



February 4th, 2013

Gerald Autler, Senior Project Manager

Boston Redevelopment Authority

One City Hall Square

Boston, MA 02201

Re: Northeastern University Institutional Master Plan

Dear Mr. Autler,

The Fenway Civic Association, while supportive of several aspects of Northeastern University's IMP, believes that current iterations of the plan require substantial change before approval is considered. The Fenway has been restively waiting more than a decade for a resolution to the crisis created by off-campus student populations. FCA is disappointed that this IMP fails to place the importance of on-campus housing on equal footing with that of academic and student life space.

While we understand the university's pressing need for both academic and student life space, there must be an acknowledgement that it is the lack of sufficient on-campus housing that has been the primary source of concern for all of NEU's surrounding neighborhoods and that a means for addressing this serious problem must be laid out in the IMP. This crisis was recognized in the consensus-based zoning adopted for the Fenway in 2003. The East Fenway Strategic Plan specifically states two priorities: 1) Work to increase the supply of quality on-campus housing for students and staff, 2) Promote the idea that student residences in the neighborhood be returned to the market as new housing is built on-campus. We do not feel that these priorities are reflected in the IMP. While NEU has created some on-campus housing and developed effective countermeasures to inappropriate student behavior, the rate and scale of construction has not kept pace with the growth of the student off-campus housing population. A net withdrawal of students from the neighborhood has not been achieved. Unless this serious issue is addressed in the IMP, it misses the opportunity to provide neighborhood residents and

the City a permanent solution to perpetual student housing issues and fails to demonstrate a serious financial commitment to resolving the student-housing problem.

FCA views the pairing of an institution's residential and academic development as a best practice for master plan development. Possible creation of additional housing dispersed at the outer edges of campus without an overall plan or timetable for completing it relative to other projects is not reassuring---particularly when considering the projects within the IMP may not be completed during its term. This raises the very real possibility that no on-campus housing may be constructed unless there is an enforceable mechanism to predicate the creation of on-campus housing to the creation of non-housing projects. While it is evident the university does need space to accomplish some its larger projects, a well-defined residential construction plan would be far more effective than the existing scattered proposals. Without an enforceable on-campus housing commitment, the only other option to achieving equilibrium between enrollment and beds is through a temporary reduction or change in enrollment practices.

While critical of the IMP's housing provisions, FCA is supportive of various proposals to revamp existing campus fabric and would like to comment on several items:

- We believe replacement of the Columbus Avenue parking lot with a new world-class technology quadrangle and additional access over the Orange Line right of way is transformative and will be every bit as dramatic as the development of West Village. However, FCA questions why the Columbus Avenue garage was not considered as part of the redevelopment area. As the garage borders the proposed new quadrangle site, we do not understand why the cost of the additional underground parking required to permit demolition of the garage does not outweigh the ability to utilize this acreage for better use. FCA requests that this site be incorporated into the new quadrangle development as an added link uniting campus on both sides of the Orange Line.
- We view the transfer of land to the city for the expansion of Carter Field and the university's support in renovating the field as a very significant community benefit. Many of the area's passive parks see excessive wear and tear from ad hoc student uses due to a lack of available recreational space. Providing a well-maintained multi-use park will help alleviate some crowding and improper use of passive park spaces. We hope the City will ensure that the permitted usage remains the same as any other public park.

We would like to recognize the University's own beautifully landscaped campus as an asset for the enjoyment of everyone who passes through. We are grateful that NU understands the importance of well-maintained public space and for its willingness to assist with valuable financial, strategic, and in-kind support in many of our surrounding public parks.

- FCA views the relocation and consolidation of athletic and student life facilities to cluster at the Matthew's Arena area as a positive step to facilitating the redevelopment of the core of campus and abolishing the pedestrian unfriendly walls fronting Huntington Avenue and Forsyth Street. We do have concerns that the concentration of athletic facilities directly adjacent to Jordan Hall and the proposed expansion of performance space at NEC might create conflicts during events of differing natures. We also have some concern that this site is somewhat removed from the majority of on-campus housing and might see a diminished level of use as a result. However, we believe this use in what has been a dead space against the Orange Line right of way improves and creates an active entertainment sub district abutting what has been a dangerous and inactive path.
- We believe additional student life space alone will not address student behavior issues rooted in youthful boredom, and suggest that NEU explore ways to provide active opportunities including bowling, billiards, and other sought-after nightlife activities in order to offer healthy options.
- The opening up of the core of campus along Huntington Avenue created by relocation of the existing athletic quad and redevelopment of several of the buildings at the perimeter of the School of Law is a positive step to transform the character Huntington Avenue into pedestrian friendly and porous streetscape. The proposed replacement of several low-rise buildings with high density, mid to high-rise buildings surrounding courtyards penetrated with pathways is highly desirable. In this vein we strongly suggest, in addition to the scattered areas identified as potential housing sites (which may be developed coinciding with academic projects), that the development area comprised of the Cabot gymnasium and Forsyth building be explored for mixed use student housing as the major residential project of this IMP. We do realize this would be a later phase, requiring the shifting of the athletic facilities first; however, it could provide “a

light at the end of the tunnel” if combined with other housing construction accomplished at the scattered sites earlier in the IMP.

