

February 23, 2021

To: Boxborough Building Committee
CC: Boxborough Select Board

From: Diana Lipari
394 Littlefield Road
Boxborough MA 01719

Re: Proposed Public Safety Building

First let me say that as a citizen of Boxborough, I congratulate the current and past members of the Boxborough Building Committee (BBC) and the Boxborough Select Board (BSB) for the years of hard work and dedication to the Public Safety Building Project. It is never easy to take on any project, especially one as complicated and impactful to the Town as is this project. That having been said, I feel that it is important to reconsider the Public Safety Building proposal as a whole and, in particular, the site at 72 Stow Road that seems to be favored at the moment. I have attached several documents to this email for your convenience even though the first three documents listed below are accessible on the Town website.

An Alternative Scenario for the Public Safety Buildings

While I appreciate that a preference over the years has been for a combined facility for police and fire, etc., that option was defeated at Town Meeting in 2016 resulting in an update to the BBC's mandate. Per the "*Boxborough Building Committee Report [update], May 8, 2017*":

"At Town Meeting last May, it became clear that voters were not satisfied with the options before them for meeting the space needs of our Police (PD) and Fire Departments (FD). In particular, they were not satisfied that building a single Public Safety Building for both PD and FD is the best alternative."

The first of the three preliminary recommendations was:

" 1. Identify and acquire a suitable parcel of land on Mass Ave and build a new 16,500 SF fire station. Considering requirements for parking, well, fire suppression, and septic systems this will require about 4 acres."

It then concluded:

“Addressing the Town’s needs in stages, beginning with the acquisition of a new site for the Fire Department, would ensure that we do not build more than we need sooner than we must.”

Why has that conclusion been ignored especially in light of the fact that the Town was willing to build only a Fire Station at 1414 Massachusetts Avenue in 2019 if an agreement with Lincoln Property had been reached re zoning changes? Based on my conversations with other Boxborough citizens, I don’t think the BBC will get a lot of support at Town Meeting for a combined facility. Simply building a Fire Station at this point, seems to be the general feeling expressed in Town.

So, what happens if we only build a Fire Station? I would like to offer an alternative scenario for your consideration.

- A.) Build the Fire Station first (preferably on a site other than 72 Stow Road).
- B.) Renovate the current Fire Station as a Police Station or build a new building on that site for that purpose.
- C.) Renovate/reconfigure the current Police Station as the new Community Center for Boxborough Citizens.

The advantages of this scenario are:

1. Funding the project in stages.
2. Siting the Fire Station on the main road away from residences made possible because a smaller parcel could be used.
3. Siting the Police Station also on the main thoroughfare in Town and across from Blanchard School for increased visibility of Town law enforcement.
4. Reusing two of the buildings and/or sites already owned by the Town.
5. Preserving the 72 Stow Road parcel for its intended purpose of affordable housing.

700 Massachusetts Avenue vs. 72 Stow Road

I believe the 700 Massachusetts Avenue parcel is the logical place for the Fire Station, not the 72 Stow Road property. I have many reasons for this preference which mirror comments that you have already heard from others in Town.

- 72 Stow Road was acquired by the Housing Board for \$850,000 in 2000 (using funds from the Boxborough Affordable Housing Trust Fund) for the purpose of placing a small number of affordable housing units on the property. The

following is a link to an interesting article in the Beacon from 2000 regarding that purchase:

<https://boxborough.wickedlocal.com/article/20110119/NEWS/301199684>.

While I understand that fulfilling this mission has been difficult, it seems too bad to abandon it now if another parcel can be found for the Fire Station.

- 72 Stow Road is not “free” to the Town in the sense that the Housing Board would have to be compensated in some fashion for this parcel. This is a legal matter since the Housing Board operates per Massachusetts Law. I have heard that counsel has been consulted on this issue. In any case, this “transfer” or “purchase” would still have to be approved at Town Meeting.
- 72 Stow is currently zoned AR (Agricultural Residential). It is a residential parcel next to and behind other residential parcels and directly across the street from the senior citizen development, Tisbury Meadow and Sheriff’s Meadow. Several of those residents have expressed concerns about noise and traffic resulting from 72 Stow Road if public buildings are built on that site.
- 72 Stow Road also borders in close proximity to a parcel with three apartment buildings. Although the parcel on the corner at 688 Massachusetts Avenue is zoned “Business,” it nonetheless has apartments on it with Boxborough residents who might also suffer from the additional noise and traffic from a Stow Road development with public buildings.
- The residents along Stow Road are rightly concerned with the increase in traffic from the Enclave on Stow Road and with the concerns for the Massachusetts Avenue intersection with Stow and Middle Road. The Enclave traffic study cited 4 crashes there between 2015 and 2018.
- 700 Massachusetts Avenue is one of the last remaining parcels in the Town zoned “Town Center.” It was zoned this way for obvious reasons. This is the center of Town. Adding a beautiful, New England style building on this parcel would add visual substance and gravity to the “Rural Town Center” concept recommended in the UMass study and heartily approved by Town residents.
- 700 Massachusetts Avenue is on the main throughfare in Town. Such a parcel has been sought by the Building Committee for many years as the site for the Fire Station. The Town should not miss this opportunity to acquire this parcel subject to it having the needed buildable/useable acreage for the Fire Station, a reasonable purchase price and availability for construction by the Town within a relatively quick time frame.

