

NEWTONVILLE AREA COUNCIL: Meeting
Thursday, December 10, 2020: 7:00m p.m.
Kirill Alshewski, Zoom host; Peter Bruce, President

Council members: Susan Reisler, Vice-President; Jessica Aker Archer, Carolyn Gabbay, Martina Jackson, Pam Shufro, Kartikey Trivedi: Dana D'Agostino, absent.

City Council Members: Susan Albright, President; Deb Crossley, ZAP Chair; Lisle Baker, Julia Malakie, Emily Norton, Pam Wright

Attendees also included approximately 50 residents.

1) Gloria Gavis and Meryl Kessler presented a project developed to produce public art, under the aegis of the Committee on Community Design for Arts and Culture, which Ms. Gavis chairs. The Austin Street mural is the first project, spearheaded by Meryl Kessler. NAC member Pam Shufro was liaison to the committee developing arts projects in the Bram Way plaza adjacent to the apartment complex. The committee is seeking additional sites to mount murals and other art forms as a means of enhancing pedestrian traffic and a sense of community. Arlington and Concord are displaying painted doors in walking spaces and Newton will have three on display. Susan Reisler voiced concern that an alley between Bram Way and Walnut Street, a suggested location, was too narrow and dark as an arts venue. Gavis explained that lighting there could be enhanced and that art projects on private property were at the discretion of the owner, while public spaces can be funded by Newton Pride - of which she and Meryl Kessler are members. Kessler noted there will be a call for public art projects in village centers to be displayed from May-November. Peter Bruce suggested Edmands Park as an arts location.

2) Newton Planning Department Community Engagement Specialist Nevena Pilipovic-Wengler joined the meeting addressed citizen participation in the department's Zoning Redesign proposal. She mentioned two recent public Zoom meetings to introduce the proposed zoning changes and to invite public comment - which will be posted on the city website. (*Should I include links to view the presentation and complete the survey? – yes include the links and urge people to fill out the short survey*) The discussions, thus far, have centered on the belief that zoning changes will address racial and income disparity, attainability, and sustainability. Nevena wanted to understand if questions of trust referred to the process or the city staff.

Kirill voiced concern about the broken links on the city website, thereby preventing residents from accessing an on-line survey. He also noted that the website document is three- months old and wanted information about the current

document. Nevena promised to address both concerns. Nevena said that ZAP is working on Article 3 of Newton's zoning code and invited City Council President Susan Albright to comment. According to Albright, ZAP is discussing the "garage ordinance," not in Article 3, to reduce garage prominence from the street, and promised more website responsiveness. Peter Bruce asked for easier ZAP and Washington Street Survey access. He also complained that the December 10 meeting notice and the October meeting minutes had been removed from the City's NAC website.

Addressing the issue of trust, Bruce said that the NAC's Washington Street survey clearly indicated resident preference for building heights limited to four stories and no more than 250 units, but that the city seemed not to care about those results or parts of the Principle Group's survey that indicated that most people thought it was important to minimize development on Washington Street. Gabbay felt that the Zoning Redesign presentations were more advocacy than opportunities for public feedback, and reported that some breakout room recordings did not begin to record at the beginning of the sessions. Tarik Lucas, former NAC member, reported that the Area Council sent out 11,000 postcards to Wards 1, 2, and 3 residents, as invitations to the Washington Street survey. He recommended that medium and a non-binding referendum on zoning change. Reisler suggested that a brief survey distributed with the City's January census was the best means of public feedback and said it should be included in the census envelope. Ed Olhava felt that many people don't respond to mail and suggested social media options. Nevena reported that the city is working with a group of high school - NextGen Voices - to attract more young people.

Kartikey Trivedi questioned the economic purpose of zoning redesign, recommending an economic study, because the city spent \$500,000 searching for a senior center site, ultimately returning to its current site. Nevena cited the Boston-area housing supply issue as a reason for zoning redesign. Kartikey asked if the expensiveness of new housing really answers the question about the need for more affordable housing. Former Newton Alderman Peter Harrington said people tend not to trust government and wondered if the city is interested in qualitative or quantitative results. He believes that incremental changes would be better for the environment and housing mix. President Albright responded that the City Council has been working on zoning since 2011 and asked if the NAC had ever heard a presentation by City Councilors on the goals of Zoning Redesign. (Bruce responded that Councilor Crossley had made such a presentation recently. She suggested that Nevena make a presentation to the NAC to reinforce that understanding. She also asserted that the \$500,000 was not wasted in the NewCal relocation effort, and that an architect is currently working on plans for it.

