

April 8, 2019

via email

Councilors Gregory Schwartz, Richard Lipof, Maria Greenberg, Jacob Auchincloss, Andrea Kelly, Christopher Markiewicz, Deborah Crossley, and Marc Laredo

Land Use Committee
Newton City Hall
1000 Commonwealth Avenue
Newton, MA 02459

Re: Petitions #425-18 & 426-18

SHUTTLE BUSES

Dear Councilors Schwartz, Lipof, Greenberg, Auchincloss, Kelly, Markiewicz, Crossley, and Laredo,

As detailed in the other letters from RightsizeNewton to this committee, Northland's proposed development will result in a dramatic increase in vehicular traffic and fails to provide an adequate amount of parking for the size of the development. Northland attempts to mitigate these concerns by proposing a "Robust Shuttle Service" that aims to dramatically shift the mode of transportation split ("mode-split"), so that it can claim fewer vehicle trips will be generated by the site than the actual data suggests. At present, 82% of Newton residents and 88% of employees working in Newton use their own private cars; Northland claims it can magically reduce those numbers so that instead only 60% of residents, and 60% of office employees, would use their own vehicles.¹

Northland's own traffic study projects that the proposed development will more than double the number of vehicle trips currently generated by the project site.² So, Northland relies primarily on its ambitious shuttle proposal because it has no other way to convince the City that the number of vehicle trips will not increase so dramatically.³

Neither Northland, nor its transportation partner the 128 Business Council, can show that they have successfully implemented such a shuttle bus program elsewhere that achieved the results they are projecting. Northland cannot, and has not, pointed to such a successful system elsewhere in a location with similar demographics and has not provided any data to support its estimates. Indeed, in its

¹ Vehicle use by "Retail" employees, approximately one-third of the total (134/396) would nevertheless not be reduced. See Tables 4 and 8, VHB Memorandum dated March 28, 2019, available at: <http://www.newtonma.gov/civicax/filebank/documents/96175> ("VHB Memo Mar 28, 2019").

² See Table 1 and Table 2 on pages 3 and 4 of VHB Memo Mar 28, 2019. The number of unadjusted vehicle trips increases from 6,249 to 12,846 (weekday daily), 379 to 668 (weekday morning), 583 to 1,128 (weekday evening), 7,064 to 12,966 (Saturday daily), and 523 to 1,129 (Saturday midday).

³ Id; see Table 8 on page 10.

response to BETA's peer review of its transportation proposal,⁴ Northland states that "there is not good data that we are aware of that fully support the percentages outlined" and that even under best conditions, "the reality is that the actual [mode-split] is likely to be something in-between the existing and that represented under the Robust Shuttle scenario."⁵ Further, Northland makes it clear that "no data exists regarding projected percentage [public transportation] ridership gain."⁶

Newton's Planning Department, in its memo dated April 5, 2019, states that "staff still has concerns regarding the effectiveness of the proposed shuttle system," citing in particular the long headways for many of the routes and that "[t]o be successful, walking, biking, or taking transit will need to be a more attractive option than driving or relying on Uber or Lyft."⁷

In fact, Northland's proposed 60-minute headways for the "Cambridge Express" and "Boston Express" routes and 30-45 minute headways on the "Newton Circulator" route⁸ make them unattractive options for commuters (the penalty of being an hour late for work when missing a bus is too much). The 128 Business Council's own survey regarding public transportation use showed respondents expressing "dissatisfaction with the frequency of service" as one of the main concerns.⁹ Limiting the operating hours of the shuttles to "provide service primarily during commuting hours"¹⁰ further limits the effectiveness of the service. And, Northland's newly-proposed "Newton Highlands" route, which is scheduled to run on a 20-minute schedule during peak hours¹¹ cannot possibly achieve this level of service without utilizing multiple buses.¹²

However, the biggest problem with Northland's proposed shuttle bus system is that it would have to compete with far more convenient offerings from Transportation Network Companies (TNCs) such as Uber and Lyft. As can be seen in the attached Figures 1 – 4, TNCs can be used as on-demand transportation mimicking the proposed shuttle routes for between \$4.89 and \$25.43 per trip, depending on level of service and distance travelled. While shuttle buses could certainly be priced lower than these amounts, the inherent uncertainty due to limited space and long headways of the shuttle buses and the inherent on-demand convenience of TNCs make the TNCs a more attractive alternative for many.

