



CITY OF NEWTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Newton Housing Partnership

August 26, 2020

Ruthanne Fuller,
Mayor

Dear Mayor Fuller and Chairperson Crossley,

Barney Heath,
Director
Planning & Development

The Newton Housing Partnership (NHP) appreciates your leadership and commitment to the zoning redesign process -- an unprecedented and powerful opportunity to create a zoning code that will make it possible to diversify and expand housing options, including housing that is more affordable than options currently available in Newton. Given the magnitude of this opportunity, we have appointed a four-member working group charged with overseeing the Partnership's input throughout the redesign process based on the following goals:

Members:

Lizbeth Heyer, Chair
Mark Caggiano
Eliza Datta
Chuck Eisenberg
John Hennessey
Kathy Marchi
Josephine McNeil
Marva Serotkin
Stephen Tise

- Create zoning that allows for a greater diversity of housing types. The Partnership supports a diverse housing stock for Newton with a mix of options that includes both rental and ownership, multifamily and single-family, and smaller homes and apartments that offer lower price points.
- Create zoning that supports more housing in locations that offer greater and more equitable social and economic opportunities for low and middle-income households. This includes in locations that have access to transportation, jobs, and services.
- Create zoning rules that provide predictability, simplify the approvals process, and reduce the cost of housing production, including reducing and eliminating special permit requirements in certain districts to allow for more as of right multi-family development.

Even in an economic crisis, Newton housing is extremely expensive. The current average rent is \$2,800 and the median sales price is \$1,300,000. The primary reasons for this are the lack of vacant sites and the attendant high price for buildable sites as well as the inadequacy of supply relative to demand. These factors are only exacerbated by Newton's zoning regulations and permitting process where only single-family dwellings are allowed as of right in most residential districts and restrictive minimum lot sizes are imposed. As a result, Newton is even less affordable and less diverse than it has been in the past.

It has been fifty years since the original version of Chapter 40B passed the State Legislature and yet Newton still has not achieved 10% affordability. There are three ways to develop more affordable and lower cost housing: build more subsidized housing, build more projects with inclusionary units, and increase the stock of smaller, more affordable units throughout the City via new zoning requirements. For Newton to significantly increase the affordable stock we must do all three.

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At the present time, the only affordable housing being created in Newton is in larger multi-family projects with some inclusionary or subsidized units. These projects take years to permit and develop and add a minimal number of affordable units to the housing stock each year. Moreover, many of Newton's larger development sites are being developed, so future projects will by necessity likely be much smaller.

The current Zoning Redesign effort offers an opportunity to encourage the creation of lower cost housing via smaller units, particularly for middle-income households throughout Newton. As it is envisioned, the Zoning Redesign draws on the concept of form-based zoning, which emphasizes the compatibility of structures rather than the micro-management of uses, an approach that we support because it allows for incremental and contextual change over time by setting new standards across the city.

Article 3

At our August 2020 meeting, the Partnership voted to support adoption of Article 3-Residence Districts of the Zoning Revisions under consideration, including several suggested revisions, because these new form-based guidelines will result in the creation of more housing with the same or similar envelopes, leading to lower cost in smaller unit types. Article 3-Residence Districts deals with current residential districts in the City and, as proposed, contain several specific changes which we believe will lead to more housing that is lower cost:

- Existing homes in residential districts will be allowed to be converted into multiple units by right depending on the size of the property. (Section 3.5.2 would allow up to six-units as of right if the building is at least 7,200 square feet and the parking requirements can be met on site).
- New structures will be allowed to have two units as of right in predominantly single-family neighborhoods provided that they meet the bulk and dimensional requirements that contextually align with existing homes in the area. Examples of typical single-family homes can be found in Sections 3.2.3, 3.2.4 and 3.2.6.
- Parking requirements will be eliminated for one- and two-unit buildings which will provide for appropriate flexibility to increase the number of units.
- Sections 3.1.5 and 3.1.6 provide for the subdivision of lots in R4 and N districts into smaller parcels, the elimination of minimum lots size requirements (actually, in all districts), and the encouragement of denser development. "Transitional zones" surrounding transit nodes and village centers are an excellent location for lower scale multifamily housing (often referred to as "gentle density") and even mixed-use development.



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The Partnership has three recommendations that we believe will strengthen the Article 3 revisions under consideration:

- First, many cities are now allowing and encouraging accessory apartments that are not directly connected to the main dwelling. We have these in Newton where there are large houses with converted detached garages or barns, but they are not as of right. This should be considered.
- Second, the revised draft recommends unit sizes of 1,200 square feet. If this is an average size for a property, then we support this change. If it is a minimum for all units, we consider that to be excessive and counter to the effort to achieve affordability.
- Third, as long as new structures meet the bulk and dimensional requirements that contextually align with existing homes in the area and parking requirements can be met on site, up to four units should be allowed as of right instead of two.

All of these changes will enhance housing affordability in the City of Newton by increasing the overall stock, allowing for smaller, less expensive housing units and creating more rental units. They will also encourage housing that is lower cost to be dispersed throughout the City rather than concentrated in a few locations.

Especially as Newton's Housing prices continue to escalate while the need for housing that is inclusive and affordable to all is unprecedented, we urge you to adopt changes to the zoning code that will support a meaningful and measured impact on our housing supply. Adopting the changes to Article 3 under consideration, together with our recommended amendments is an important first step.

Thank you for your consideration,


Lizbeth Heyer, Partnership Chair

Cc.
Council President Susan Albright
Councilor Jacob D. Auchincloss
Councilor Lisle Baker
Councilor Alicia Bowman
Councilor Allan Ciccone, Jr.
Councilor Victoria L. Danberg
Councilor Andreae Downs
Councilor Leonard J. Gentile
Councilor Maria Scibelli Greenberg
Councilor Rebecca Walker Grossman

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Councilor Marc C. Laredo
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Planning for the Future