

Newton began working to redesign its zoning ordinance in 2011. After a pause to create plans for Needham and Washington Streets, the City Council's Zoning and Planning Committee (ZAP) turned back to zoning redesign in 2020, and from August to December focused on an August [draft of new residential zoning](#). The [Planning Department's presentations on 2-3 December 2020](#) summarized the current status and goals of zoning redesign.

This handout focuses on aspects of zoning that might help to preserve or create accessible, relatively affordable housing:

- **Zoning can affect accessibility either by requiring specific building features** such as no-step entries or wide doorways, **or simply by encouraging single-floor housing**. Most such requirements currently apply only to large, new, elevator-served buildings. The discussion below focuses on how zoning might encourage accessibility in smaller buildings.
- **Zoning affects housing prices only indirectly, by regulating the design, size, and location of buildings**. The discussion below focuses on how to encourage housing that would be *relatively affordable*, for households with annual incomes too high to qualify for subsidized, income-restricted housing (as of 2020, about \$77,000-\$95,000 for a 2-person household) but below the \$250,000 or more required to afford most unsubsidized homes in Newton, where the median price for a single-family house is now about \$1.2 million.
- **Zoning can also help older homeowners on fixed incomes stay in Newton** by allowing them to rent or sell a portion of either their home or their lot.

On its last two pages, this handout includes

- **diagrams of the residential building types that the draft zoning proposes to allow "by right"**, with the zoning districts where each would be allowed; "by right" simply means without requiring a special permit, which must be granted by a vote of the full City Council
- **a map of proposed zoning districts** from fall 2018; this map is slightly out of date, but a comprehensive newer version has not yet been issued

The rest of this handout is organized primarily by the building types in the draft zoning. *Each section highlights a few questions for discussion.*

A **visitability** ordinance could require smaller, new residential buildings to provide no-step entries, wide doorways, and blocking inside walls to support future grab-bars.

- *Does a visitability ordinance seem like a good idea? What size buildings should it cover?*

A **"multi-unit conversion"** subdivides an existing house into two or more units without changing the exterior. The new units are usually less expensive than the house as a whole, and some ground-floor units can be made accessible. The original homeowner can live in one unit and rent or sell the others, providing an incentive to preserve rather than replace large, older homes. The draft zoning proposes to allow such conversions by right throughout the city, but the new units must average at least 1200 sq ft, so not every house could be subdivided.

- *In general, does encouraging multi-unit conversions seem worthwhile?*

Accessory apartments (sometimes called "in-law apartments") are now allowed as rental units throughout Newton. They can provide less expensive housing as well as extra income for the homeowner. However, their maximum size is 1000 sq ft, and accessory units in detached structures – such as carriage houses or garages -- usually require a special permit.

- *Should we allow larger accessory apartments? detached accessory apartments by right?*

The draft zoning proposes to allow **“stacked” 2- and 3-family houses** by right in several districts. Since each unit occupies a single floor, the ground-floor unit can sometimes be made accessible. However, the market demand for such units seems limited in Newton.

- Would older adults want to live in the ground-floor units of “stacked” 2- or 3-family houses?

Side-by-side or **townhomes** often offer little or no accessibility because each unit occupies multiple floors. Also, many large, newer townhouses have sold for \$1.2 million or more. For all of these reasons, the draft zoning limits side-by-side or townhomes to just one zoning district. Yet there is clearly a market demand for this housing type in Newton.

- Should side-by-side or townhomes be allowed in more places? Should we require their ground floors to provide accessible, essential living space so older adults could live there, while other family members, guests or a caregiver used the upper floors?

small apartment houses & small multi-use buildings: Newton’s current zoning requires a special permit for a building with 3 or more housing units, anywhere in the city. To encourage more energy-efficient, *relatively* affordable housing, the draft zoning proposes to allow both small apartment houses with 4-8 units and “small multi-use buildings” by right, near or within mixed-use village centers. The small apartment house’s 8-unit maximum may be too small for elevators, so only the ground-floor units in these buildings might be accessible.

- Would older adults want to live in such small multifamily buildings? Should these building types be allowed in more places? Should the maximum number of units for small apartment houses be increased to 12 or 16, to encourage elevators?

multifamily housing near transit, shopping, and recreation: Having more housing in locations where residents can meet their daily needs while driving less and owning fewer cars could both reduce Newton’s contribution to climate change and make that housing affordable to more people. Based on the AAA’s 2019 estimate that owning a car costs about \$9,200 a year, a household that can get along with 1 car rather than 2 could have \$250,000 more to spend on other needs -- including housing -- over the life of a 30-year mortgage.