⁴ VHB Memorandum, dated February 12, 2019, available at:

<http://www.newtonma.gov/civicax/filebank/documents/95502>

⁵ Id; response to comment #2.21

⁶ Id; response to comment #7.18

⁷ Id; page 5.

⁸ Id; page 6.

⁹ See page 55 of Northland's Transportation Implementation Plan, dated October 16, 2018, available at:

<http://www.newtonma.gov/civicax/filebank/documents/92315>

¹⁰ See page 3 of Summary of TDM Provisions, dated March 28, 2019, available at:

<http://www.newtonma.gov/civicax/filebank/documents/96176>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² The distance between Northland's proposed Mobility Hub and the Newton Highlands MBTA station is approximately 1.2 miles. As can be seen in comment #2.16 of BETA's Transportation Engineering Peer Review of Northland's transportation plan, available at: <http://www.newtonma.gov/civicax/filebank/documents/94582>, traffic along Needham Street moves at 4-5 miles per hour during peak periods, meaning that a bus would require 36 minutes of driving to complete the loop, not counting time needed to park and load/unload passengers.

The Planning Department recommends holding this project “to a higher standard,” and proposes that the project, if approved, be conditioned “so that [Northland] is required to meet a certain performance standard.”¹³ However, as noted above, none of the parties are able to articulate how Northland is to meet that standard and what actions could be taken if the residents and employees of the proposed development maintain the trend of using primarily their personal vehicles (or TNCs) as their preferred mode of transportation, regardless of any shuttle bus routes. As the 128 Business Council cogently recognized, “[i]f someone owns a car, they will use it – even when other transportation modes are available.”¹⁴

Moreover, previous attempts have been unsuccessful. Newton has tried this before with the Newton Nexus bus service, which failed. The MBTA runs bus service connecting Needham Street to the Newton Highlands MBTA station, but this service has not produced the dramatic shift that Northland hopes to produce with its shuttle bus service.

What Northland is proposing is an experiment to determine whether shuttle buses can reduce suburban society’s reliance on the automobile in a way that has failed in the past. If this project is approved and Northland’s experiment fails, there will be no way to mitigate the traffic nightmare that most certainly will result. Northland, like others, simply cannot find an alternate way to mitigate “the first/last mile problem that arises when potential transit riders are located more than a comfortable walking distance from transit.”¹⁵

In light of the past failures to shift the mode-splits towards public transportation, and in light of the many shortcomings of Northland’s proposed shuttle bus service, it would be wholly irresponsible to approve this large project based on nothing but a hope that the shuttle service will be able to achieve results that no data or other experience support.

Thank you,



Leon Schwartz
Carl Street
Newton Highlands
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cc: Nadia Khan

¹³ See page 6 of the Newton Planning Department Memorandum dated April 5, 2019, available at:

<http://www.newtonma.gov/civicax/filebank/documents/96257>

¹⁴ See page 34 of Northland’s Transportation Impact and Access Study, dated October 2018, available at:

<http://www.newtonma.gov/civicax/filebank/documents/92313>

¹⁵ See page 6 of the Newton Planning Department Memorandum dated April 5, 2019, available at:

<http://www.newtonma.gov/civicax/filebank/documents/96257>

Uber price estimator

● 281 Needham St, Newton Upper Falls, MA

■ Newtonville, Newton, MA

Popular rides All rides

Pool	\$7.07	ⓘ
UberX	\$10.64	ⓘ
Taxi	\$17.85	ⓘ

Sample rider prices are estimates only and do not reflect variations due to discounts, traffic delays, or other factors. Flat rates and minimum fees may apply. Actual prices may vary.

