensary, Mayflower Medicinals, on the other side of Harvard Street (230 Harvard Street next to the wine store) submitted an application to sell recreational marijuana. If the permit is granted, it is likely that more people, some of them high on marijuana, would be standing in line and loitering around the bench at the Bus 66 stop. As I mentioned, this bench is already popular with some impatient patrons of the spirits store, who start drinking alcohol as soon as they leave the store. It becomes even more essential for the residents of Brookline's five-street area around Coolidge Park that at least one side of Harvard Street has a wide and relatively unobstructed sidewalk that would be safe for women, children, and seniors walking to and from Commonwealth Avenue. For the benefit of the more vulnerable among us, we ask the ZBA Board to ensure that the sidewalk in front of the proposed 500 Harvard Street building is not getting narrower because of the new building.

**Noise Concerns:** As I was getting signatures for the petition, I talked to a number of residents who live on Verndale Street. For years, they were simply terrorized by all-night parties that students, who used to live in several houses on the street, organized there. The higher the 500 Harvard Street building, the higher the probability that we will have music blaring from the top floors of the building all over the five-street neighborhood. The developers want to rent the luxury units to young professionals and students, the demographic group likely to have all-night parties.

**Loss of Sunshine and Privacy:** The abutters and people living close to the new building would live in its shadow. They would also lose the sunshine because they would have to close the blinds on their windows not to be observed by the new building's residents. They would also lose privacy in their yards because the residents of the proposed building's top floors would have a direct line of sight in the adjacent properties. Once again, the higher the building, the more houses in the neighborhood would be affected by these problems.

A number of us think that if the proposed building was smaller (three-story in line with the 514/516 Harvard or four-story-high as is allowed by the regulations), the problems mentioned above would be smaller or did not exist at all.

I hope that the ZBA Board and the Town of Brookline authorities would convince the developers to respect the community's opinion and reduce the building's height.

Respectfully,  
Vitaly Veksler

The letter was read and electronically signed by Anna Kolodner, Lisa Coady, and Joanna Gallimore

*Fellow Members of the Save North Brookline committee*