

Zoning Redesign: Village Centers – Vision Kit Companion

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Hello everyone, thank you for taking the time to explore the history of Newton's village centers with us. My name is Zachery LeMel and I am the head of Long Range Planning with the City Planning Department. This presentation is part of the Vision Kit companion material to help guide the Newton community in participation of this phase of Zoning Redesign focused on village centers. Although we can't be together in person, this presentation is meant to be a conversation starter. We hope it encourages asking questions and looking at things a little differently as you are running an errand, waiting for the train, meeting a friend for lunch, or just wandering about. We also want to say from the start: please send us your corrections, comments, and questions. We may have gotten something wrong or left something out of this very short presentation.

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This presentation includes some historical images and interpretations about how and why Newton's villages evolved through time, so it may inform how we want to shape them for the future. The presentation also includes some thoughts about what makes a village center a village center. At the end, we share some additional historic resources for digging more deeply into Newton's development history and for getting involved with the ongoing Zoning Redesign effort.

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Newton can be seen as a series of historical layers, superimposed on one another. Each layer has been shaped by often unrelated or even conflicting forces: technology, markets, economic activities, public policies. Using history can help us see how places like village centers responded to all these forces over time to produce the places we see today.

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Ask someone how many village centers Newton has and you may get a few different answers. Village centers are Newton's primary mixed-use areas serving as the commercial and retail hearts of the City. These centers often provide an identity for the neighborhoods that encompass them. They are walkable and pedestrian friendly, typically, and serve as places for community gathering, socializing, and shopping. Many are accessible by at least one form of public transit. Many were originally civic and cultural centers, and to a lesser extent they still are today. The map shown here was generated using different city data sets about the criteria just listed. It should be thought of as a general overview of the patterns that exist today. It is not a comprehensive description or meant to capture the full diversity of Newton's village centers.

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Newton is continuously developing and has done so for nearly 400 years. Some early settlements formed around the sites of mill dams along the Charles River, with the first mill opening in Upper Falls in 1688. Since then, transportation options like railroads, streetcars/buses, and automobiles have strongly shaped both the location, development, and the redevelopment of Newton's village centers.

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After World War II, as automobile ownership became more common, the areas around Newton's established village centers began to fill in with the more auto-dependent development that many people think of as typically "suburban." As this map and the next slide both illustrate, this was particularly true on the south side of the city, which developed mostly after the war and without the transit options that strongly influenced earlier development north of Boylston Street (now Route 9).

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Most Newton's buildings are old enough to be considered historic, even more so in and around village centers. These maps reinforce the previous observation that until the widespread use of the automobile, village centers (whether organized around transportation or industry) acted as the gravitational centers of growth and development. The fixed train lines are shown on these maps, while the former streetcar lines are not. Looking at these old streetcar lines further paints the picture of how past development mostly occurred along transit. The link below goes to an interactive map of Newton's streetcar lines created by a Newton Resident.

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So what makes, and historically what has made, village centers Newton's vibrant mixed-use areas today? To orient ourselves, let's use some of the themes being explored in the Vision Kit, like environment, housing, and economic development. What follows are tiny snapshots and by no means an exhaustive review.

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Historically, cities and towns have sought to control nature through development. Newton's earliest villages were situated along the Charles River, harnessing its power to operate mills and factories. Outside of village centers, the river was used to move the waste created by these very same factories away from where people lived and worked. For example, Newton's municipal water supply system drew drinking water from the Charles River and Cutler Pond upstream of Upper Falls – knowing full well that the water downstream of the factories was not safe. Thinking towards the future, how do we think we can work with nature, rather than trying to control it?

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By 1831, Upper Falls was a bustling mill village with approximately 55 houses. Laborers' housing, small one-and-a-half story cottages, tenements, and boarding houses lined both Elliot St and the Worcester Turnpike. While, the factory workers resided in housing close to the mills, an emerging middle class of shopkeepers and skilled professionals built their houses higher up on the hillside, with the best sites reserved for the mill owners...but still close. The village center was a real mixture that provided for the various needs of the different groups of people living and working in the area.

