



Ruthanne Fuller
Mayor

Barney Heath
Director
Planning & Development

Joseph Iadonisi
Planning Associate

Members

Kelley Brown, Chair
Kevin McCormick, Vice Chair
Lee Breckenridge, Member
Amy Dain, Member
Peter Doeringer, Member
Jennifer Molinsky, Member
Barney Heath, *ex officio*

1000 Commonwealth Ave.
Newton, MA 02459
T 617-796-1120
F 617-796-1142
www.newtonma.gov

CITY OF NEWTON

Planning and Development Board

October 20, 2023

To: The Honorable City Council President, Susan Albright
City of Newton
1000 Commonwealth Avenue
Newton, MA 02459

CC: Honorable Newton City Councilors
Planning & Development Board

SUBJ: Village Center Overlay District Zoning Recommendation

Dear Honorable Council President Albright:

After nearly three years of Board discussion, often as part of joint meetings with the City Council Zoning and Planning Committee (ZAP), and following the close of the recent VCOD public hearings, the Planning and Development Board deliberated and voted 6-0-1, with Director Heath abstaining, at its meeting on October 16th to recommend that the City Council adopt the Village Center Overlay District (VCOD) Version 3.0 with the understanding that further review and revision will occur prior to the City Council vote.

The Board agreed that the VCOD is the right step towards achieving the principal policy goals and objectives set at the onset of this endeavor:

- I. Increasing housing options – Making it easier to build housing of varying types and sizes.
- II. Supporting and expanding local businesses – Simplifying rules for opening and growing a business.
- III. Reducing greenhouse gas emissions – Incentivizing compact, transit-accessible, vehicle-lite, and energy efficient new development.
- IV. Creating more affordable/accessible housing – More housing means more permanently affordable housing through our inclusionary zoning requirements and more elevator accessible living options.

In particular, the VCOD allows multiple housing options and smaller by right development in traditional village centers and transit-accessible areas. This is in contrast with the current zoning ordinance that favors multi-family housing only by special permit and has resulted in a small number of large-scale multi-family housing developments. By encouraging

smaller scale by right multi-family and mixed-use development of the VCOD, the Board expects development to occur at an appropriate scale for our village centers and at an incremental pace.

There is the possibility that the VCOD will not produce a significant amount of housing over time. Therefore, further reforms to encourage more housing of all types may be required. The City of Newton has not passed such a major reform to its zoning ordinance since the 1950s. The results of the VCOD will depend on future economic conditions, land and construction costs, the availability of financing, the desires of property owners, and terms of existing leases.

Passing the VCOD proposal is essential, but only a first step. The Board encourages the City to implement and manage the VCOD through strong interdepartmental coordination to ensure that the VCOD is meeting the community's needs. The City should periodically evaluate the impact and adjust the zoning ordinance and other City policies to meet desired outcomes.

The Board supports the removal of minimum parking requirements for individual properties from the VCOD to encourage walking, biking, and use of public transportation. The Board believes this will improve urban form and design and support the development of housing and small business.

At the same time, the Planning Board believes it is essential that the Planning Department and other departments anticipate future needs for traffic and parking management by monitoring the effects of development and other factors on the availability of public and private parking. The Planning Department should evaluate the need and develop a long-term plan for investment in pedestrian and bicycle safety, municipal and shared parking, and traffic management.

The Planning Board endorses the VCOD's potential benefits for small businesses by expanding the areas where commercial uses and mixed use are allowed by right. While the VCOD overall will benefit small businesses, during the construction process there may be some disruption to existing businesses and the Board encourages the City to prepare options for supporting existing small businesses against the possibility of disruption or displacement.

The Board of Planning and Development applauds the work by the Zoning and Planning Committee, the Planning Department and its consultants from Utile in preparing the Village Center Overlay District.

Sincerely,

Kelley Brown

Kelley Brown, Chair