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MEMORANDUM

DATE: February 9, 2023
TO: Councilor R. Lisle Baker, 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: **#85-24 Request for discussion and possible amendments to enhance the preservation of existing homes.**
COUNCILORS BAKER, OLIVER, MALAKIE, KALIS, GETZ, LUCAS, LOBOVITS, AND WRIGHT requesting a discussion and possible amendments to Chapter 30 Zoning or other City Ordinances to enhance the preservation of existing homes over their replacement by larger and more expensive structures.

#41-24 Amend the setbacks in the MR zones to encourage preservation of existing buildings.
COUNCILORS ALBRIGHT, DANBERG, KRINTZMAN, AND LEARY seeking a discussion with the Planning Department to consider ordinance amendments that would revise the metrics in the multi-residence (MR1, MR2 and MR3) zones, to regulate the size of new buildings better, enable a wider range of housing options close to public transit, and better incentivize preservation and renovation of existing housing stock.

MEETING: February 15, 2023

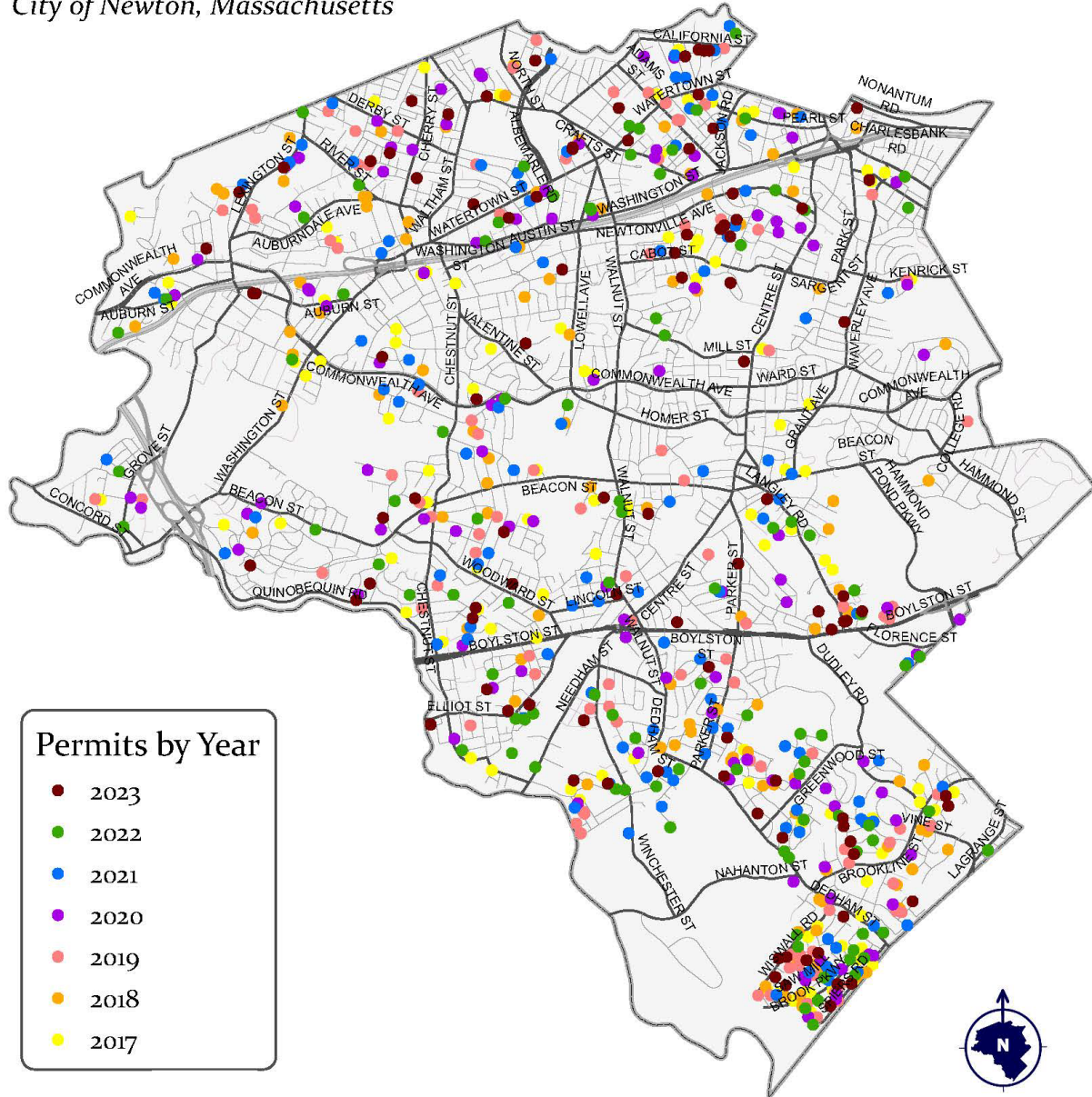
CC: City Council
Planning Board
Jonathan Yeo, Chief Operating Officer

Introduction

Significant attention and concern have been given to the demolition of existing homes within the single residence (SR) and multi-residence (MR) districts across Newton. While the distribution across the City varies, the rate of approximately 100 demolition permits per year has held fairly constant over the last decade (see map).