[Sign up to ride →](#)

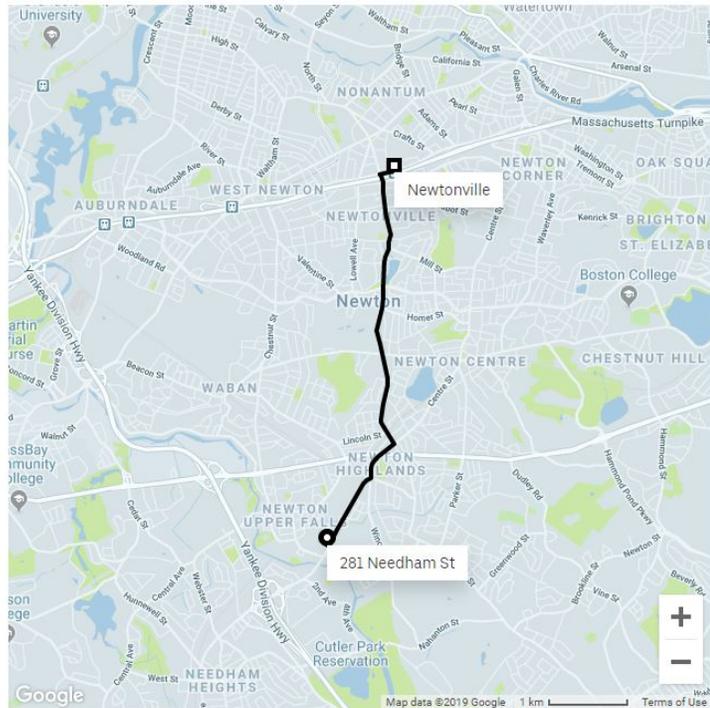


Figure 1: Cost estimate for using Uber to travel the Newton Circulator route

Uber price estimator

● 281 Needham St, Newton Upper Falls, MA

■ Newton Highlands - MBTA Station, Newton Highlands, MA

Popular rides All rides

Pool	\$4.81	ⓘ
UberX	\$6.85	ⓘ
Taxi	\$9.32	ⓘ

Sample rider prices are estimates only and do not reflect variations due to discounts, traffic delays, or other factors. Flat rates and minimum fees may apply. Actual prices may vary.

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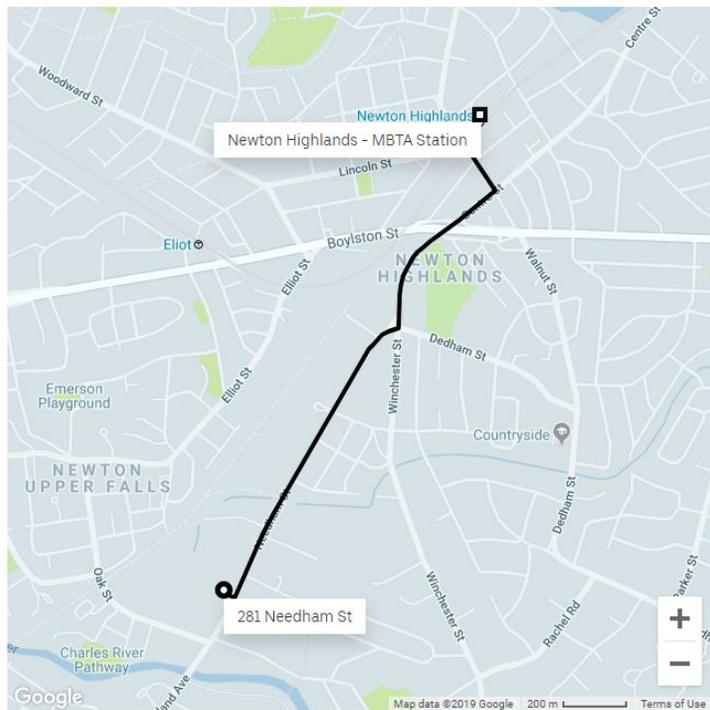


Figure 2: Cost estimate for using Uber to travel the Newton Highlands route

Uber price estimator

● 281 Needham St, Newton Upper Falls, MA ×

■ Kendall Square, Cambridge, MA ×

Popular rides All rides

Pool	\$16.80	ⓘ
UberX	\$24.44	ⓘ
UberXL	\$51.11	ⓘ

Sample rider prices are estimates only and do not reflect variations due to discounts, traffic delays, or other factors. Flat rates and minimum fees may apply. Actual prices may vary.

