



Date: November 3, 2023
To: City Council
From: Councilors Deborah J. Crossley and Vicki Danberg
Re: Memo to Clarify Public Misinformation on the Village Center Overlay District

Memorandum

SUMMARY

Councilors Oliver and Wright have published and disseminated a chart that is misleading, and has been used incorrectly to support a theory that the VCOD is not reasonably mapped across our villages. The flaw in their analysis is they look only at units per acre as a measure of density, while ignoring the large number of potential units enabled and land area covered by the VCOD.

The largest villages, Newton Centre, West Newton, Newtonville and Newton Highlands have the most housing potential. Two are on the green line and two are on the Worcester line. The largest land area is in the villages of Newton Centre and Newton Highlands at 130 acres with the most unit potential at 4250 units. The distribution of potential housing units is as follows:

Transit	Approximate Potential units*
Green line	5,600.
Worcester line	4,900.
Bus service	1,400.
None	3,000.

NOTE: These potential units are calculated according to the MBTA compliance formula - NOT real potential units. See footnote below.

Density is not the right measure. Why is it wrong?

A relatively small building on a small lot can have a very high density, whereas a very large building on a large lot can have a very low density. You learn little by that alone. In early 2022, the Planning Department looked at a variety of existing buildings around Newton to examine density. Take two properties in Newtonville; 25 - 21 Highland Ave. is a relatively small, 3-story, 16-unit building with a density of 53 units per acre. Trio, a few blocks away, is a far larger 5-story, 140-unit building, but is a density of 49 units per acre. Councilors Oliver and Wright didn't take into account the relationship between the size of the village and the type of zoning proposed.

Using the same Oliver/Wright data, the most unit potential AND the largest land area in the VCOD district is in Newton Centre. The more land the VCOD encompasses, the lower the units per acre, or density. The villages with the highest number of potential units are Newton Centre, West Newton, Newtonville and Newton Highlands (about equally) ... and the large contiguous district (required by MBTA) is along the Green line. This area also has by far most of the MRT zone (all residential 2.5 story) applied over adjacent neighborhoods, which reduces the density further.

By sheer number of potential units* and land area covered, villages south of Commonwealth Avenue have the most potential redevelopment under the VCOD.

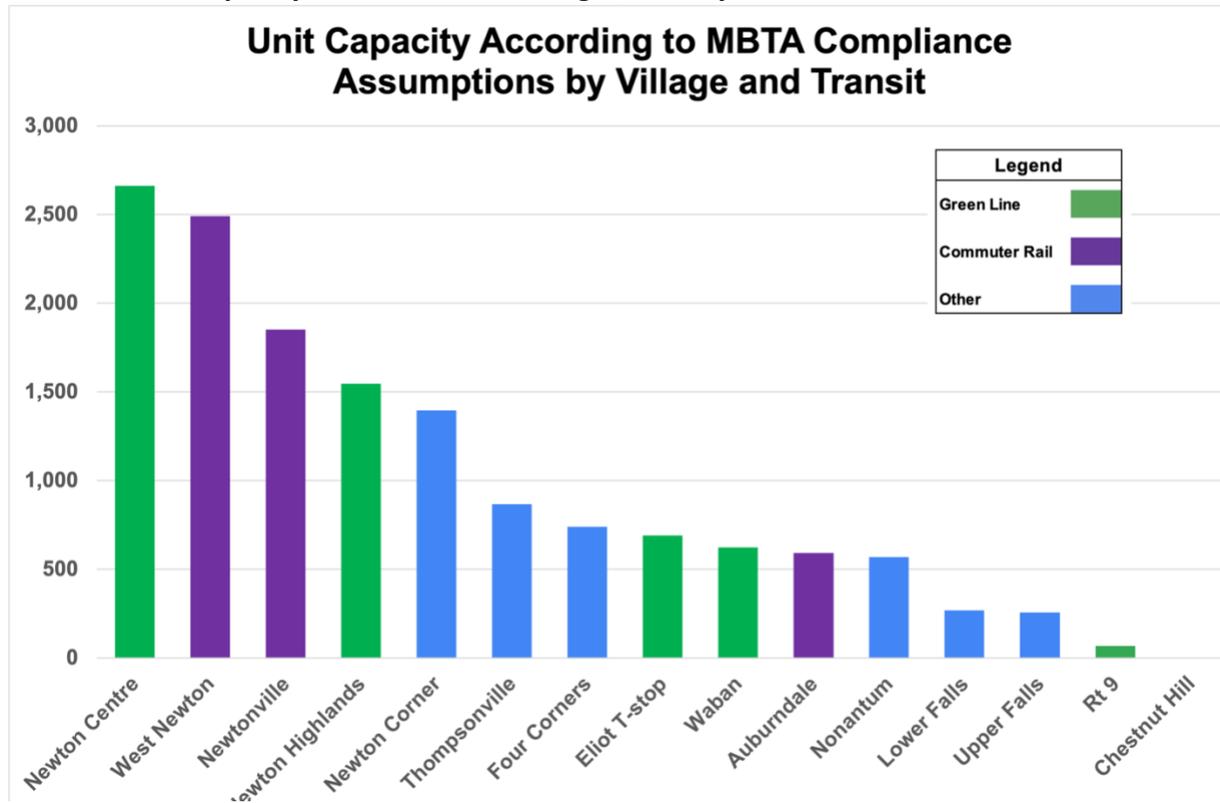
**For consistency, this discussion uses the unit capacity as calculated by the formula that Councilors Wright and Oliver created to simulate the MBTA Communities formula. We understand that the unit capacity numbers generated overestimate, and are not actual units that could be built.*