- The Cabot site is centrally located on campus and could accommodate a large-scale dormitory development of significant height without affecting the neighborhood. We question why proposed tower heights for this area are restricted out of a desire to “reduce impacts on Huntington Avenue”. The avenue abuts the Prudential Center with negligible effect and will potentially be adjacent to a similar, if not taller, Wentworth tower proposal at the existing Sweeney Field site. Why is this site not evaluated and designated high point, or crown of campus, to avoid pushing towers to the edge of campus? FCA much prefers campuses grow up rather than sprawl out, with the exception of casting shadows on parkland, and it would make sense to maximize height at this location given both its centrality and scope that this IMP hopes to encompass.
- We are concerned with an apparent lack of coordination between NEU, Wentworth Institute of Technology, and the Museum of Fine Arts regarding the triangular site currently occupied by Burstein & Rubenstein Halls and Sweeney Field. We ask that appropriate dialogue develop given Wentworth's current proposal to replace Sweeney Field and the scale of NEU's potential development on the MFA's doorstep.
- While concern for sustainability on campus is appreciated, FCA views LEED certification as costly, and prefers funds to be expended on sustainable features and practices rather than certification processes. We ask that special consideration of the abutting Back Bay Fens (a major bird migration route and year round habitat for over-wintering birds) be taken. Measures to incorporate bird safe glazing and other features into the design of all new campus projects and renovations are encouraged, and we urge the university to follow the LEED standards for bird-safe buildings in Pilot Credit 55: Bird Collision Deterrence.
<http://www.usgbc.org/ShowFile.aspx?DocumentID=10402>. NEU is bordered by the Emerald Necklace and the Southwest Corridor Park making it very appropriate for the university to be every bit as green as its environs.

FCA supports the potential for improvements to Forsyth Street and general plans for Huntington Avenue and other areas around campus. These proposals are great improvements to the public realm, the edges of campus, and the way campus interacts with the surrounding neighborhoods. However, we question why similar improvements are not proposed for two other public ways on campus: The Gainsborough Street corridor in its entirety is not part of the IMP despite NEU owning property at every intersection except Huntington Avenue. As Gainsborough Street is the only through pedestrian route for several blocks, we ask the university to undertake efforts to improve access with a new crosswalk at Hemenway Street and improved accessibility at the other intersections with which it has abutting property. We also believe the alley between the Fenway and Hemenway Street bordered by three NEU properties, most notably Melvin & Smith Halls, should be upgraded into a more pleasing, safe, and handicap accessible passage.

- Regarding transportation issues, FCA suggests that NEU provide on-campus bike parking and repair stations similar to those pioneered locally by MIT and Berklee College of Music. This will serve to reduce street clutter, abandonment of bicycles, and use of cars by students within the neighborhoods. We also believe to the university should partner with MassBike, or one of the other advocacy groups, to offer safety courses to students and reduce the incidents of pedestrian, automobile, and cyclist conflicts within the neighborhood.
- In review of the other new proposed community benefits, FCA asks that should the university proceed with proposals for local purchasing, revolving loan funds, hiring, etc. that these benefits be available equitably to all neighborhoods with which the university interacts and affects. The new community affairs team has been responsive to inquiries & concerns and we believe a monthly community council meeting could be a productive entity for resolving issues and discussing ongoing community benefits.
- Regarding non-institutional related uses of campus property or investment FCA has several comments: We do not wish any ‘endowment campus’ type projects to be built on NEU owned land until sufficient on-campus housing is provided to satisfy a quorum of neighborhood groups, with an exception to the long standing hotel proposal at Parcel 18. FCA does not approve of institutional leasing of land for profit unless it has already satisfied the demand for on campus housing and sufficient open space to support student needs. We disapprove of institutional sale

or transference of land unless it is to other institutions or for projects seen as a community benefit, such as the cession of land to expand Carter Field.

FCA prefers to eliminate the leasing space of off-campus space, unless from other institutions, out of temporary need due to construction or in the process of facilitating developments beneficial to neighborhoods such as Parcel 3 Roxbury Square. We do not want the university creating a commercial space bubble similar to the housing bubble, which might force local employers or businesses out of the neighborhoods, and view limitations of leasing as another check on institutional expansion.

- Concerning residential master leasing, FCA supports master leasing at properties where it has occurred previously. While we do not like having housing stock occupied by students, FCA would rather have the university retain culpability and enforcement capabilities in occupied housing stock than not. This housing should not be included in the overall on-campus housing total and ultimately must be phased out with mandated on-campus housing construction goals.
- We ask that further acquisition of existing residential zoned buildings in the neighborhood cease with work towards conversion of off-site existing dormitories and apartment buildings into faculty and staff housing as on-campus housing develops. This will serve to shift employment to local residents, allow employees to become local residents, and support the university's connection and investment in the neighborhood. While FCA views the construction of student housing as a short-term community benefit, we consider the opportunity for staff & faculty housing and promotion of homeownership in the neighborhood a highly desirable long-term community benefit.
- With regard to all properties NEU owns within the neighborhoods, FCA wishes the university to continue to improve and maintain buildings in keeping with their original character. Wooden doors, aesthetically appropriate lighting, and landscaping instead of concrete, help to maintain the feel of a residential neighborhood. The recent renovations at Northeastern's St. Stephen Street properties and Melvin & Kerr Hall on the Fenway area good examples of this. FCA firmly believes that maintaining the historic dignity and residential character of the neighborhood

architecture & landscaping helps improve the perception, respect, and quality of life of residents and visitors alike.

While FCA supports many items in the current IMP, we maintain that improvements to a campus and the interaction of its edges with the neighborhood, no matter how wonderful, do not alleviate the effects and interactions the student population has WITHIN the neighborhood. We cannot support this IMP's approval unless NEU is willing to adjust the IMP filing to include a robust housing plan to coincide with the other proposals.

FCA hopes these comments, questions, concerns, and suggestions will be addressed and have been constructive in further developing this IMP filing.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Matthew A. Brooks".

Matthew A. Brooks

NEU IMP Task Force, Fenway Civic Association board