- Should we allow more multifamily housing by right near transit and shopping? If so, what forms should this housing take? And how should we define “near”?

regulating unit size: The draft zoning includes minimum average unit sizes for multi-unit conversions or multifamily buildings: 1200 sq ft, or 900 sq ft if the project is 100% income-restricted or exceeds current energy efficiency standards. The smaller minimum is an incentive because it increases a project’s economic return (**how about offering it for accessibility, too?**). Many people have also noted that 2-family houses are not automatically more affordable than 1-family houses, as many new townhouses sell for \$1.2 million or more.** Yet these homes are expensive partly because of their size: often 4 or more bedrooms, and even more bathrooms.

- Should zoning that allows more multifamily housing also include rules or incentives to encourage “modest” housing units with, for example, 2 or 3 bedrooms and 1.5 or 2 bathrooms? Like older adults, the diverse families excluded by single-family zoning often have incomes too high to qualify for income-restricted housing, but too low to afford most current apartments or houses in Newton. Can the same size rules serve both groups?

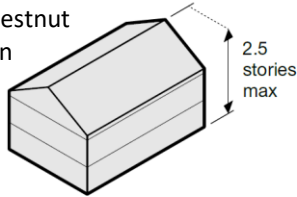
** Note: Many new, large, paired townhomes are built by right under Newton’s current zoning. Encouraging alternative forms of housing on these lots basically requires new zoning.

Proposed By-Right Residential Building Types

- This list is based on the [User's Guide \(Attachment C\) in the Planning Dept.'s August 2020 draft Article 3 of the zoning ordinance](#). It excludes larger, elevator-served residential buildings, most of which will require a special permit from the City Council, regardless of where they are located.
- Some building types below will probably also be allowed by right in the V (village center) districts, but proposed rules for these districts have not been drafted yet.

Single-Family Homes

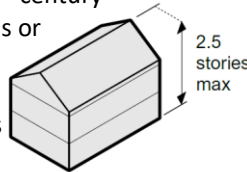
the largest house type, found mostly in neighborhoods such as Chestnut Hill, Waban and West Newton Hill



House A
max footprint 2400 sf



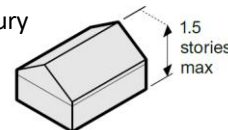
a mid-sized home, such as many 19th-century Victorians or 20th-century Colonials



House B
max footprint 1400 sf



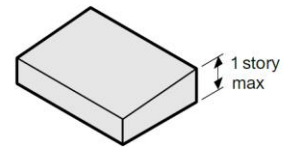
a small home, such as a Cape, mostly built in the 20th century



House C
max footprint 1200 sf



a 1-story "ranch" house, built in the 1950s or later

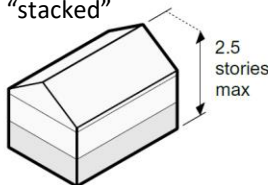


House D
max footprint 2300 sf



Multi-Family Homes & Multi-Use Buildings

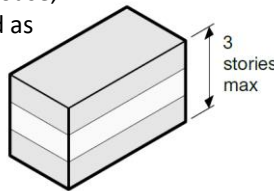
a 2-family house, currently defined as "stacked" (each unit usually on 1 floor)



Duplex
max footprint 1800 sf



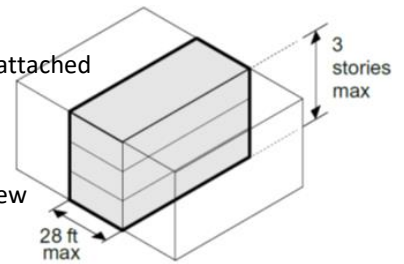
a 3-family house, also defined as "stacked" (each unit usually on 1 floor)



Triple Decker
max footprint 1800 sf



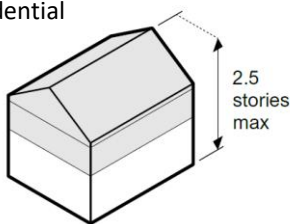
side-by-side, attached 1- or 2-family houses, each with its own entrance; a few in older mill villages, but most built since 1980



Townhouse Section
max footprint 1500 sf



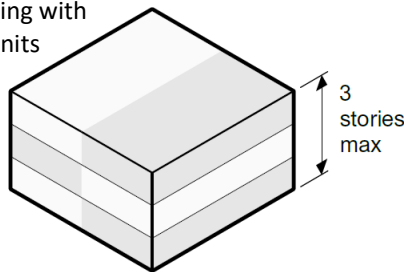
a small building with commercial space on the ground floor and residential space above



Shop House
max footprint 2000 sf



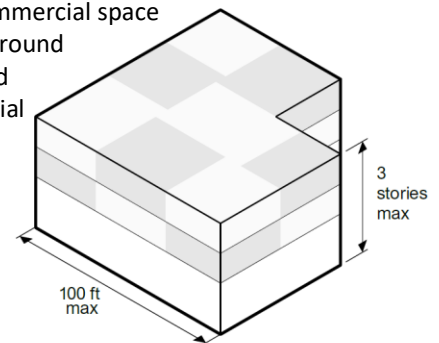
a small, strictly residential building with 4-8 units



