

# Vision Kit Companion for Newton Village Centers



City of Newton  
Department of Planning & Development  
Summer 2021

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## Introduction to the Vision Kit Companion

We have developed the Vision Kit Companion for those interested in a deeper dive into village centers. This Companion includes:

Additional **history and policy considerations and graphics** for each theme listed in the Vision Kit

A compiled table of **past strategies/goals and actions/objectives** taken from previous planning and policy documents related to village centers

A presentation that **explores the history of Newton's village centers** to better understand how and why village centers evolved through time, so it may inform how we want to shape village centers in the future

## Accessing the Vision Kit

Looking to access the Vision Kit or the Online Interactive Forum? Use this link to the main Zoning Redesign - Village Centers website:

**<https://www.newtonma.gov/zoningredesign/vc>**

## Did We Miss Something? Contact Us!

We may have missed something or gotten something wrong. You also may have questions about the Vision Kit or the community engagement for the Village Centers. Please send us your comments, questions, or corrections to **[zoningredesign@newtonma.gov](mailto:zoningredesign@newtonma.gov)**.

# What is a Village Center?

history + policy considerations + graphics

## history

Newton is unique, with over 13 village centers. They have developed extensively since the 1800s along transit routes and some go as far back as the 1600s, when Newton was known as "Cambridge Village." Looking closely, you may find some of these different layers of history in your village center!

## policy consideration

Though Newton's village centers developed over different time periods and at different scales, most are now predominantly zoned as the same district (Business 1 - BU1). Village centers are full of what traditional zoning considers "nonconforming uses", meaning what exists now could not be built today under current rules.

Looking ahead, trying to fit these dynamic village centers under one zoning district can undercut rather than preserve their historic significance and mixed use.



served by public transit



community gathering spaces



smaller / local retail and office



pedestrian friendly

# Environment

history + policy considerations + graphics



## history

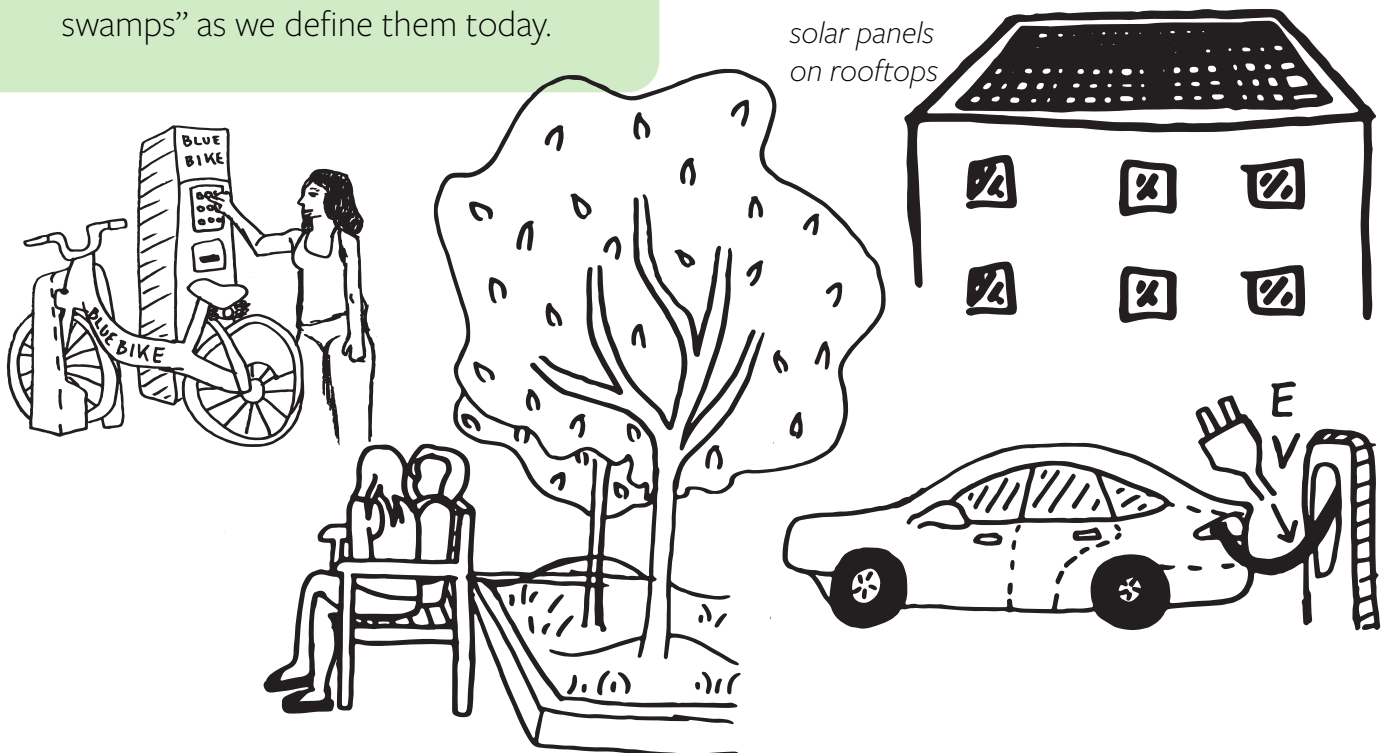
Historically, cities and towns have sought to control nature through development. For example, many areas of the City were built on top of wetlands and other low lying areas by filling them in with dirt and soil, with little regard for the impact this would have on the natural environment.

See this [1892 map of Newton areas requiring drainage \(a\)](#) compared to our [current wetlands and conservation areas \(b\)](#). We can infer that “areas requiring drainage” would have been considered “wetlands, marshes, or swamps” as we define them today.

## policy consideration

Buildings and automobiles often are responsible for large percentages of a city’s greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs).

