



# Zoning & Planning Committee Agenda

## City of Newton In City Council

**Monday, April 22, 2019**

**7:30PM – NOTE TIME CHANGE**  
**Council Chamber**

### **Items Scheduled for Discussion:**

- #220-18**      **Discussion relative to the Washington Street Corridor Action Plan**  
DIRECTOR OF PLANNING requesting monthly progress discussions on the Washington Street Corridor action plan.

**Respectfully Submitted,**

**Susan S. Albright, Chair**

---

The location of this meeting is accessible and reasonable accommodations will be provided to persons with disabilities who require assistance. If you need a reasonable accommodation, please contact the city of Newton's ADA Coordinator, Jini Fairley, at least two business days in advance of the meeting: [jfairley@newtonma.gov](mailto:jfairley@newtonma.gov) or (617) 796-1253. The city's TTY/TDD direct line is: 617-796-1089. For the Telecommunications Relay Service (TRS), please dial 711.



Ruthanne Fuller  
Mayor

**City of Newton, Massachusetts**  
Department of Planning and Development  
1000 Commonwealth Avenue Newton, Massachusetts 02459

Telephone  
(617) 796-1120  
Telefax  
(617) 796-1142  
TDD/TTY  
(617) 796-1089  
[www.newtonma.gov](http://www.newtonma.gov)

Barney S. Heath  
Director

---

**MEMORANDUM**

**DATE:** April 17, 2019

**TO:** Councilor Albright, Chair  
Members of the Zoning and Planning Committee

**FROM:** Barney S. Heath, Director of Planning and Development  
James Freas, Deputy Director of Planning and Development  
Lily Canan Reynolds, Community Engagement Manager  
Rachel B. Nadkarni, Long-Range Planner

**RE:** **#220-18 Washington Street Vision Plan Draft Three**

**MEETING DATE:** April 22, 2019

**CC:** Honorable Newton City Councilors  
Planning and Development Board  
Urban Design Commission

---

On Monday, April 22 the planning team will release Draft #3 of the Washington Street Vision Plan and Zoning. These documents represent the ‘final drafts’ that will be produced with the consultant team. City Planning staff have worked in lockstep with the consultant team throughout this process. Staff is fully prepared to continue work on the plan and zoning ‘in-house’ at the direction of the Committee as it conducts its review over the coming months.

The Committee Chair has indicated the Committee will take up review of the Vision Plan first with the aim to discuss it and revise the draft before a public hearing and potential vote on the item in May. After the Council has completed its work on the Vision Plan, staff will continue to work closely with the Committee as it turns its attention to the proposed Zoning for Washington Street.

Roughly at this time last year, the City of Newton kicked off the “Hello Washington Street” planning process for West Newton, Newtonville, Crafts Street and the areas along Washington Street that link these neighborhoods together. The goal of the project has been to create a vision plan and zoning ordinance for the future of Washington Street over the next 20 years. To do so, the City engaged the expertise the Principle Group, allocated Planning Department staff resources, and set out to work closely with the community and the City Council to create a plan based in Newton’s values and aspirations as well as market realities and demographic changes. To date the community planning process has centered on the following milestones:

- May 1, 2018 – Launch Event at Second Church in West Newton
  - Surveys gathered responses online through late June; 1,345 surveys completed
- June 5 – 12, 2018 – Public Design Week several events and open-studio in West Newton
  - Over 75 hours of public engagement; 400+ individual visitors
- October 24, 2018 – First Draft released at the Plan Open House at Newton North High School
  - Month-long comment period; 2,672 comments from 317 individuals
- November 2018 – Four open drop-in sessions at City Hall
- February 11, 2019 – Second Draft released at City Council and community preview event
  - Month-long comment period; 1,017 comments from 97 individuals & 50+ emails/letters
- March 2019 – Three drop-in sessions at City Hall

Alongside the public process, the Zoning and Planning Committee of the City Council has met on this topic frequently, tracking the progression of the vision plan and zoning:

