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Members

Peter Doeringer, Chair
Kelley Brown, Member
Sudha Maheshwari, Member
Jennifer Molinsky, Member
Sonia Parisca, Vice Chair
Chris Steele, Member
Barney Heath, *ex officio*
Kevin McCormick, Alternate
James Robertson, Alternate

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PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT BOARD MEETING MINUTES

July 6, 2020

Members Present:

Peter Doeringer, Chair
Sonia Parisca, Vice Chair
Kelley Brown
Sudha Maheshwari
Jennifer Molinsky
Chris Steele
Kevin McCormick (not voting)
James Robertson (not voting)

Staff Present:

Gabriel Holbrow, Community Engagement Specialist
Zachery LeMel, Chief of Long Range Planning
Cat Kemmett, Planning Associate

Meeting held virtually by Zoom Meeting

1. Workshop on Zoning Redesign: Article 3 Residence Districts

Chair Doeringer opened the meeting at 7:00 pm. He told the Board that they would have a free-form discussion about Zoning Redesign, and hoped to leave this meeting with a better understanding of whether there is a general consensus on the Board for the broad goals for residential zoning and the strategies to achieve that as outlined in the current draft.

Chair Doeringer listed some of the broad goals of the Zoning Redesign, which include:

1. Increase housing options
2. Greater density near village centers
3. Promoting sustainability
4. Minimize tear downs
5. Simplify zoning rules and reduce non-conformities

Mr. Holbrow noted that these goals do differ slightly from the goals that ZAP adopted for Zoning Redesign in April, but are largely consistent with ZAP's adopted goals.

Ms. Molinsky noted that zoning is not in itself a solution to affordability, but it can open opportunities for a greater range of housing types and costs. "Affordability" means different things: it can refer to subsidized housing (based on household income levels), as well as housing that this affordable to a wider range of people

than are able to afford housing in Newton right now. In that way it is important to carefully consider the language the Board uses when discussing affordability and be clear about whether it refers to subsidized housing or something else.

Mr. Brown said that there is confusion about the nature of the housing market. In U.S. cities, including Newton, new housing that gets built is delivering high-end housing to the upper end of the market. Newton is a desirable place so when new units go on the market, there is high demand. But the solution to the housing crisis cannot be to build less housing, it should be to build more housing, and of a variety of types. In Newton, multi-family housing is probably the most single important addition. Mr. Brown underscored the need for market-rate housing since government subsidized units were still not fulfilling the need.

Mr. McCormick agreed with the need to create more market-rate housing, and more housing units in general, which could be achieved in part through multi-unit conversion. Mr. Steele stated that though zoning does not create affordable housing by itself, it does create the environment in which affordable housing can be more easily constructed. Ms. Parisca discussed the need to look into allowing multi-family options near transit, increasing walkable spaces (open space), and lifting parking restrictions. Ms. Maheshwari brought up sustainability and the need to contextualize these discussions because some of these are competing goals.

Mr. Brown brought up one of the goals that ZAP has adopted, which is to preserve neighborhood context in the redesign process. He said that since now we are discussing adding density near transit, parking restrictions must be addressed. He believes that the Board needs to acknowledge these trade-offs, and their position on those trade-offs.

As a reminder, Mr. Holbrow then read ZAP's three adopted goals:

1. Housing: a zoning code more responsive to a demand for housing that serves a range of incomes; promote sustainable community development patterns.
2. Sustainability: environmental stewardship, fiscal strength, meeting community needs
3. Context: preserve and protect what we like in our neighborhoods; encourage new development to fit in the context of our neighborhoods and villages.

Ms. Parisca agreed that there seems to be some tension between the stated ZAP goals and some of what the plan is trying to achieve- we cannot change the density if we must keep the context.

Ms. Molinsky said that a lot of the desirable missing middle housing in Newton came before we had zoning, and people like it. There is something there that we can work with. Newton is unique in its Village context and that context can remain while adding more housing options.

Chair Doeringer said that he is increasingly of the view that single-residence only zoning should be eliminated throughout the City. The demand for housing near transit is so great that any new housing near transit and village centers will be luxury housing. The more attractive we make village centers, the more they will attract people who can pay for expensive housing. He said that if we are going to get affordable housing, it is going to be farther from village centers. We should allow multi-family housing in those areas as well.

Ms. Parisca voiced agreement with this idea but thought it might be hard to achieve politically. Ms. Molinsky said that this is not a radical notion, and similar changes are happening around the country, though she acknowledged it would be a significant change for Newton. Ms. Molinsky said she was wary of using phrases like “abolishing single-family only zoning” because lots of times the “only” gets lost, and we are not talking about abolishing single-family homes or banning them in any way. Mr. LeMel confirmed that no part of the zoning ordinance will ban single family homes, this is not a goal of the redesign process, it just allows for more options.