Demolition Permits 2017-2023

City of Newton, Massachusetts



Map Date: January 25, 2024



CITY OF NEWTON, MASSACHUSETTS
Mayor - Ruthanne Fuller

The information on this map is from the Newton Geographic Information System (GIS). The City of Newton cannot guarantee the accuracy of this information. Each user of this map is responsible for determining its suitability for his or her intended purpose. City departments will not necessarily approve applications based solely on GIS data.

On its face, the replacement of existing homes may not cause a rise to action. In fact, nearly all of these demolitions and the new homes that replace them occur by-right. In other words, they fully comply with Newton's Zoning Ordinance. These rules and regulations, in theory, reflect the goals and objectives of the City Council as it relates to development. However, this clearly is not the case, and the areas of concern may fall into a few categories:

1. **The loss of more moderately priced (“naturally affordable” or “starter home”) housing to more expensive housing.** The median home price in Newton is nearly \$1.6 million, according to the [FY2024 Tax Classification Booklet](#).
2. **The newly constructed homes (single- and two-family) are significantly larger than the home(s) being replaced.** These larger homes often dwarf neighboring properties, particularly in neighborhoods predominately made up of single-story ranches and split-level homes.
3. **New development comes with certain environmental considerations.** Often these larger homes come with major siteworks, the removal of existing trees, and an increase in impervious surfaces.
4. **New development in SR and MR districts are one type of housing product marketed to a specific economic demographic.** Newton's housing stock should serve all households, including downsizing seniors/empty nesters, new families, single-individuals, extended families, etc.

Current and Past Efforts to Address This Issue

Multi-Residence Transit (MRT)

The Multi-Residence Transit (MRT) zone within the recently adopted Village Center Overlay District looks to address all the issues above through two distinct development pathways. First, the adaptive reuse provisions allow existing homes to be expanded and converted to up to six units. On a large adaptive reuse site an additional building with up to four units may be added by Site Plan Review instead of Special Permit. These additional units would be within a maintained building that appears the same from the street, be smaller by design and therefore more affordable, and address sustainability goals through the reuse of existing materials (i.e. the current home).

Second, new construction is limited to a building footprint of 1,500 square feet and minimum of three units and a maximum of four units. This would lead to two-bedroom and three-bedroom units 1,100 and 1,400 square feet. Based on comparable projects, these units could sell for around \$700,000, a price significantly below the median price for recent sales of single-family (\$1.6 million), multi-family (\$1.3 million), and condominium (\$915,000) units (see FY24 Tax Classification Booklet). You can find case studies provided as part of the VCOD process here:

<https://www.newtonma.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/102154/638231092977100000>

Applying New Lot Standards to All New Constructions

This item was most recently presented at ZAP in February 2022 (Docket #57-22, formerly #75-21), when Councilors Wright and Baker proposed requiring all new construction to meet new lot site dimensional requirements (setbacks, open space, lot coverage, etc.). From the report, “Based on the information studied, she (Councilor Wright) found that requiring teardowns or major additions to go to new lot standards will likely not reduce teardowns.” The report with supplemental material can be found here:

<https://www.newtonma.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/81112/637962399977230000>

Large Home Review Case Study

In addition, as part of the initial Zoning Redesign effort in the 2010s, Planning staff investigated “Large Home Review” provisions in nearby municipalities (Wellesley and Cohasset). This was last reviewed in 2015 (Docket # 388-14). You can find the ZAP report and presentations here:

<https://www.newtonma.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/19551/637241695868870000> (agenda)

<https://www.newtonma.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/19553/637241695874470000> (report)

Following the discussion at ZAP, staff can look into other previous efforts based on the specifics that the Committee wants to focus on.

Next Steps

Additional clarity and refinement of scope from the Committee is needed before staff dive into additional research and analysis. A few of the areas of concern are mentioned in this memo above. Are there more? How would the Committee like to prioritize these issues? Answers to these questions and more will lead to a refined scope that Planning can develop to achieve the Committee/Council objectives.