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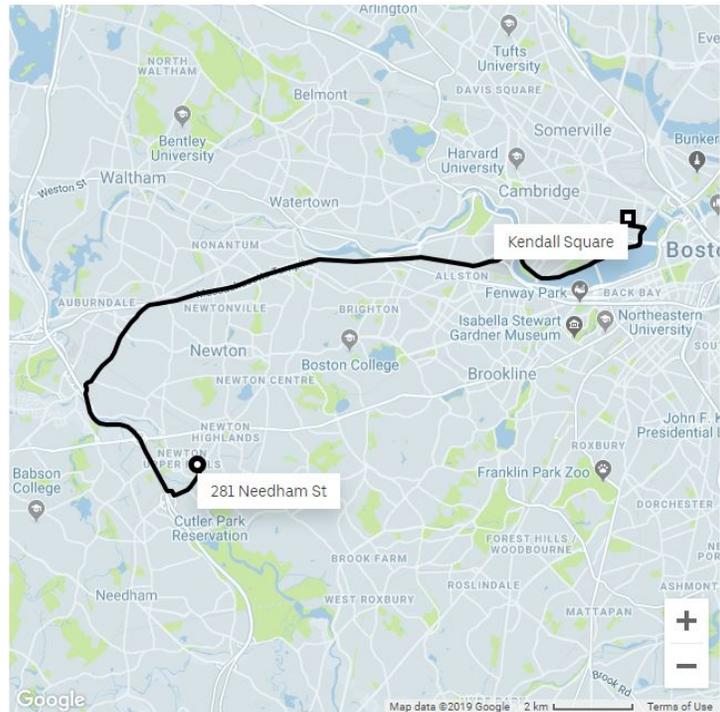


Figure 3: Cost estimate for using Uber to travel the Cambridge Express route

Uber price estimator

● 281 Needham St, Newton Upper Falls, MA ×

■ Seaport District, Boston, MA ×

Popular rides All rides

Pool	\$18.74	ⓘ
UberX	\$25.43	ⓘ
UberXL	\$49.21	ⓘ

Sample rider prices are estimates only and do not reflect variations due to discounts, traffic delays, or other factors. Flat rates and minimum fees may apply. Actual prices may vary.

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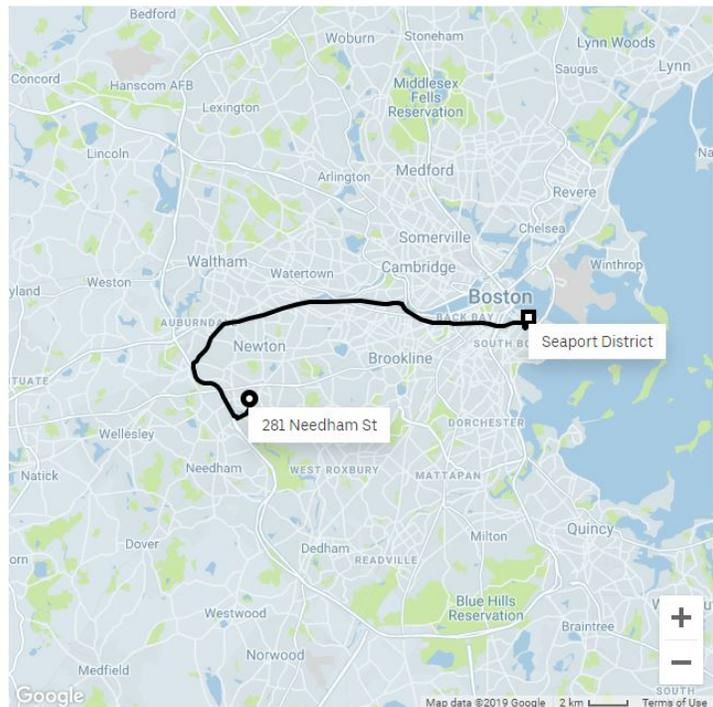


Figure 4: Cost estimate for using Uber to travel the Boston Express route