



MEMO

TO: Devens Jurisdiction Committee
FROM: Peter Lowitt, FAICP Director, Devens Enterprise Commission
DATE: November 4, 2021
RE: Why Rezone Vicksburg Square to allow residential uses in the near term

The Town of Harvard has requested that the component members of the Devens Jurisdiction Committee, one of whom is the DEC, provide a list of pros and cons for rezoning Vicksburg Square in the near term. The Commission met to discuss this issue and voted at its meeting to November 4, 2021 to send a summary of the discussion points to the Devens Jurisdiction Committee for their consideration:

- Without an intervention in the near term, the National Register buildings comprising Vicksburg Square will succumb to the elements.
- **Agreed. This supports the need to deal with the issue of permanent government in the near term in conjunction with rezoning.**
- The Governor has declared a housing emergency and has repeatedly shown the connection between the availability of housing and successful economic development.
- **Agreed. And first time homebuyers are an equally important part of the needed housing mix.**
- Prior market studies and over twenty years of efforts to sell the property under its current Innovation Technology Center zoning have all stated that the property needs to be rezoned to residential in order to redevelop it.
- **Agreed**
- Vicksburg Square is the iconic emblem of the former Fort Devens and representative of the US Army's presence in New England.
- **Agreed**
- Past efforts brought to town meeting have shown a viable path to redevelop these properties using a combination of Historic Tax Credits and Low Income Tax Credits.
- **Both of these development options programmatically exclude homeownership which would leave the Devens residential community with over 60% of all housing as rental housing.**
- Redevelopment will have multiple regional benefits, including twenty five percent of the units redeveloped will be deed restricted to count towards the underlying communities low income and workforce housing requirements.

- **An important factor, but not an overriding consideration. While the towns struggle to achieve the 10% goal, is it fair to place so much of that burden on to the Devens community which according to the Reuse Plan must have 25% of its housing as affordable.**
- Mixed use should be considered by MassDevelopment to help underwrite the redevelopment costs for the project. Allowing some minor retail uses should be discussed. Limited retail should be discussed and input sought by MassDevelopment as part of their rezoning process for Vicksburg Square. The Commissioners encourage MassDevelopment to continue to meet with the host communities and seek input into the rezoning process.
- **Agreed**
- The region needs the affordable and workforce housing component to support its continued growth and economic development. Housing will attract people for the jobs within the Devens Regional Enterprise Zone and surrounding communities.
- **The average annual income of the Devens workforce, according to the 2020 report of the Donahue Institute at UMass, is over \$90,000. The Reuse Plan requires that any housing developed at Devens shall have an affordable housing component, again should Devens be asked to bear a disproportionate affordable housing burden in order to address the housing needs of the region?**
- Housing is currently not available or affordable in our communities.
- **Overstated here, but nonetheless a real issue for Devens and the towns**
- There is a need for rental housing. Shirley Meadows is restricted to deeply affordable senior rental housing. The Emerson Village Green rental housing is permitted, but has yet to be built but would still not meet the current demand.
- **One of the reasons why we are seeing a shortage of rental housing and escalating rents is that many who today live in rental housing would have by now moved on to homeownership had affordable opportunities existed. Also, the lack of wealth among individuals and families of color can be largely attributed to the historic lack of access to home ownership.**
- If the iconic buildings of Vicksburg Square are not preserved through rezoning and utilized, it will reflect poorly on the Commonwealth's redevelopment efforts and the businesses will take notice of this failure to invest in the area's future.
- **Agreed. Again, this supports the need to deal with the issue of permanent government in the near term in conjunction with rezoning.**
- The demand for housing of all types is through the roof. The Governor's housing initiative and legislation to change how housing is voted on in town meeting (changing it to a simple majority for rezoning efforts) illustrates the need for action and the legislature's support for efforts to create more housing.

- **The good news is that at Devens, it only takes a simple majority to change zoning, the bad news, according to some developers, is that it take all three towns to agree by simple majority, simultaneously, to change zoning.**
- The Nashoba Valley Chamber of Commerce is on record as supporting the rezoning of Vicksburg Square in the near term.
- **That is good.**
- The Commissioners believe there are no negatives to rezoning as quickly as possible.
- **That is surprising.**
- Rezoning and the adaptive reuse of the Vicksburg Square buildings will help Devens meet the Reuse Plan sustainable redevelopment goals as well as the greenhouse gas emission reduction goals of the Devens Forward Climate Action and Resilience Plan through the adaptive reuse of these historic structures and the retention of the embodied energy in the existing buildings.
- **Agreed.**
- The rezoning will bring in additional residents who will help support the region's businesses and the Town of Ayer's West Ayer Village redevelopment which includes retail.
- **Agreed.**
- Regional affordable and workforce housing goals (helping both Ayer and Harvard meet their goals)
- **Ayer and Harvard should help Devens by supporting a balance housing production plan including rental housing and homeownership, both with affordable housing components.**
- Opportunities for additional regional support services (veterans housing and senior housing, mixed in with market-rate apartments)
- **It should not be a surprise that many veterans and seniors want to own their homes as well.**
- Devens has the existing infrastructure to support this density of development
- **Agreed**
- Urgent need for rezoning was repeated by the Commission throughout the meeting.
- **Then, let's make it happen by crafting a better plan, not merely taking the path of seemingly least resistance being driven by developers of large scale rental housing.**