- July 30, 2018 – Results of Public Design Week
- September 12, 2018 – Discussion
- October 10, 2018 – Discussion
- November 14, 2018 – Draft #1 Overview
- November 26, 2018 – West Newton focus
- December 6, 2018 - Committee of the Whole: Development Objectives & Height Map
- January 14, 2019 – Newtonville and Crafts Street focus
- January 28, 2019 – Zoning Toolkit
- February 11, 2019 – Draft #2 of Vision Plan and Zoning
- March 19, 2019 – Committee of the Whole: Fiscal Impact
- March 20, 2019 – Transportation presentation to Public Safety & Transportation Committee
- March 25, 2019 – Councilor Comments on Draft #2
- April 4, 2019 – Transportation / Councilor Comments on Draft #2
- April 8, 2019 – Councilor Comments on Draft #2

At the request of the Committee Chair, staff is pulling together a joint subcommittee of members of the Planning Board and the Urban Design Commission to engage in a review of the proposed Washington Street Zoning in the coming months. Members of both boards have professional backgrounds in real estate, architecture, and/or planning and should serve as a valuable resource to the Committee as it conducts its own review.

### **What to expect in the Draft #3 of the Vision Plan and Zoning**

In response to comments from both the community and City Council, the format of the documents is slightly different and has larger text to allow for better readability. There are more explanations of the precedent images as well as source materials. Some of the content has been reorganized to keep chapter themes more consistent.

The chapters of Draft #3 Vision Plan have been renamed slightly for clarity, but the material follows the same order as Draft #2: Introduction, Big Ideas and Actions, Design and Development Objectives, Street Repair, and Running the Numbers.

The draft also includes more context about the vision plan. This context intends to clarify that the vision plan is a guidance document for decision-making over the next 20 years, but it is not a replacement of the detailed study and review process that will take place for most large future development projects as well as public infrastructure investments.

The remainder of this memo outlines the community comments received on Draft #2 and describes responses to some of the key areas of discussion.

### **Community Comments on Draft #2**

---

A total of 97 people commented online on the Second Draft, significantly fewer than the 317 people who commented on Draft #1. Like with Draft #1, the Principle Group as well as City of Newton Planning Department staff have spent time to read every one of the comments received. In addition, the planning team has read dozens of emails, letters, and talked with approximately 30 people who attended the three Drop-In Office Hours in person in March 2019.

Also like with Draft #1, the purpose of the month-long comment period is not to produce a data set of comments to be analyzed quantitatively. The open-ended questions asked about the plan have generated creative thinking and interactive dialogue about the future of Newton. This process requires people to consider a complex series of policies – a task that does not lend itself to a simplified ranking of choices, yes or no answers, or tallying preferences.

As is often the case, the Hello Washington Street process has not been one with a consensus community opinion. This held true for the comments on Draft #2; many expressed their opinions on places where the draft plan proposes too much change or too little change, and many also pointed out places where the draft plan aligns with their vision for Washington Street.

This document is not intended to provide a summary of all comments received, however all the comments themselves, are available on the project website [www.newtonma.gov/washingtonstreetvision](http://www.newtonma.gov/washingtonstreetvision).

In order to capture most common themes from the community dialogue about Draft #2, while not characterizing the sentiment of any comment, key ideas have been listed here in the form of questions about specific aspects of the vision plan, with some responses from the planning team about how they have shaped the production of Draft #3. Staff expects that many of these questions will be topics that the Committee discusses in depth in the coming months.

Question: How will the zoning that encourages **preserving the historic façade** work? Is it appropriate to incentivize historic façade preservation with more height?

- Draft #3 of the zoning will outline a proposed zoning and administrative mechanism for enabling creative preservation projects. The Newton Historic Commission already works with property owners to incorporate preservation of significant aspects of a historic building while doing major renovations or construction. The proposal in this would give the Commission and the Special Permit Granting Authority a new tool to incentivize preservation work, a height bonus. There are many details to discuss, in order to ensure that the Historic Commission and Special Permit process work smoothly together, but the goal is clear – the bonus is only to be granted if preservation of the significant portion of a building is ensured.

Question: Why are **story heights** measured differently than from what is currently allowed in Newton's Chapter 30 Zoning Ordinance? Why are heights proposed to be measured differently from what is proposed in the citywide Zoning Redesign?