The data tells the story:

The charts below were created using Councilor Oliver and Wright’s database. Councilor Oliver stated in his Newsletter that “the spirit of the MBTA Act is to put denser housing where it could do the most good – near transit”. More correctly, the spirit of the Act is to put **more** housing near transit – not just denser housing. We want to enable more housing in the Villages with transit and we want the size of the buildings to gently transition to the surrounding neighborhoods. Density is the wrong criteria to use to accurately evaluate the Village Center Overlay District.

The charts below describe 1) how many units are enabled in each village, 2) the acreage in each village and 3) the number of acres comprising the residential only district (MRT) adjacent to each village, which adds more unit potential but lowers the density.

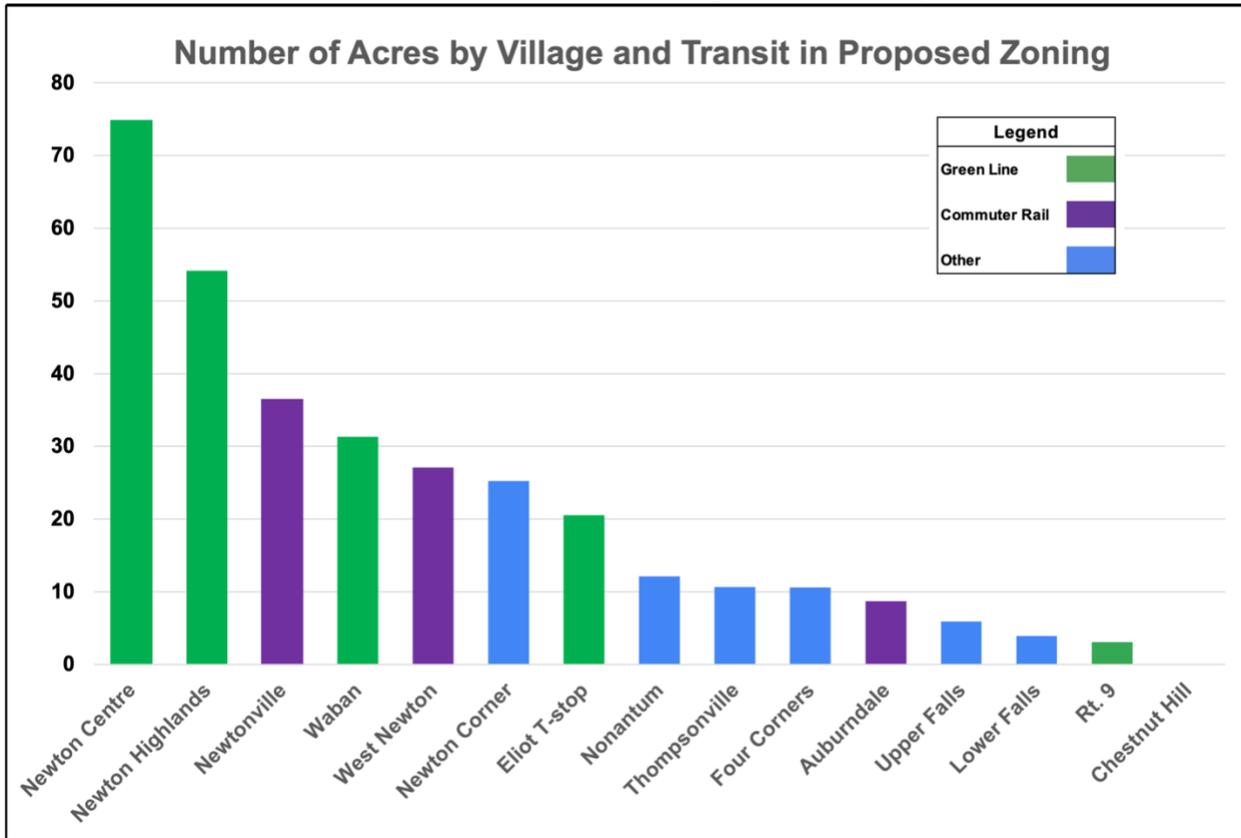
1. VCOD Unit Capacity is in the correct villages, exactly where needed to access transit