Pam Shufro felt the goals have changed since the initial zoning redesign discussion. She said limiting non-conforming use as a goal has taken a back seat to adding population to village centers which are increasingly at-risk in the Covid era. Moreover, she said there is not enough discussion about racial justice and climate change, and zoning redesign will not do much to meet these challenges. Newton is a wealthy community, but has not provided sufficient measures to build more affordable housing, and while zoning may help incrementally, much more needs to be done immediately. In response to questions from Kirill about the urgency in making the survey available, City Councilor Julia Malakie proposed a link to the zoning website survey for people paying their water bills on-line, as well as a banner on the city website linking to the zoning redesign page. Gabbay noted that Julia Malakie suggested a simple “widget” to help people calculate their, and their neighbors, before and after (zoning redesign) property values. She said that there were better ways to achieve social goals than by profit-driven developers, who, after tearing down a single modestly priced house prefer to build side-by-side units, charging over \$1 million for each. Jessica Aker Archer advocated for more IT staff and said that the 1950s zoning code doesn’t fit current needs.

3) City Councilor Pam Wright discussed the proposed changes in Article 3 of the zoning code and its impact in Newtonville, particularly in R2, R3 and R4 districts (see the slide presentation featured on the NAC website’s homepage). The proposed zoning will allow building homes on smaller lots, in addition to two-family units across the city and multi-unit conversions for most existing homes. Today, tear-downs lead to more expensive multi-unit development, and expensive replacement homes/condos will continue with the proposed zoning changes. The new garage proposal for the current zoning ordinance will reduce “snout” garages, in front of houses, thereby reducing their prominence from the street. A public hearing is scheduled in January. Kirill commented that the new setbacks incentivize tear-downs, and that is true of his neighborhood, where nonconforming houses will become tear-downs.

Robert Fizek asked if zoning redesign is really necessary and questioned its cost. Pam Wright noted that not all councilors believe redesign is necessary. She expressed concern about the density created by redesign with new multi-family houses everywhere. 25% of city lots would be able to have a rear lot subdivisions. Fizek, an architect, noted that zoning redesign’s original purpose was to reduce nonconforming houses. Councilor Wright agreed that was the original goal, but it is not happening and that new housing is more expensive than the tear-downs they replace. Councilor Lisle Baker said the numbers are hard to get at, but the goals aren’t being met by zoning. He noted the Planning Department hasn’t produced an analysis demonstrating that zoning redesign is a good idea. He also observed that zoning redesign is being used to achieve

housing goals, but not whether redesign really meets those goals . ZAP Chair Deb Crossley said the problems include climate change, transportation and housing availability. She believes the goals haven't changed but the world has, which occasionally requires new regulations and that the special permit process is protection for non-conforming use. Councilor Wright responded that cost estimates come from the Planning Department. Mr. Harrington commented on the uniformity of houses in the slides, but that conformity isn't typical of Newton or desirable for it. He said that more emphasis on low- and middle-income housing won't come from private developers, who are in business to make profits . Government involvement is necessary for that. . Councilor Wright observed that commercial taxes generate more revenue for the city and require fewer services, and that Watertown and Waltham were able to build new schools without an override because of their commercial base. She added that we are pricing seniors and others out of housing because of the ever-increasing property tax.

4) Scott Oran, developer of 28 Austin Street, presented a new planters replacing the current blue Jersey barriers sealing off the plaza area on the Philip Bram Way. . He also proposed Adirondack chairs at the combined cost (mostly for the planters) of \$8000-\$12,000. Gabbay quoted from the City Council Board Order noting that NAC funds were for social and cultural activities rather than beautification. President Albright also remarked that older people had difficulty getting out of Adirondack chairs. She further commented that Mr. Oran's proposal might require a "consistency review" (of the Board Order by the Law Department). Scott Oran said the Philip Bram Way is city property. Peter Bruce wondered if we could raise money from the public for the movable planters.

5) Gabbay asked for approval of the October minutes. The minutes were approved by Peter, Susan, Kirill, Carolyn, Martina and Pam.

6) Peter Bruce noted that there would be a special election for at-large City Council members in Wards 1 and 2 and asked for volunteers to help coordinate debates. Tentatively, Carolyn and Jess agreed. Rena Getz suggested that the debates be held together to no objection. Peter will reach out to the other area council chairs. Rena offered to help. Albright said mail-in voting is certain, but early voting has not yet been approved. March 16th is the date of the special election. Rep. John Lawn will offer legislation to allow early voting as well.

7) Meeting was adjourned at 10:01 p.m.