- Story heights are the floor-to-floor measurement of each story in zoning. This is a very common way of measuring height in a zoning ordinance because it allows for nuance in the application of different building code standards. While people experience a floor-to-ceiling of 8 to 10 ft in most residential environments, there are often approximately 2 ft+ of structural supports and mechanical equipment (HVAC, water pipes, etc.) between floors. That is why floor-to-floor is used in zoning and not floor-to-ceiling. Offices and labs have more equipment between floors than residential, and most modern construction restaurant and retail spaces need more than 14 ft in height in order to fit the equipment required for operations. In addition, the preferences of contemporary homeowners and commercial tenants have tended towards higher ceiling heights over time. The story heights proposed in the Washington Street zoning are calibrated the construction requirements contemporary buildings and preferences.
- A clear preference of the Newton community identified in the Hello Washington Street process is for buildings with varied heights, varied roof lines, and varied widths. The community does not want to see blocky monotonous buildings, but instead prefers a more incremental form of development. The proposed zoning allows for a greater maximum story height in the first floor of some building types, which is more attuned to the historic pattern of development preferred by the community. In addition, greater maximum story heights in the proposed zoning will allow architects designing future buildings on Washington Street to have more ability to vary story heights.
- Staff expects to work closely with the Committee on describing the area under a roof. The Washington Street Zoning does not describe this area as a story or half-story but regulates this area with very specific roof type regulations. Throughout the process, the community expressed preferences for buildings with pitched roofs, but modern building practices often disfavors pitched roofs because it's cheaper to build flat, particularly in commercial construction. Given the preference for pitched roofs, the planning team has recommended allowing the area under a roof above the whatever story limit the zone allows.

Question: Why are **maximum widths** of buildings in the proposed zoning larger than some of the existing stores in West Newton?

- Like floor-to-floor story heights, the way buildings are constructed in 2019 means that there are different requirements than existed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century when some of the buildings in West Newton were built. Today's building codes require ADA accessibility, for example, which results in wider door frames and more space within stores, making for wider storefronts. The 30ft. max width proposed for the storefronts on Washington Street is a relatively narrow increment for contemporary commercial construction.

Question: What is the difference between the different images shown in Chapter 3 "Site Studies", particularly the **site plans and aerial photos**? What is the difference between the **height map and the zoning map**?

- Chapter 3 “Site Studies” shows both site studies and aerial photos. Each site study illustrates one potential arrangement of buildings, roads, open space, and infrastructure for a particular area of Washington Street. These are not indicative of exactly what each site will look like in the future. Property development is dependent on many factors and there is no way to anticipate when or even if a property might develop in the future. The aerial photos show the same locations as they are today for comparison.
- The height map shown in the Draft #2 Vision Plan was created to provide an ‘at-a-glance’ idea of the proposed zoning; the Draft #2 Zoning includes a zoning map showing the extend of different proposed zoning districts. To reduce confusion and to direct all discussion about height to the most appropriate document, the height map will be removed from Draft #3 Vision Plan. The Draft #3 Zoning will include a zoning map.

Question: Since the economic realities for **retail** have changed so drastically in recent years, why does the plan show retail space? What are strategies for encouraging businesses and ensuring there are as few empty storefronts as possible?

- One of the most consistent comments staff has heard from community members throughout this process is the desire for vibrant village centers with local stores and restaurants. People want to see the existing businesses on Washington Street continue to thrive and the empty storefronts filled with new tenants. As many commenters point out, retail is changing nationwide. However, the desire people have to spend time with each other at an exciting restaurant, a wonderful coffee shop, or to get their dry cleaning done hasn’t changed. The retail landscape is changing toward a more experience-based environment, things that cannot go online as easily like dining and dry-cleaning. Additionally, retailers are actually looking for smaller spaces, sometimes as small as a few hundred square feet. One of the goals of the shopfront requirements is to ensure that spaces can be subdivided easily for small shops.
- Retail and restaurants need a customer base and a workforce to survive. Those people can come from West Newton and Newtonville or it can come from all over the region. Creating additional housing does help bolster local businesses by giving them more access to customers and or employees that do not need to drive long distances to reach them.
- The desire to do more than just create the physical environment for small businesses is something staff has heard in this process and in the economic development strategy process. With this in mind, the early actions coming after this plan include taking a closer look at how the City can directly support small business growth on Washington Street and throughout Newton.

Question: Why does the plan not mention that **West Newton village center is a National Register-listed Historic District**? Does this plan incorporate enough tools for historic preservation?

