

CHESTO MEANS BUSINESS

# Newton chamber joins Charlie Baker's housing fight

By **Jon Chesto** Globe Staff, May 2, 2019, 7:04 p.m.



A rendering of the 1.5-million-square-foot mixed-use complex proposed for the Riverside T station parking lot in Newton. (JEFF SPEOK/MARK DEVELOPMENT)

Want to see what the front lines of Greater Boston's housing crisis look like? Try the employer next door.

That's what the Newton-Needham Regional Chamber did for a video kicking off its campaign focused on the housing shortage and its ripple effects: a restaurant owner, a hotel manager, a nonprofit executive, a startup founder. All tell of stiff challenges as they look far beyond the Newton area to find workers.

This is shaping up to be the chamber's biggest public policy initiative in recent memory, and for good reason. Chamber president Greg Reibman has his eyes on three major projects in Newton that could collectively bring more than 1,900 new units of housing. But Reibman has a broader purpose: He argues Boston's inner suburbs aren't doing enough to fix the problem, and that all need to step up.

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Easier said than done. Many municipal votes to change land use require two-thirds majorities. That's why Reibman hopes the chamber's campaign will also help Governor Charlie Baker's "housing choice" bill, which would lower the threshold to a simple majority for many zoning and special-permit votes, to spur more residential construction. The fate of the bill is of concern to many business groups, not just Reibman's. The Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce, for example, has been lobbying for its passage.

The Legislature's housing committee will discuss Baker's housing bill at a public hearing on May 14. Meantime, Baker and top aides are crisscrossing the state to build support and visibility.

The next leg on this tour? You guessed it: Newton. Mike Kennealy, Baker's economic development and housing chief, visits the chamber's spring breakfast at the Needham Sheraton on Friday to make the case. Reibman plans to unveil the video there. An online petition will soon follow.

Among the faces in that video: Christopher Allen, general manager of the Marriott hotel in Auburndale. He says it can be tough to find people at all levels. Senior-level employees drive from as far away as Wilbraham, 70-plus miles west on the pike. Hourly workers often face hour-plus commutes involving the Green Line, and then a shuttle from Riverside.

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Reibman has long been a prominent pro-development voice in Newton. But three of Newton's biggest-ever projects will soon need City Council votes, and Reibman wants to underscore the important connection between housing production and employment: Tough to convince more employers to expand if they can't find the workers to fill their offices.

A Northland-sponsored complex that would put more than 800 housing units on Needham Street is furthest along in the city's review. Robert Korff's Mark Development, working with Normandy Real Estate Partners, filed plans in March for a 1.5-million-square-foot, mixed-use project next to the Riverside T station, with 675 units. And Korff also wants to build at least 450 units of housing spanning several blocks along Washington Street, just east of West Newton Square, though the exact size is still in flux.

The opposition in Newton to these proposals underscores both the need for Baker's bill, and its biggest potential weakness. Leon Schwartz, a board member of residents group RightSize Newton, wants the two-thirds majority requirement to stay: A high threshold forces a more careful review, he says, and results in a better project. His big concerns revolve around the potential to choke streets with traffic and to change a neighborhood's character with buildings that are too tall. Schwartz also worries about the extent in which developers such as Northland and Mark drive the city's planning.

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Another concern: affordability. Most new units, in Newton and elsewhere in Greater Boston, will be high end, out of reach for many workers.

A coalition of advocacy groups dubbed "Homes for All" issued a statement excoriating Baker's bill Wednesday, saying his legislation does little for the low- and moderate-income residents who need the most help.

Reibman concedes that the Newton projects should contain more income-restricted units. That can be worked out, he says, in the give-and-take with city officials.

It wasn't that long ago when civic leaders and activists worried about the crisis that Amazon's second headquarters might cause: brutal hunts for talent, bruising searches for affordable homes. We didn't get HQ2, of course. But for many employers, the crisis is already here.



Riverside is one of three sites in Newton that local business leaders say need to be redeveloped to provide more housing for employees. (NICK ALLEN)

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