



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

Barney S. Heath  
Director

---

## MEMORANDUM

DATE: December 6, 2019

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

FROM: Barney Heath, Director of Planning & Development  
Jennifer Caira, Deputy Director of Planning & Development  
Zachery LeMel, Chief of Long Range Planning

MEETING DATE: December 11, 2019

SUBJECT: **#165-19 Washington Street Comprehensive Plan Amendment**

CC: Planning & Development Board  
City Council

---

Following the release of the final draft of the Washington Street Vision Plan on November 15, Staff received comments about the draft from City Council. Attached is a change log (Attachment A) outlining the suggested changes, including a new height diagram (Attachment B), and updated bicycle facilities map (Attachment C). The general concerns are listed below along with Staff responses. Finally, spelling mistakes were pointed out and Staff made the necessary corrections.

### **General Concerns and Response**

#### *Height*

Concerns were raised regarding the maximum height of 6 stories as well as location and number of areas identified as medium height (3 to 6 stories) and whether the maximum 6 stories would be permitted in all of these areas. The current draft of the Plan includes a Height Principles Diagram, which includes three different sets of height ranges: low heights – neighborhood character (1 to 3 stories); low heights – village character (1 to 4 stories); and medium heights – village character (3 to 6 stories). Voted on by the committee previously, these height ranges represent a reduction in height as proposed in previous drafts where up to 10 stories was proposed as of right. This draft

does not specify any height as-of-right or by special permit, rather the heights are an illustration of principles and only represent a range of heights that may be appropriate, subject to further detailed analysis. For example, single residence zones today allow 2.5 stories by-right and 3 stories by Special Permit. The low heights – neighborhood character areas in the Vision Plan include a range of 1 to 3 stories. This is consistent with existing zoning and the Washington Street zoning will need to set the thresholds for by-right and Special Permit heights. The principles also include varying heights within a block, and requiring setbacks on taller buildings, all of which will need to be further analyzed for inclusion in zoning regulations and will limit the number of buildings built to the 6 story maximum. Methods for measuring overall heights, acknowledging the different floor-to-floor heights typically found in residential and commercial buildings, will also need to be determined as part of the zoning. Working with the City Council further nuance will be developed in the Washington Street Zoning and how these taller buildings may require additional review, community input, and a Special Permit Process.

### *Parking*

Concerns were raised regarding statements in the Vision Plan about the consideration to eliminate parking minimums as part of the zoning. The City understands that parking is often necessary to ensure commercial success. Knowing this, while remaining consistent with the goals set forth in the Climate Action Plan, Staff recommends considering the reduction or elimination of the parking minimum requirement, not an outright elimination (see Attachment A). The Washington Street Zoning to follow will focus on parking requirements in much greater detail.

### *Housing Affordability/Diversity*

Comments received included pointing out that smaller units are likely more affordable, even at market rates, and that we should ensure that new housing projects offer the opportunity for home ownership in addition to rental. The City is committed to supporting the development of a diverse housing stock to serve the community's diverse population. Along Washington Street this not only means a variety of housing sizes and affordability levels, but also a mix of homeownership opportunities as well as rentals and recommended text edits are shown in Attachment A.

### *Historical Context/Sensitivity*

A comment was received recommending that some of the new developments drawn upon the historic elements found in many of the iconic buildings. The City of Newton benefits from a variety of buildings developed incrementally over time. These buildings are distinct from each other and work together to form a pattern that defines the unique sense of place of Newton. Likewise, Washington Street will be redeveloped overtime and the future zoning that comes out of this planning process will guide development to compliment the iconic historic buildings throughout the City, especially within the village cores (see recommended text edits in Attachment A). Finally, the Plan outlines that building heights will vary along any given block to maintain the sense of buildings having developed incrementally over time.

An additional comment was received recommending the section on exploring a height and/or floor area bonus when a historic structure has been preserved be struck entirely. The Vision Plan itself

does not convey any new development rights without corresponding zoning and Planning staff believes this is an important tool to continue to explore as part of zoning.

### *Mass Pike Air Rights*

A comment was received recommending the section on Mass Pike air rights and decking over the pike be removed entirely. While the reduction in maximum heights make it unlikely that developers would consider decking over the Pike, this is also something that can continue to be explored to determine the viability and desirability of this sort of development.