- More housing is enabled in villages with transit.
- Villages without transit have less land area and fewer units enabled by the VCOD zoning.

Note that the largest number of units enabled by the VCOD are in the largest villages served by either the Green Line or Worcester Line. Newton Corner is 4th largest which has express buses.

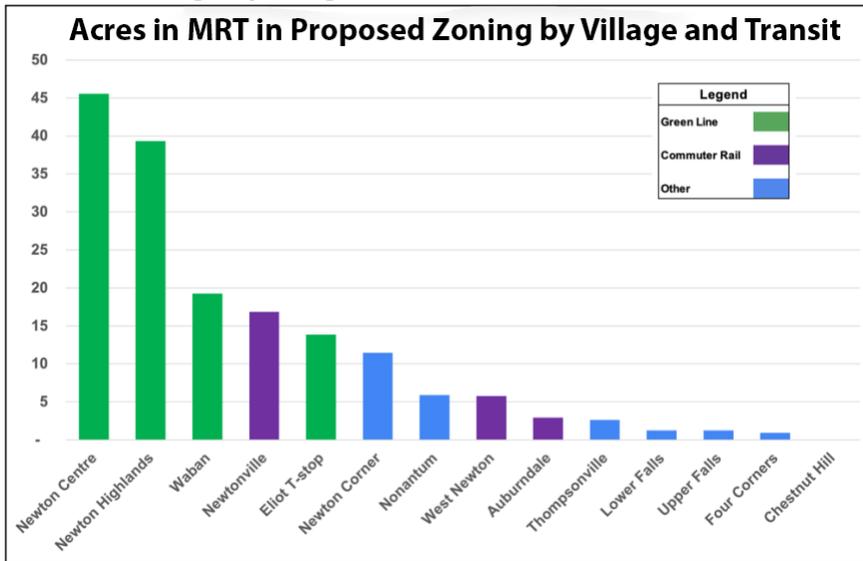
2. Villages with access to transit have the most acreage in the overlay district



**So how did Councilor Oliver come out with such upside-down conclusions?
Councilor Oliver used only density as a criterion.**

Thompsonville, Four Corners, and Lower Falls are all very small villages, slightly over 10 acres each. The limited amount of VCOD applied over these villages is mostly VC2 and VC3. By contrast Newton Centre at 70 acres and Newton Highlands at 50 acres have a mix of VC2, VC3 and MRT (Multi Residence Transit). The MRT zoning enables small homes (incentivizing preserving current housing stock) with 3-6 units, at a very low density. Mixing all three zoning districts in the larger villages brings the average density way down for these villages. To visualize, this chart shows the acreage of MRT zoning by village:

3. MRT acreage by village



Newton Highlands and Newton Centre have significantly more low density MRT area proposed than Thompsonville, Four Corners or Lower Falls – which has none. This many small homes at appropriate neighborhood scale with more open space and setback requirements, bring the average density way down for the larger villages. But still, Newton Centre and Newton Highlands have the highest unit potential. We wouldn't want large buildings in the surrounding neighborhoods bordering the other residential areas.