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Many village centers were shaped by speculative development tied to transit. For example, William Jackson lobbied actively for the railroad that eventually became the commuter rail, anticipating that it would bring a demand for housing from a new type of resident, the suburban commuter. Jackson created his first speculative development on Walnut Park in Newton Corner, but he later brought together a group of investors to purchase and subdivide 120 acres of land adjacent to the Auburndale village center and train stop. Later in the 19th century, a planned residential development called "Newton Terraces" included a proposed streetcar along what is now Waban Avenue, to connect residents to the village center and the recently created passenger service on what later became the Green Line. But Newton Terraces and its proposed streetcar line were never actually built.

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As noted earlier, some of Newton's village centers developed around industry, including paper mills, tanneries, woodworking and furniture manufacturing. The buildings shown on this slide no longer exist, but as the next slide shows, some of Newton's historic industrial buildings are still visible and in use today.

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We are always finding new ways to use old spaces. The former Silver Lake Cordage Company Building was converted to offices in the 1980s and serves as a great example of adaptive reuse. How do you think other historic and new village center spaces will be used as trends and needs change over time?

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Until the early 20th century, residents around village centers obtained daily or weekly goods and services from businesses within walking distance of their homes. Think back to those development pattern maps shown previously. The onset of shopping centers and cars meant people could drive to pick up clothes or groceries, making it harder for businesses in village centers to survive. This parallels the challenge that e-commerce poses for local brick-and-mortar businesses today.

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The initial patterns of development in our village centers predate zoning, with public buildings like courthouses, city hall, libraries, fire stations, and schools all situated near one another. These civic and cultural spaces were critical economic anchors for the village centers, encouraging parents, children, and workers to eat, shop, and play on their way to or from school and work. We know it is not so easy to bring back public buildings to village centers, especially not through zoning alone. But, something to think about is, how could other public investments or activities help to create new “anchors” for village centers?

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And finally, as mentioned before, village centers provide a sense of identity to neighborhood. They provide the setting or backdrop for community gatherings, be it a local event – a parade, festival, or theater production, or just daily outing - going to the playground or meeting a friend for lunch.

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When it comes to transportation, Newton is lucky to have a variety of options. But these options have also created some challenges. In the 1960s, construction of Route 128 (now I-95) nearly eliminated the village center of Lower Falls on the Newton side of the Charles River. The 1960s extension of the Massachusetts Turnpike is also often blamed for creating a canyon through Newton's northside villages. Yet the Pike didn't create this divide...rather it widened a division created in the early 20th century when the City of Newton moved the northern railroad tracks below grade for safety reasons. At the same time, the City elevated streets over the southern tracks, as seen in these photos of Newton Highlands.

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How did people get to and from the village center train stations? Horses covered the “last mile” between homes and train stations for far longer than we sometimes realize. Newton residents who couldn't simply walk to work but couldn't afford their own horses and carriages relied on livery stables and horse cabs. Today, we have a growing bike share system that is helping to cover that “last mile.” Who knows what is next -- electric scooters? driverless vehicles? something else?

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In Newton Centre, eminent domain was used in the 1940s to create new parking lots behind stores on Centre Street and Langley Road. The corners of the divided common were rounded off, to smooth the flow of car traffic, which actually made it less safe for pedestrians. In the 1960s, the Mason School that once occupied the central triangle was demolished and replaced by the new Mason Rice School, built outside the immediate center on a portion of the Newton

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Centre Playground. Proposals were solicited for what to do with the triangle. In the end it became a parking lot.

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As we have seen, Newton's village centers have evolved over time, but they have seen relatively little new development since before World War II, and even since Newton first adopted zoning in the early 1920s. As a result, these centers are full of what traditional zoning considers "nonconforming uses," meaning what exists now could not be built under current rules. What does the future of our village centers look like, and how can zoning best support that future? We want to hear from you! The village center Vision Kit is a document can help you explore your village center, reflect on how you currently experience it and imagine what it could be in the future. Your observations and ideas will help the City of Newton identify areas of research for how to update the zoning for village centers. Following the link here will get you to the Vision Kit and other ways for you to participate.

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Interested in more history? Use these links for city and other local resources to explore different maps, guided walking tours, historic photos, and more!

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Thank you for participating! We very much look forward to hearing from you and will end here with the different ways to connect with the Planning Department and others in the Newton Community.