### *Street Redesign*

Reconfiguring Washington Street as a boulevard is one way to make the street function better and safer for all users. Numerous examples of boulevard designs from around the world can be found in Allan Jacobs classic text, *Great Streets*, and can all be used as case studies for Washington Street. A comment was received recommending that the text be more explicit that the boulevard design will need to provide opportunities for pick up/drop off, deliveries, and other quick access along the curbside. In the next phase of this effort the City will explore in much greater detail if, and how, a boulevard design for Washington Street can work not only for increased safety, but also increased functionality as it relates to curbside uses and beyond (see recommended text edits in Attachment A).

### *Miscellaneous*

Additional comments were received that recommended the Vision Plan explicitly state that projects over 20,000 square feet require a Special Permit, that it should be specified that the Austin Street plaza requires an agreement on closing Bram Way, and that text regarding strengthening the local economy be tied to addressing pensions and retiree health care. While these are all valid points, Planning staff do not believe they need to be stated explicitly in the Vision Plan, which is meant as a more general, guiding document. The zoning for Washington Street will determine thresholds for Special Permits. Bram Way can still be closed occasionally for Special Events without the need to amend the easement. And strengthening the local economy and increasing the tax base is important for many reasons.

### **Height Map (pg. 84-85)**

Numerous iterations of the height map within the Plan has led to the current version. It must be noted the height map is an illustration, not a regulatory zoning map. Updates to the current version include the additional labeling of streets and the reduction of the westernmost portion of the study area from “medium height” to “low height – neighborhood character”.

### **Bicycle Facilities Map (pg. 37)**

The existing bicycle facilities map shows existing and proposed bike lanes, but is not clear because it is missing street names. Street names have been added along the highlighted existing and proposed bike lanes.

### **Attachments**

Attachment A – Suggested Change Log

Attachment B – Height Map (pg. 84-85)

Attachment C – Bicycle Facilities Map (pg. 37)

**Next Steps**

Staff recommends the committee approve amendment #165-19 so it can be taken up by the full City Council on December 16, 2019.

