



THE CITY OF NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND

Planning Board

January 11, 2021

RE: Amendment to the Comprehensive Plan to include the North End Urban Plan

Dear Mayor Napolitano and Members of the City Council:

The North End Urban Plan (NEUP) was created to fill a gap in City planning. The 2017 Comprehensive Plan outlined the contours of an economic development project for deaccessioned lands, including parcels released by the Navy at the former hospital site and lands created by RIDOT's ramp realignment. Prior to the North End Urban Plan, however, the City lacked a vision for the future urban design of the city's North End. Fortunately, the Comp Plan provided a framework for such a plan. It is widely understood that the urban historic character of Newport should be maintained and could be leveraged for growth and prosperity. Newport has the added benefit of urban fabric that is desired by high-wage employers. New growth should therefore conform to a model which is compatible with and enhances the existing environment. The NEUP demonstrates that the human scale, pedestrian friendly commercial streets of Newport provide an excellent model for future commerce and connectivity. In referencing the old town, the City supports measures that will provide continued economic benefit, improved equity, and quality of life for its residents. The NEUP, as proposed, mitigates multiple longstanding resident concerns of social, physical, experiential and economic disconnection.

Additionally, the NEUP lays the foundation for new regulations and investments to promote the City's goals. In 2018 Matrix (consultants for the 2017 Comp Plan) created a zoning document for Mixed-Use Innovation in the North End to replace the existing Commercial-Industrial zoning. In early 2019 the Planning Board deemed the Matrix document insufficient to meet the City's goals. It seemed foreign to Newport. Planning staff soon recognized that a different approach to zoning, which would draw on local strengths, would do more to achieve those goals. This approach was embodied in the zoning working group's proposals, which the Planning Board will soon review. New zoning will promote greater flexibility in supporting innovative uses. It will create a legal framework for encouraging developer investment in new infrastructure. Coupled with the vision put forth by the North End Urban Plan, new zoning will ensure the creation of an innovation zone compatible with Newport's rich architectural and urban design history. The Board has reviewed the North End Urban Plan over a series of four public hearings. Adjustments have been made to the document to reflect the extensive public comment received, as well as Board members' individual expertise. The final product is an exemplary plan, serving as a capstone in the more than two decades of planning for Newport's North End.

Incorporating this document, as proposed, into the Comprehensive Plan will demonstrate the City's commitment to its future success. The Board has unanimously approved this amendment and recommends swift approval, so that the City can energize its preeminent economic development opportunity. Once incorporation into the Comprehensive Plan is complete, additional implementation actions are needed. The most pressing are the new innovation zoning and the successful completion of the reconstruction of the Pell Bridge approaches in line with the North End Urban Plan. The Board is also hopeful the acquisition of the former Navy hospital will be completed soon. Additional infrastructure in the North End is needed. Stormwater is a nuisance in certain areas and sea-level rise and storm surge threaten some of the prime development parcels. Also, major investment is needed to serve future energy and communications demand. The Board is well informed on the economic challenges facing the city currently, but the desired economic development in the North End will not transpire without further Council leadership and investment. We stand ready to assist with these endeavors critical for Newport's future.

Sincerely,

Kim Salerno  
Planning Board Chair