



Zoning Redesign: Village Centers

The City of Newton's project to redesign the zoning code

VCOD Proposal Voted Out to Full Council

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City Council to Vote on VCOD Proposal

On October 26th, the Zoning and Planning (ZAP) Committee voted for the latest draft, Version 3.1, of the Village Center Overlay District (VCOD) zoning proposal to go to the full City Council. The Council will discuss the proposal on November 6th, and dedicate an entire meeting on November 15th to consider its formal adoption.

This moment is the culmination of nearly three years of engagement and work on the part of ZAP, the Planning Department, and citizens of Newton. At the start of 2021, the Zoning Redesign project began to focus on village centers at ZAP's request. Extensive engagement was conducted across the City and involved thousands of residents over the course of a few years. ZAP Committee members and the Planning Department incorporated feedback throughout this process into VCOD versions 1.0, 2.0, 3.0 and finally 3.1. The final version that will be voted on by the full Council reflects the many considered changes and amendments, which have been incorporated into this latest version.

8 Important Things to Know About VCOD Zoning

Capacity, Compliance, Concentration – It is important to grasp the three c's of the Village Center Overlay District. The proposed zoning allows for housing **capacity** for future development under zoning rules not actual development of housing which will occur incrementally over decades. The City of Newton is just one of twelve MBTA rapid transit communities that must come into **compliance** with the State MBTA Communities Law by December 31 of this year. The entire VCOD zone is concentrated in around 3% of Newton's land area with the overwhelming majority **concentrated** within a ½ mile of a Green Line or commuter rail station.

Attainable, Accessible, and Affordable Housing – The type of housing envisioned to be developed in our village centers is intentionally geared toward smaller in-fill buildings. Because the units are smaller, they will likely be more **attainable** than today's large single-family or condominium units with sizes that lead to extremely high prices (Newton's median sales price in 2023 was \$1.8 million). The majority of new housing units, to be built on upper floors, are going to be **accessible** and amenable to one floor living, something that downsizing seniors here in Newton and elsewhere might find attractive. It is also important to note that 17.5- 20% of any housing built over 6 units will be permanently **affordable** for households at 65% of area median income. More housing, particularly multifamily housing, is needed for seniors looking to age in place, young families just starting out, and young adults hoping to live in the city where they grew up. Research shows that building more

housing helps stall rising rents or even lower the cost of housing.

Smaller and Climate Friendly –The proposed VCOD limits the bulk and height of what can be built in our village centers. For example, the buildings at both Trio and Austin Street are much bigger in building footprint than what could be built under VCOD rules. The VCOD zoning discourages developers from building on large sites and ensures buildings fit the scale of our villages. A special permit is required for any new building on a lot that is over 30,000 sq. ft. and the zoning district that allows the largest buildings (generally reserved for the core of village centers) limits buildings to 4.5 stories and a 15,000 sq. ft. footprint. For reference, Trio on Washington Street in Newtonville could not be built under the VCOD zoning. Trio is on a lot that is over 120,000 sq. ft. and contains two large buildings, the smallest of which has a footprint of about 20,000 sq. ft.

Preservation of existing buildings is incentivized –The Multi Residence Transit (MRT) zone, which is a residential zone acting as a transition from the commercial areas to the surrounding neighborhoods, allows more units and a larger footprint when the existing house is kept and converted to multiple units. Preservation of existing buildings in the VC2 and VC3 zones will also be incentivized by allowing nonconformities and expanding the allowed uses for existing buildings, creating a pathway for conversion of underutilized office or industrial spaces to residential.

The village center zoning complies with state law –The MBTA Communities Law requires Newton to update zoning to allow at least 8,330 units of multifamily housing to be built by-right near transit. This is a big number, but it does not consider any existing housing and assumes every site is a blank slate and is maximized with new housing without providing any parking on site. The proposed zoning meets state requirements and distributes the zoning across the city with much of it within a quarter mile of a commuter rail or Green Line station. Given the increased frequency in service, the zoning allows for approximately 33% more units around the Green Line stations as compared to the three commuter rail stations.

Change will happen incrementally and over many years –According to the US Census, Newton added just 672 total housing units between 2010 and 2020, a period of time which included very favorable economic conditions. Additional housing is needed to reduce the pressure on the existing housing and to stabilize rising housing costs, however it will not all happen at once and some areas may never redevelop because the existing buildings are close to or exceed the size allowed under the new zoning, the site has been recently developed, or the owner lacks interest in redevelopment. For example, of the areas with current zoning that allows for at least a two-family home, 40% of the lots contain a single-family home. This suggests that even when zoning allows two-family development many owners choose to have a single-family home.

We are prepared for new residents –New construction takes several years from submitting for a building permit to when people are actually living there, allowing the City to plan across departments and coordinate services once we have important details regarding the location, type and size of building proposed and can understand how it might impact city services and schools. The zoning is focused on areas of the city that are already largely paved, have existing infrastructure, and have access to transit, resulting in fewer vehicle trips, fewer resources consumed, and fewer trees lost than new single- and two-family homes.

The latest version of the zoning reflects many modifications –Since Version 1.0 was released a year ago, the Zoning and Planning Committee has increased protections for residential neighborhoods (greater setbacks, reduced building heights, increased building step backs), increased open space requirements, eliminated a zoning district, added a minimum parking requirement in residential neighborhoods, removed areas from the VCOD maps (most notably areas in Nonantum, West Newton, Newton Highlands, and Route 9), and changed the zoning on particular parcels to require smaller buildings (for example,

allowing 3.5 stories instead of 4.5 stories for much of Walnut Street in Newtonville).



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