Suitability of 700 Massachusetts Avenue for A Fire Station

As I expressed at the BBC meeting on February 17th regarding the Town Planner’s review of the alternative site at 700 Massachusetts Avenue, I do not believe proper attention was given to a possible buildable area on that parcel closer to Massachusetts Avenue between the two wetland areas. I explained that there were engineered documents produced in connection with the original Town Center development that showed a

planned road, clubhouse, pool and parking areas (among other buildings and sport courts); these plans show that this same area could be large enough to accommodate a reasonable footprint for a sizeable building. I have not been able to calculate that area accurately simply from these plans but a cursory look at the size of the clubhouse, pool and parking areas seem to show a 10,000 plus square foot rectangular area that could easily support a building with that footprint. This document is still listed on the Planning Board's page under "Current Projects and Applications" with the 700 Massachusetts Ave address, but I have attached the "*Revised 2017 Site Plan for the Enclave at 700-800 Massachusetts Avenue*" to this memorandum for your convenience; you will find a detail on page 5 of this document showing the clubhouse area that I reference.

I agree that this parcel is probably not big enough for a combined Public Safety Building with a 27,000-35000 square feet footprint. It could, however, be very suitable for a Fire Station with single story bays for vehicles and a two-story component for offices, training rooms and living quarters.

Regarding the sight line issue for this parcel, in recent Building Committee Meetings it was stated that the 700 Massachusetts Avenue parcel is unsuitable because of previously raised traffic safety concerns dating back to the originally proposed 2017 Boxborough Town Center, LLC 100 home senior community (which projected approximately 175 senior drivers entering and exiting onto Mass. Avenue daily). It is important to examine the context and specifics of the issues raised at that time and whether they are relevant to this very different context. The primary issue that citizens commented on in 2017 was particular to seniors requiring additional stopping distance because of their presumably slower perception reaction time. Some citizens believed that because of this a different standard for sight distance needed to be met beyond the typically accepted one. The current Public Safety Building proposal is an entirely different situation. It is not a dense senior community; it is possible the driveway may be situated differently; and the additional lights/signage accompanying a Fire Station could possibly mitigate traffic safety issues. Additionally, the construction access road leading to the Enclave from Massachusetts Avenue has been elevated at the location where it meets Massachusetts Avenue to provide a safer exit and entrance for the construction vehicles. Traffic safety in this context must be reexamined with a new professional study.

In short, 700 Massachusetts Avenue does show some promise as a site for the Fire Station but more detailed information is needed. The property's owners, *Boxborough Town Center LLC*, should provide exact and detailed information from its engineers regarding the dimensions/plat map of the parcel to be acquired, buildable area on the parcel close to Massachusetts Avenue and further upland (regarding wetlands and other features requiring buffers or setbacks), the purchase price, availability for transfer of ownership and any other specifics that would make this parcel useful and attractive for the Town to consider its purchase

Now I want to look at the second and third phases of my proposed “Alternative Scenario”: The Police Station and the Community Center. I will discuss them in the context of the information provided in “*The Public Safety Space Needs Assessment from May 2015* (hereinafter the “2015 Study”).

The Police Station - Renovate the current Fire Station

The *2015 Study* stated that the Fire Station was in fair condition and the Police Station was in good condition, stressing that both buildings would require significant renovations to bring them up to current code. That having been said, both buildings were evaluated as costing less with renovations than new construction.

In the *2015 Study*, significant additions were proposed for the Fire Station (for a combined facility) “to the north and west of the existing apparatus bays and a small addition to the north of the existing administration/living area.” These possible additions are important to note given the oft cited problem of wetlands on the Fire Station property when evaluating its use for a Police Station.

