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## N2 Innovation District A Lopsided Success

Needham Embraces The New While Newton Digs In

By [Scott Van Voorhis](#) | Banker & Tradesman Columnist | Oct 2, 2016

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**SharkNinja, currently located in Newton, has announced plans to move into a new headquarters being built for the company at Needham Crossing.**

You have to wonder how many new homes, jobs and businesses over the years Massachusetts has lost out on thanks to the rather virulent form of NIMBYism that infects so much of our state. If you are wondering how much economic damage rampant NIMBYism has caused, just take a look at the fledgling N2 tech corridor along Route 128.

Local business leaders launched N2 – originally dubbed the N2 Corridor and renamed the N2 Innovation District in early September – along the highway where Needham meets Newton to attract the innovation economy jobs that too often bypassed the suburbs in a stampede for Kendall Square.

The Needham side of N2 has been a spectacular success, with an explosion in new, tech-company driven development and badly needed housing.

But on the Newton side of the corridor, where the Wells Avenue Office Park overlooks Route 128, development has lagged, despite some promising signs of interest by real estate investors.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out the difference.

Needham has welcomed new development with open arms on its side of N2, while Newton has fought it, inexplicably battling to a standstill plans to build hundreds of new apartments in what has been a half-empty business park.

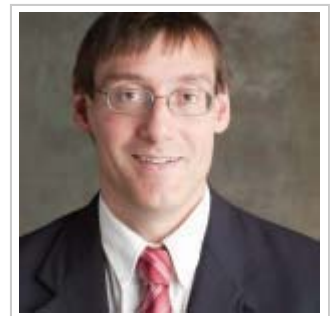
### A Recipe For Success

N2 is made up of three sites: the old Needham Crossing business park; the Wells Avenue Office Park on the Newton side of the corridor; and a stretch of acreage just off Needham Street in Newton that is being primed for redevelopment.

So far, Needham Crossing has been the star of the show, thanks in large part to open-minded and relatively far-sighted policies pursued by Needham officials.

Trip Advisor now has 900 employees working out of its new headquarters building, with plans to add hundreds more in future expansion.

In another major coup, SharkNinja, currently located in Newton, has announced plans to move into a new headquarters being built for the company at Needham Crossing, with plans for as many as 700 employees there.



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There are now two hotels at the site – a Sheraton and a Residence Hotel – with the possibility of two more down the line. Plans are taking shape for 390 apartments as well, with Needham officials making clear they are interested in creating an urban-style, mixed-use neighborhood.

So what's driving this success story?

For starters, it doesn't hurt there is just one owner/developer, with Normandy Real Estate Partners having bought the business park from General Dynamics. That makes master planning a lot easier.

But Needham officials have played a big role, including rezoning the area for mixed-used development. That has enabled Normandy to not just build out office space, but to create a full-fledged, vibrant neighborhood.

And, in a successful bid to convince Trip Advisor to build its headquarters at Needham Crossing, town officials came through with a key tax break.

## **Appeasing The NIMBYies**

Just over the town line at the Wells Avenue Office Park in Newton, there is certainly activity, with one key owner renovating his holdings and real estate investors coming in to snap up other buildings.

Yet unless or until Newton officials take a different – and frankly braver – approach, the future of the office park is likely to fall short of the lively new mixed-use neighborhood taking shape just over the town line in Needham.

Newton officials have gone to court to successfully challenge plans by developer Cabot, Cabot and Forbes to build hundreds of apartments at the office park. The city has offered all sorts of cockamamie reasons for opposing the proposal, but it fits a larger pattern that has seen NIMBY concerns derail a number of new housing proposals in Needham, with the acquiescence or backing of city officials.

In a city where the median home price is well over \$1 million, it's not hard to imagine that apartments – and the people who rent them – are seen as less than desirable neighbors. It is an ugly undercurrent that can be found in towns and suburbs across the Boston area when it comes to new housing, especially of the rental variety.

But for an otherwise smart, sophisticated and politically savvy city, it is an extremely blinkered and short-sighted approach.

The fact is companies don't want to move into boring, single-use, suburban office parks anymore. Given the option, they will choose a mixed-used development, with an array of restaurants, shops, hotels and yes, apartments too. It's hard enough to recruit young tech talent in the suburbs, especially given the allure of everything urban to the Millennial generation.

Needham is jumping onto a larger and successful trend that is transforming aging and underused development sites across the Boston area. One need look no farther than a trio of big projects taking shape along 128 – University Station in Westwood, Northwest Park in Burlington and 1265 Main in Waltham – to see the future of office development taking shape.

But Newton has opted instead to go the NIMBY route. That may keep the anti-housing and anti-development crazies happy for now – though they are never really all that happy, even when they get their way and stop yet another “greedy” apartment developer in his tracks.

There's always something else to grouse about, after all.

However, in the end, it is Newton – and Newton taxpayers – who will pay the price for yet another case of housing snobbery in lost tax revenue and jobs that go elsewhere.

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