- This was an oversight in the previous draft that was identified by the community, and Draft #3 now includes this in the revised Chapter Two. The plan expresses Newton’s desire to see preservation of significant resources along Washington Street. The proposed zoning offers a new tool to get there, a

height bonus. The height bonus provides the landowner with a financial tool to invest in historic preservation, which can help overcome the great cost barriers that often deter preservation. The language introduced in Draft #3 will outline a significant role for Newton's Historic Commission in determining what preservation needs to be done in order to use that height bonus.

Question: Are there additional ways to build more **affordable housing** that can be incorporated into the plan?

- The Vision Plan encourages the City to explore all avenues toward affordable housing production, recognizing that affordable housing subsidies must come from somewhere. By allowing more to be built both by-right and by special permit on Washington Street more affordable units will be built. One of the reasons some additional housing is proposed to be allowed by-right is to create a track for moderately-sized and moderately-priced housing to be created without subsidy. Currently the City's Inclusionary Zoning ordinance mandates at least 15% of new units in large projects be deed-restricted affordable. The 15% number could increase in amendments to the Inclusionary Zoning ordinance currently under review by the Committee.

Question: Will the plan's proposal to allow **on-street parking** year-round happen right away? Will it be a good thing for Washington Street? Will it overwhelm neighborhood streets?

- No, changes to on-street parking rules will not happen right away. Changes to any of the City's parking regulations, including changes to the winter overnight parking ban, will require additional community conversations and a vote by City Council. The Washington Street Vision Plan identifies changes to parking regulations that would help Newton, over the course of 20 years, transition from a community that invites driving and traffic to a place that provides a more balanced range of transportation options including more enticing walking, biking and public transit. An important aspect of the Vision Plan is a set of strategies for managing parking and traffic speeds on neighborhood streets.

Question: Have the proposals for the changes to the **roadway on Washington Street**, like converting from 4-to-3 lanes been studied enough? Are there ways to test this before building?

- No, they have not been studied enough. The Vision Plan lays out guidance for the future design of the Washington Street roadway, but this will need to be studied in more detail. An early implementation step is engaging in an engineering study for Washington Street that will look closely at the 4-to-3 lane option and other ideas using detailed transportation engineering metrics. This study will also investigate ways to safely test the changes before permanent construction.

Question: Will these buildings be **built all at once**?

- No, this plan describes what Washington Street could look after 20-years. Both the images shown in the Vision Plan and the numbers shown in the Fiscal Impact Analysis indicate the total build after 20 years of development. The images are also representative of the ideas in the vision, and the buildings that ultimately get built may look very different. Furthermore, proposals for building larger buildings and large groups of buildings being built at the same time would still come under special permit development review.

Question: Has the **fiscal impact** of this plan been studied in enough detail?

- As requested by Council and the community, Draft #3 includes more detailed methodology and explanation of assumptions used in the Zoning Build Out Analysis and Fiscal Impact Analysis for the Hello Washington Street project. The Fiscal Impact Analysis part of this project provides valuable information to guide the City's next steps about what financial planning tools might be available to make infrastructure investments along Washington Street. In the coming months, as the City Council continues to review the proposed zoning for Washington Street, the fiscal impact analysis will also need to be tracked. While the City Council is deliberating on the proposed zoning, the planning team will adjust the build out and analyze the fiscal impacts to ascertain whether the zoning shows a net fiscal benefit. In addition, any large project on Washington Street that requires a special permit will continue need to submit its own fiscal impact analysis, as it true today.

Question: Will the **MBTA commit** to building the improvements the plan envisions for the Newtonville and West Newton Commuter Rail Stations?

- One of the best ways to indicate to the MBTA that it should prioritize investment for upgrading Newton's Commuter Rail Stations and/or improve bus service is to adopt a local vision plan and related zoning like the Hello Washington Street project proposes. The MBTA is interested in working with committed partners. Demonstrating that the City is clear about the direction it is interested in seeing, including direction about new residences and commercial space, will help Newton work towards a partnership with the MBTA to secure transportation investments identified in the plan.

To read the raw data of all the community comments, go to [www.newtonma.gov/washingtonstreetvision](http://www.newtonma.gov/washingtonstreetvision) and download the table.

As the Draft #3 Vision Plan is reviewed by the City Council, members of the public are encouraged to stay involved in the process. All meetings of the Committee and the entire Council are open to the public. Meeting dates and times are available on the City Clerk's webpage <http://www.newtonma.gov/gov/aldermen/committees/zoning/default.asp>