Chair Doeringer said that what we need is more housing and less cars. The trend has been toward more cars, and that trend is unlikely to stop unless we force people to limit their car use, through mechanisms like parking maximums and maintaining the on-street winter parking ban. The amount of on-site parking and on-street parking needs to be constrained in order to see a significant change in car usage.

Ms. Maheshwari discussed the fact that in certain neighborhoods that are zoned for 2 family homes, but many homeowners will not convert their single family homes to 2 units because they would not be able to add a parking space, which would make the extra unit unattractive to certain buyers. She expressed that parking rules and zoning must go hand in hand in order to achieve our desired outcomes.

Mr. Kelley asked staff if there has been a buildout analysis to determine whether parking will become a constraint to new housing construction. Mr. LeMel said that he does not believe so, but it would be good to investigate the data more, and to look at what other cities do to handle this issue.

The Board then discussed the topic of neighborhood character. Ms. Parisca said that it is important to distinguish what exactly we mean we talk about the character – does it refer to the aesthetics of the built environment, or the density of people in a neighborhood? Because it is possible to increase density while also keeping the character. Ms. Molinsky agreed that people can mean a lot of different things by character, so it can be tricky to talk about broadly. She underscored that rather than try to preserve everything as it is, we should look for where it makes sense to make changes and build things a little differently in the future to achieve our goals.

Mr. Brown asked if this kind of form-based code with components as incentives has been used elsewhere. Mr. LeMel confirmed that some other cities do use form-based codes with components, like Somerville, but is not familiar with the details of how they are used elsewhere as incentives. Mr. McCormick added that this is where multi-unit conversion can be a critical tool because it allows us to retain the character of the area more easily.

Mr. Robertson asked whether we could create an architectural review process similar to the one used in the Back Bay where every new construction undergoes extensive review. Mr. Brown said that this is because the neighborhood has a historical designation, so it could be done but might run counter to the goal of creating more housing and simplifying the process. Mr. McCormick added that Newton already does have several historic districts where the character will be largely retained and likes Ms. Molinsky’s vision of retaining much of the character but looking for the places where change can help create housing and positive change.

Chair Doeringer said that since we've seen a lot of examples of case studies for individual buildings, it might be helpful to see a case study at a higher level, maybe for a whole neighborhood. Mr. LeMel agreed that this would be a good idea, and that it makes to do a few neighborhoods: one close to transit or a village center and some further to reflect the diversity of neighborhood types in the city. Ms. Maheshwari added that neighborhoods that are already zoned for 2-3 families but have remained dominated by single family homes should also be examined so we can better understand what might happen if similar changes are expanded to more of the city. Chair Doeringer said it would be helpful if there was an in-between time where the old ordinance will be phased out and the new one phased in so people can become used to the changes.

Ms. Molinsky brought up some conversations that have been happening at ZAP around the changing demographics of the city, and the long history of exclusionary and racist practices in zoning, housing, lending, and many other aspects of society that Newton and other communities across the country are trying to reckon with and take steps to address. She said it was important to acknowledge these truths and keep them in mind in discussing these zoning reforms, but we can frame things positively, Mr. McCormick agreed that we need to move forward and learn from the exclusionary mistakes of the past.

2. Rezoning of Takings to Public Use

The Board then discussed docket item #287-20, Rezoning of Takings to Public Use: "Director of Planning requesting change of zone to Public Use for portions of land located at 23 Parkview Avenue (currently MR1) acquired in 2016 for the expansion of Cabot School, and at 300 Hammond Pond Parkway, known as Webster Woods, (currently SR1) acquired in 2019 for open space use and conservation purposes." Chair Doeringer asked if 23 Parkview Avenue was a single-family home, and Mr. Robertson confirmed that it was indeed.

Upon a motion by Mr. Steele and seconded by Ms. Parisca, the Board voted unanimously 6-0-0 to recommend approval of this item at 9:01 pm.

3. Planning & Development Project Updates

Mr. Holbrow informed the board that the Riverside project is still at the Land Use Committee, the Riverdale project was approved by the ZBA, and that the Dunstan East project is still at the ZBA.

4. Adjournment

The Board expressed their gratitude and appreciation for Mr. Holbrow, who will be leaving his position with the city at the end of the month, and wished him well. Upon a motion by Ms. Parisca and seconded by Ms. Molinsky, the Board voted unanimously 6-0-0 to adjourn the meeting at 9:09 pm.