



Summary Report

Building Shape, Size, and Form in Neighborhoods and Village Centers

This summary report is for the Zoning Redesign event on Thursday March 15, 2018 and the presentation slides and video of the presentation are available online (www.courbanize.com/newtonzoning). An informational sheet was published ahead of the event and is appended to this report. The event was well attended by over 70 people.

Community Feedback: Neighborhood Design Policy

Neighborhood Design Policy

Goal: To promote compatibility in neighborhood design

1. Front doors for the "Trick-or-Treat" test
2. Update contextual front setbacks for neighborhood context
3. Character features in setback : porches, vestibules, front entries, cornices & trims

The premise of the design policies proposed by staff is that, in general, new zoning should encourage similar design principles found in the existing forms of Newton's neighborhoods and village centers. Community discussions at the event acknowledged that Newton's charm is in the form of its diverse neighborhoods and villages and that new zoning should require good design. In general, attendees were supportive of the idea that zoning has a strong role to play in maintaining the context of Newton's neighborhoods through design review and dimensional controls. Continuations of existing patterns should be allowed by-right to a large extent.

Yet, there was concern that zoning not mandate design to the extent that a more organic built form emerges. One group came to agreement that design policies need to take into account the diversity of housing types and cultural backgrounds that shape how people design and use their homes and yards.

Another table asked, since not all neighborhoods in Newton look the same, how would design principles be implemented? Some attendees wanted to see more mention of historic and aesthetic features in design principles. Attendees urged that any process for design review be prompt and make use of pre-development review meetings.

To the extent that small group discussions responded to the proposals regarding front door accessibility, or the “trick-or-treat” test, and contextual front setbacks, these two topics were generally well received. One group connected the design of front door accessibility to not allowing double-wide garages or snout-nosed houses.

Groups discussed dimensional limits for house sizes. One group wanted to see smaller allowable FAR generally and in the case a house was demolished a requirement that it only be rebuilt within 20% of old FAR. Another group voiced strongly that FAR is a failed tool within Newton’s existing zoning. This group was interested in dimensional controls for height and setbacks. A different discussion group proposed increasing side setbacks in some locations while allowing buildings to be closer to each other in other areas. Several groups discussed that maintaining modestly sized homes is a good thing but encouraging this via zoning without overregulating and allowing some flexibility is challenging. Another group asked how to reconcile zoning that includes design review and standards as needed to maintain context without taking away from individual property rights.

For multi-family dwellings, one group proposed zoning that encouraged some housing types discussed at the December 14, 2017 event as ‘missing middle’ options, such as three-family buildings by right, cluster housing, several smaller detached homes on one lot, co-housing, and housing types with shared community space. This group proposed that a higher FAR calculation should be allowed in instances where smaller detached structures are allowed on one lot. These could be part of the solution for providing more options for senior friendly living situations besides senior condo living or group homes.

Community Feedback: Large House Policy

Large House Policy

Goal: To promote compatible houses in neighborhoods and provide predictable outcome for the community

1. Disincentivize incompatible construction

- Limit size of house that can be built by right & discourage bulky construction
- Reduce minimum lot size to allow contextual building types
- Eliminate unintended consequences - i.e. pedestal houses, low pitched roof
- Design Review

In general, event attendees supported zoning measures that disincentivize teardowns of small houses and replacement with much larger houses. Groups asked what thresholds would be used to determine a 'large house' especially considering the different built forms of Newton's neighborhoods. One group recommended that the threshold be set depending on the neighborhood context, rather than citywide. Several discussion groups were comfortable with setting dimensional limits for large houses and to re-examine FAR and instead provide tangible limits determining what can be built.

Different groups asked questions about what options would remain for large houses. Several groups expressed interest in the subdivision of large lots and preferred that there be a preference for "clustered" homes to preserve open yard space. A group recommended large homes be allowed to internally subdivide. There was interest in seeing that zoning allow a stacked two-family house in instances where it allows two-family attached houses. This arrangement could potentially allow more open space and accessibility.

One table discussion suggested large house review policy be informed by principles from historic districts. A group recommended speaking to builders about what features are needed to make a house attractive to families today and how to achieve that in a moderately sized building.

Many questions remained regarding large house review including what impact new limits may have on land values, if zoning could reward for remodeling instead of rebuilding, and if a stacked two-family could be encouraged instead of side-by-side two-family.

Village Centers & Commercial Corridors Policy

Goal: Promote design excellence and compatibility with context for new and infill projects

1. Incorporate design elements into commercial zones (as is currently in MU4)
 - High percentage of transparency on ground floors
 - Sign reviews
 - Update lighting standards
2. Be compatible with scale at transitions to residential neighborhoods
3. Require parking behind buildings & walk-up entrances from the street
4. Add design criteria for public open spaces

Group discussions were supportive of several design principles highlighted in the presentation, especially requiring parking to be located behind buildings, encouraging public realm enhancements like sidewalk cafes, zoning for the appropriate level of pedestrian down-lighting, and requiring both business signage and wayfinding signs. More transparency in storefronts was a high priority among several groups.

Similar to the neighborhood design principles, groups supported ways to preserve the unique and varying contexts of Newton's village centers. One group supported a mix of building heights in villages

centers. There were several groups who had questions about or objected to using 'corridor' to describe areas of Newton like Needham Street, Route 9 and Washington Street. The existing MU4 zone was not supported by one group who recommended removing it altogether. Attendees wanted to find ways to connect transportation and buildings using policy for example a shuttle system between villages, which was the subject of the January 18, 2018 meeting. Another group suggested using parking stations as a buffer between residential and commercial uses. A different group discussed environmental sustainability goals including energy efficient buildings, more incentives for green buildings, encouraging smart growth, cluster living, etc.

Groups were supportive of the idea of using zoning to transition between neighborhoods and village centers. Stepping the sizes of buildings near taller buildings was supported as well as using zoning to preserve open space in general and open space next to varying lots. One group supported zoning that would allow more people near villages including more zoning for housing and mixed uses. The same group suggested zoning should allow more different uses in the same building by right.

What's Next?

There were several comments on the process for zoning and design review, which happens to be the topic of next month: "What's the Process? How Stuff Gets Built in Newton" on April 12, 2018.