Small Apartment House
max footprint 3600 sf



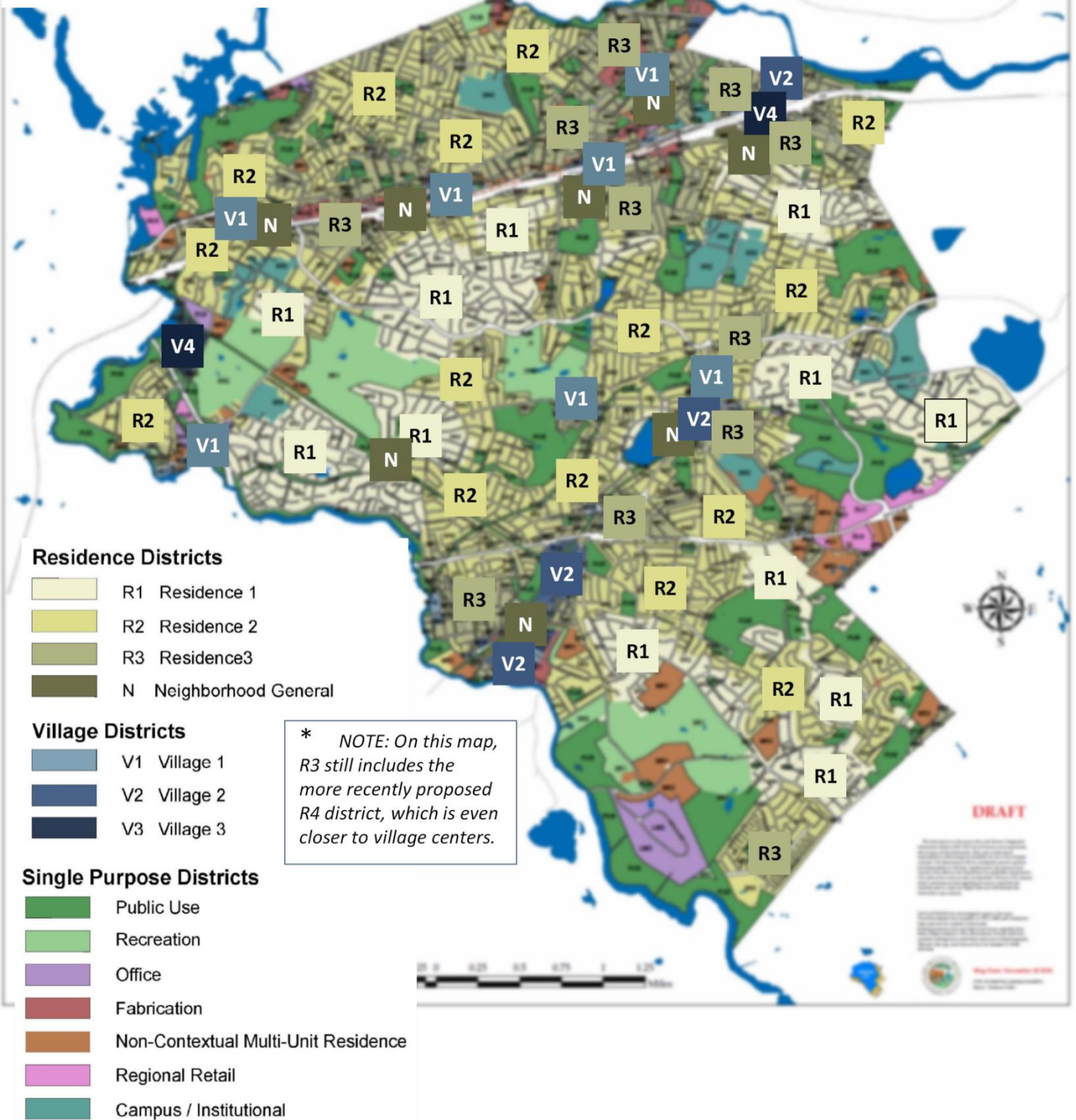
a slightly larger but still fairly small building with commercial space on the ground floor and residential space above



Small Multi-Use Building
max footprint 12000 sf



Proposed Zoning - October 19, 2018
City of Newton, Massachusetts



NOTE: This map was proposed strictly for discussion. As noted above, it is also slightly outdated, even for that purpose, but it is the best available – an updated map showing all districts has not yet been created. This version deliberately shows districts at “low resolution” (with fuzzy boundaries), both to indicate that they are tentative and to discourage trying to identify individual properties.