The current Fire Station has 8469 square feet, with a current footprint of approximately 6500 square feet. The proposed size of the Police Station in the *2015 Study* was 10,179 square feet with some additional square footage (possibly about 3200 square feet) if not built as part of a combined facility. This totals a proposed size for the Police Station of approximately 13,400. The current Fire Department building could be increased to the approximately 13,400 square feet per the above-mentioned proposed additions. I believe wetlands are not an issue if the building is renovated with additions outside of the wetland buffer zone.

The Police Station - Build a new building on the site of the current Fire Station

If a new building is required for the Police Station on the current Fire Department site, the setback for the wetlands and floodplain comes into play. While I don’t have access to a map showing the wetlands in total with the required 100-foot buffer zone, it would appear that only the southeast corner of this parcel is seriously impacted by wetlands and floodplain. I have heard that the buffer zone actually goes through the current building, but again it would appear to be only in the southeast corner of the building.

The current Fire Station of 8469 square feet has a partial two-story component. Its footprint is approximately 6500 square feet. Assuming a new two-story building of 13,400 square feet for the Police Station, the footprint of that new building would come very close to the footprint of the existing building. One might assume that moving the new building to a location outside of the wetland’s buffer zone should be possible since we are talking about a 2-acre parcel with a lot of room to move north of the wetlands

towards Massachusetts Avenue and to the west portion of the parcel. Given that the Town owns the neighboring parcel on the west side, any setback issues between the parcels could probably be overcome if necessary.

The Community Center - Renovate/Reconfigure the Current Police Station

The existing Police Station building has a total of 4613 square feet in a two-story configuration (per the *2015 Study*). This would seem to be an acceptable size for a Community Center with a little interior reconfiguration and other necessary renovations.

Public Safety Buildings - What Does Boxborough Really Need?

The last question, and really the most important and decisive question for a proper analysis and evaluation of parcel size and suitability is “What are the real and reasonable space needs for these public safety buildings given the Town’s land area and the current and projected population of Boxborough?” This project was begun seven years ago with the expectation that Boxborough was growing at a significant rate. That has not occurred. By the BBC’s own data, the current population of 5213 is only projected to grow by a little over 260 people by 2040. Even if the Town grows to 6,000 or 7,000 people should we be building such big facilities?

I have attached two other documents that speak to this question of size; they concern the new Police Station for Sudbury that was constructed in 2017. The first is entitled “*Proposed Police Headquarters Frequently Asked Questions.*” The second is the “*Final Report Sudbury Police Station Blue Ribbon Committee.*” The recommendation from the Sudbury Blue Ribbon Committee was for a 14,540 square foot two-story station with a footprint of 8329 square feet. The project cost was just under \$7M although I believe the ultimate cost was about \$8M. The important point here is that this building was planned for 29 officers with growth expected to be 35 officers in the future. Currently the new Sudbury Police Station is used by 40 employees (officers and staff). It is really important to note that this size was designed for a town that has an approximate population of 19,000 people with a town area of over 25 square miles. Sudbury also has significantly more commercial properties than Boxborough. Should Boxborough plan to build an equally sized Police Station with one-third the population and less than half the land area of Sudbury?

Similar questions can be asked concerning the reasonable size for a new Fire Station. The Town of Westford recently built a new Fire Station. It was just over 19,000 square feet for a population of approximately 25,000, a land area of over 33 square miles and a significant number of commercial properties. The *2015 Study* recommended a Fire Station of 18,362 square feet with approximately an additional 3200 square feet (if not in a combined public safety building). Does Boxborough need

anything close to a 22,500 square foot Fire Station with one-fifth the population and one-third the land area of Westford? The answer seems obvious.

Certainly, a more detailed comparison should be made making sure that the data separately compares the number of officers/firefighters, clerical staff, communications staff and overall employees across the town comparisons. Also pertinent is the amount and nature of commercial properties in those towns and other factors such as the height of buildings and the town area to be covered. Additionally, it is important to consider how many people will occupy the space at any given time; this is a crucial component of the analysis because police and fire departments rely on shifts and “per diem” personnel.

In conclusion, I hope that the BBC will seriously consider what I have discussed in this memo and remain open to new directions and new ideas from all Boxborough citizens. Again, thank you for your service to the Town.

Documents Attached:

- 1.) **Boxborough Building Committee [update], May 8, 2017**
- 2.) **Public Safety Space Needs Assessment, May 1, 2015**
- 3.) **Revised 2017 Site Plan for the Enclave at 700-800 Massachusetts Avenue**
- 4.) **Proposed Police Headquarters Frequently Asked Questions [Sudbury]**
- 5.) **Final Report Sudbury Police Station Blue Ribbon Committee**