## Attachment A – Suggested Change Log

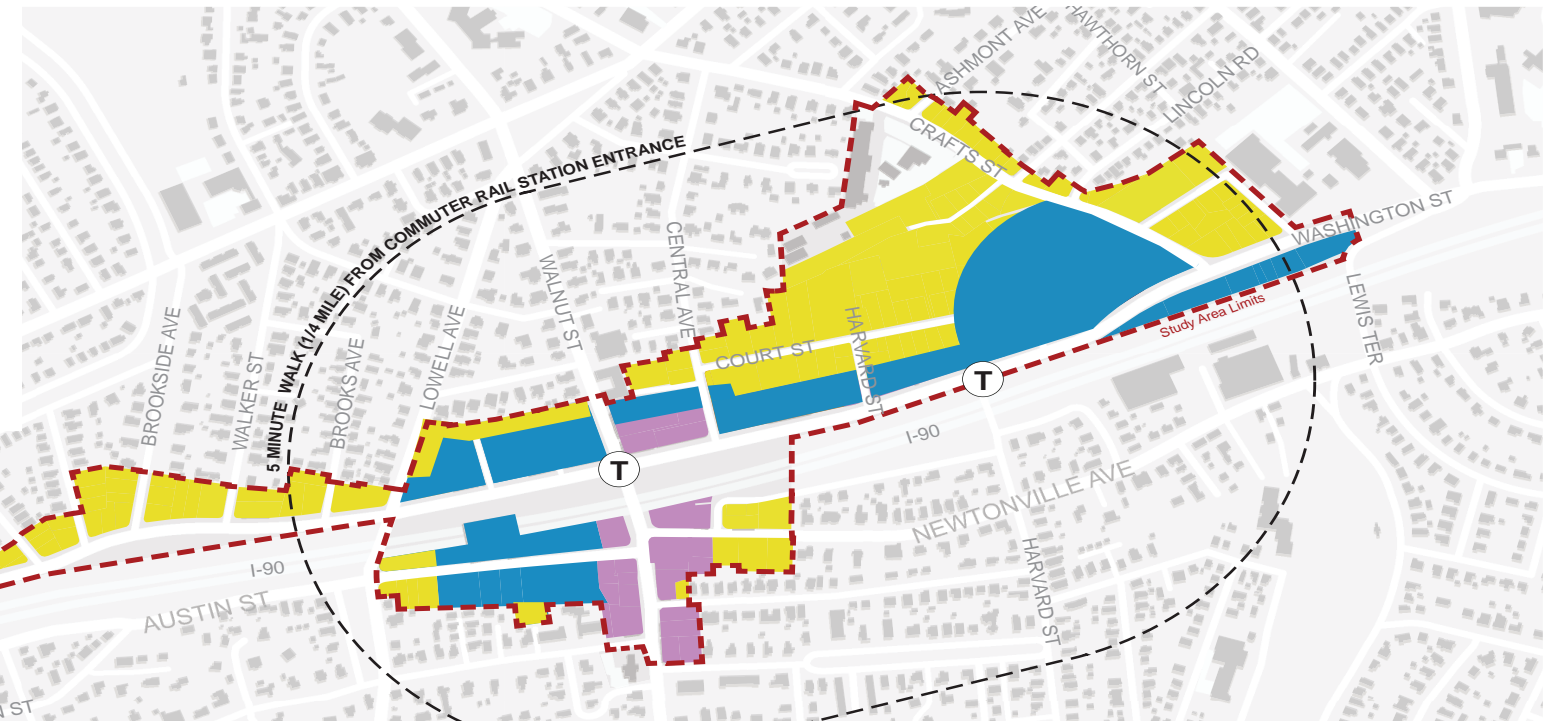
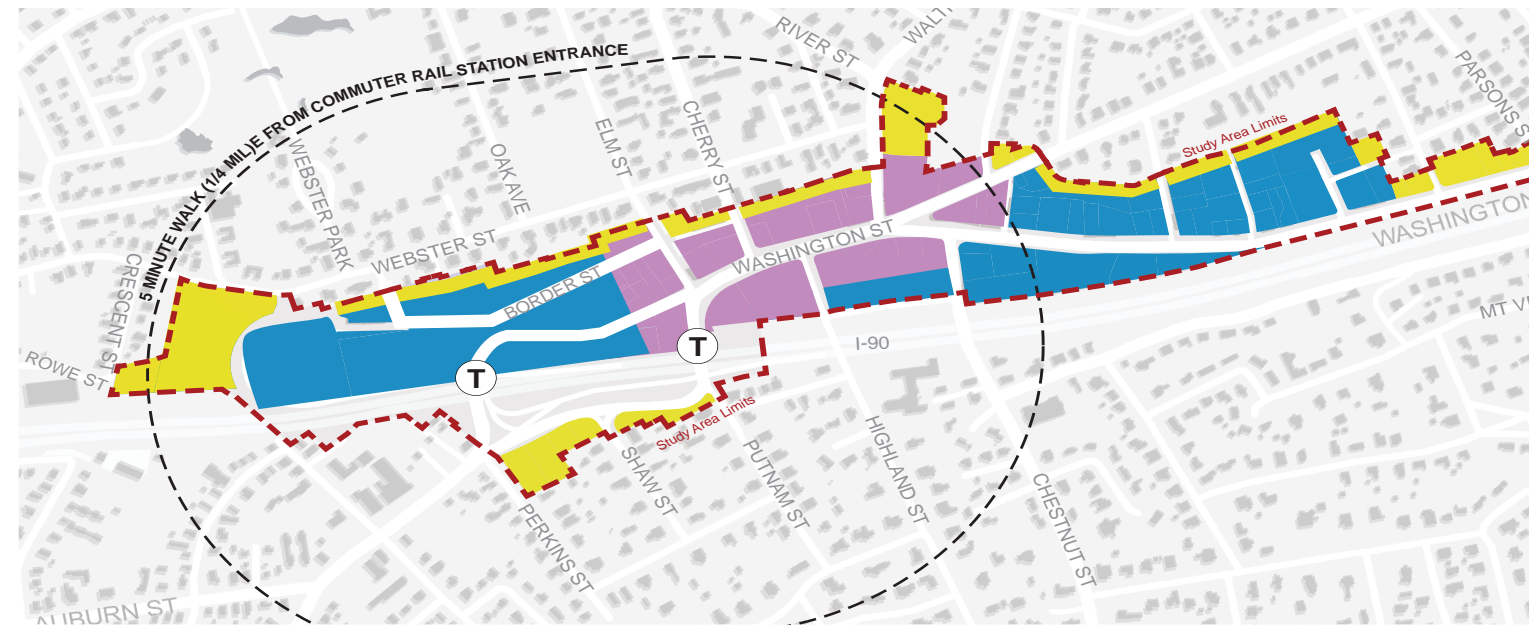
Pg.	Existing	Proposed
30	...and additional spaces on the edges for bikeways and parking.	...and additional spaces on the edges for bikeways and parking. At the same time, such a boulevard design also has to provide opportunities for short-term parking, drop off/pick up, and deliveries.
47	Newton should consider removing the minimum parking requirement entirely.	Newton should consider reducing or eliminating the parking minimum requirement.
53	New zoning for Washington Street can ensure that the building types allowed in each portion of the corridor are contextually appropriate and support the goal for diversity in housing.	New zoning for Washington Street can ensure that the building types allowed in each portion of the corridor are contextually appropriate and support the goal for diversity in housing, including ownership and rental products as appropriate.
55	...diverse and affordable housing throughout the Washington Street area to maintain economic diversity in these neighborhoods.	...diverse and affordable housing throughout the Washington Street area to maintain economic diversity in these neighborhoods. In addition the City of Newton should encourage and support diverse and affordable housing throughout all the Villages of the City.
63	Smaller units can additionally address the city's needs for a greater housing diversity.	Smaller units can additionally address the city's needs for a greater housing diversity, and by virtue of their size, even market rate units may be more affordable.
70	Captain Ryan Park in West Newton could be redeveloped as a more vibrant community space.	Captain Ryan Park in West Newton should remain as open space and improvements should be made to make it a more vibrant community space.
86	...buildings with varying heights, materials, and other design distinctiveness.	...buildings with varying heights, materials, and other design distinctiveness. In addition many of the most iconic buildings are historic, meaning new development may want to draw upon such historic elements.

