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Barney S. Heath  
Director

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## MEMORANDUM

**DATE:** June 16, 2023

**TO:** Councilor Deborah Crossley, Chair, Zoning & Planning Committee  
Members of the Zoning & Planning Committee

**FROM:** Barney Heath, Director, Department of Planning and Development  
Jennifer Caira, Deputy Director Department of Planning and Development  
Zachery LeMel, Chief of Long Range Planning

**RE:** **#38-22 Discussion and review relative to the draft Zoning Ordinance regarding village centers**  
ZONING & PLANNING COMMITTEE requesting review, discussion and possible ordinance amendments relative to Chapter 30 zoning ordinances pertaining to Mixed Use, business districts and village districts relative to the draft Zoning Ordinance. (formerly #88-20)  
**#39-22 Requesting discussion on state guidance for implementing the Housing Choice Bill**  
COUNCILOR CROSSLEY on behalf of the Zoning & Planning Committee requesting discussion on state guidance for implementing the Housing Choice element of the MA Economic Development legislation. (formerly #131-21)

**MEETING:** June 20, 2023

**CC:** City Council  
Planning Board  
Jonathan Yeo, Chief Operating Officer

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### Creating Vibrant Village Centers

Village centers have traditionally served Newton as centers of commerce, places to meet for a coffee or a meal, where one can catch a train or bus to Boston or elsewhere, and great places to live. And locating housing density near businesses and close to transit makes perfect sense (and cents) for both the residents and village center businesses in terms of their health. But the current zoning in and around our village centers is not at all conducive to this historically beneficial model of having mixed-use areas, convenient and efficient, to live, work, shop, and play. The zoning for village centers has been in place since 1987, when the ability to build multi-family housing and mixed-use development was drastically reduced or eliminated.

The Village Center Overlay District (VCOD) is a proposed set of zoning regulations for the commercial centers and immediately surrounding residential areas of 12 of Newton's village centers, covering about 3% of the city. It includes four sub-districts with maximum heights between 2.5 and 4.5 stories, applied to each village center uniquely, unlike the current zoning, which has the same set of requirements for all village centers. The VCOD zoning is consistent with city-wide goals to:

- I. Increase housing options – Easier to build housing of varying types and sizes

- II. Support local businesses – Simplify rules for opening and growing a business
- III. Reduce greenhouse gas emissions – Fossil free development per the Electrification Ordinance
- IV. Create more affordable/accessible housing – Smaller units and more inclusionary units

The VCOD would also bring Newton into compliance with the requirements of the MBTA Communities Law, which requires cities and towns served by the MBTA to zone for by-right multi family housing near transit. Newton’s deadline for compliance is December 31, 2023. The latest version of the draft VCOD zoning maps and ordinance can be found here:

[www.newtonma.gov/government/planning/zoning-redesign/village-centers/version-2-0-draft-maps](http://www.newtonma.gov/government/planning/zoning-redesign/village-centers/version-2-0-draft-maps)

### **How We Got Here**

This zoning proposal follows more than two years of community engagement, numerous proposals and analyses, and months and months of meetings and presentations with the City Council Zoning and Planning Committee (ZAP). Along with City staff, experts in urban design and the economics of development have assisted in testing and shaping this proposal to achieve our community goals. More details about this multi-phased effort will be provided at the upcoming briefing session, but additional information can be found on the *Community Engagement* page of the Newton Planning website:

<https://www.newtonma.gov/government/planning/zoning-redesign/community-engagement-2>

### **Upcoming Presentation for the Full City Council**

The briefing on June 20, 2023, is meant to provide the City Council with an overview of the VCOD proposal in advance of the June 26, 2023 public hearing. This presentation can also serve as an introduction for Newton community members who may have not followed this project until now. The following information will be presented:

- I. Introduction
- II. Village Center Overlay District (VCOD) Proposal
- III. MBTA Communities Requirements and VCOD
- IV. Benefits to the City of the VCOD proposal
- V. Engagement and Outreach
- VI. Conclusion and Looking Ahead

### **Outreach Leading to the June 26 Public Hearing**

Planning staff are working hard to let Newton residents know about this upcoming public hearing. Earlier this month, under the direction of ZAP, the Planning Department sent over 6,000 mailers to property owners and occupants within the VCOD boundary, those abutting the VCOD, and those abutting the abutters. In addition, several other engagement efforts are under way:

- I. The Mayor’s June 9 newsletter highlighted VCOD updates and the two important meetings coming up this month. This newsletter is received by over 35,000 Newton community members and has a 65% open rate.
- II. Several local news outlets will be announcing the public hearing.
- III. A NewTV piece on the VCOD proposal will be released in advance of the public hearing.

- IV. Planning staff has also been connecting with all those who were interested in or participated in focus groups, info sessions, and/or the network over the past two years in order to ensure they are aware of the public hearing.
- V. A series of twelve info sheets were developed that provide details on a variety of topics the public has been interested in knowing more about. These are linked below.

### **Additional Information**

For those looking to further familiarize themselves with the VCOD zoning, Planning staff have updated the village center webpage and created a series of info sheets broken down by topic. These can all be found through the following links:

<https://www.newtonma.gov/zoningredesign/vc>

Info Sheets –

[Overview – Creating Vibrant Village Centers](#)

[Housing – Expanding Housing Choices for All](#)

[Design Requirements – Ensuring Quality Design](#)

[Dimensional Standards - VC3](#)

[Dimensional Standards - VC2](#)

[Dimensional Standards - VC1](#)

[Dimensional Standards - MRT](#)

[Economic Development – Creating a Sense of Place Supports Businesses](#)

[Transportation – Enhancing Safety and Equity for All Street Users](#)

[Climate and Sustainability – Fossil Fuel Free New Development](#)

[MBTA Communities – VCOD Meets State Law Requirements](#)

[Development Options – Providing Options for Property Owners](#)

### **Next Steps**

ZAP will open a public hearing on the VCOD proposal on June 26 at 7pm. The public hearing will remain open through the summer. This will allow City staff to further refine the VCOD zoning over the summer so that the language is crystal clear and accomplishes the intent of the agreed upon framework. ZAP is expected to take up the public hearing again and vote on the proposal in the fall. This allows the City Council the opportunity to vote before the end of 2023, which is the deadline for Newton to comply with the MBTA Communities state law.