Area-wide Planning Principles

Height Principles Diagram

This diagram illustrates the height principles along Washington Street. The height ranges shown correspond to the area-wide planning principles:

- Maintaining the lower height neighborhood between West Newton and Newtonville.
- Ensure heights vary along any given block so as to maintain the sense of buildings having developed incrementally over time.
- Maintaining the prominence of historic iconic buildings in the village cores.
- Creating moments of arrival and transition at the edges of the villages.
- Ensure buildings respond to human-scale throughout the area including upper story setbacks on taller buildings.



- Low Heights - Neighborhood Character (1 to 3 stories)
- Low Heights - Village Character (1 to 4 stories)
- Medium Heights - Village Character (3 to 6 stories)

Footnotes:

- This is an illustration of principles only; this is not a regulatory or zoning map.
- Further nuance must be developed in Washington Street Zoning including specifying the limits of each zoning district and the rules for each district and building type.
- The scale of some buildings, including taller height buildings, will require additional review and community input as can be achieved through the Special Permit Process.

## Connect Washington Street to the Charles River Greenway

The Charles River Greenway is a key link in the regional commuter and recreational biking and walking network connecting to Waltham Center, Watertown Square, the Arsenal Mall in Watertown, and ultimately into Boston and Cambridge.

Improved bicycle connections northward to the Charles River Greenway should be considered at the following locations:

- between Washington Street and Albemarle Rd (with bicyclists then following Albemarle Rd to the Greenway and the Greenway Bridge)
- along Watertown St from West Newton Square to Nonantum and then to the Greenway connection in Watertown Yard
- on Crafts St and North St to the Greenway connection



### Bicycle Facilities

- |                    |   |
|--------------------|---|
| Existing Bike Rack | ● |
| Existing Bike Path | — |
| Existing Bike Lane | — |
| Proposed Bike Lane | — |