For example, they make up 89% of Newton’s! Through Newton’s [Climate Action Plan \(CAP\)](#) (c), the City lays out how future projects (buildings, streets, parks, etc.) can work with nature to improve water quality, create new opportunities for pedestrians and cyclists, reduce paving, and increase green space.





# Housing

history + policy considerations + graphics



## history

Newton's **first zoning map (1921)** (d) zoned the areas in/around village centers as General Residence and Business, which allowed a variety of multi-family house types (houses with 3 or more units, apartment buildings, and boarding houses). At the same time around the country, you could order a complete four-family home from a Sears and Roebuck catalog for under \$5,000. Over the course of the last century, stricter zoning laws in Newton and in cities and towns across the country have typically made it increasingly difficult to build multi-family housing.

## policy consideration

In order to achieve the goals laid out in the Comprehensive Plan, which guides the City's land use policies, it states "development of housing in mixed-use areas can lead to maintaining strong, vibrant village centers." However, many of these areas that allowed multi-family housing as part of Newton's first zoning code either no longer allow it or require City Council approval, whether a project has 3-, 30-, or 300-units.



Apartment Building in  
Newton Centre

Triplex in  
Newton Corner

Multiplex in  
Newtonville

Live-Work housing  
type in Newton  
Highlands

# Shopping, Eating + Working

history + policy considerations + graphics



## history

Until the early 20th century, residents around village centers obtained daily or weekly goods and services from businesses within walking distance of their homes. 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 more modern day struggles local businesses face today with e-commerce.

## policy consideration

During the pandemic, businesses and restaurants have struggled to safely connect with their customers and communities. In response, Newton's emergency changes include Newton All Fresco, enabling restaurants to utilize sidewalks and parking lots for outdoor dining. This was only possible because of the Governor's emergency declaration!

Going forward, greater flexibility of zoning, and other regulations, could better support local businesses' creative ways to connect with the community.



*Newton All Fresco Street*



*Places to study or work*

# Accessibility

history + policy considerations + graphics

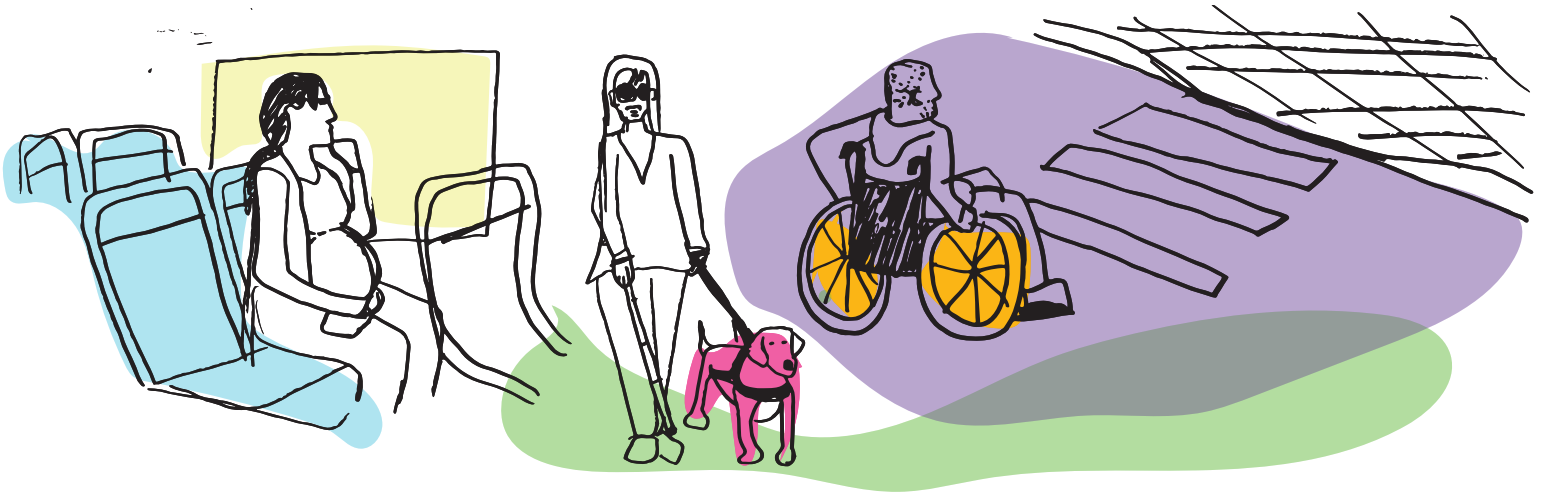


## history

Many of the buildings in Newton today were designed without consideration for disability access. The Americans With Disabilities act (ADA), passed in 1990, established the minimum standards for accessibility for alterations and new construction of commercial facilities and privately owned public spaces. It also requires public accommodations to remove barriers in existing buildings, which has increased access in the form of elevators, ramps, auditory signals, and more in public spaces. For reference, more than 75% of Newton's buildings were built before 1949, well before the ADA.

## policy consideration

Today we have a better understanding that making public spaces accessible to people with disabilities helps everyone. **Universal Design** (e) is an approach to the design of places and products that focuses on meeting the needs of everyone, so that it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability, or disability. For example, features originally designed with disability access in mind like an automatic door opener can be helpful not just for someone using a wheelchair, but also for someone with an armload of packages or a parent pushing a stroller. Zoning can incorporate elements of Universal Design to better meet the needs of all.





# Inclusive, Diverse + Welcoming Spaces

history + policy considerations + graphics



## history

Like the State and Country, Newton has become more racially and ethnically diverse since the late 20th century. In 1980, people of color made up only 5% of Newton's population, while today that number is closer to 26% ([Newton Demographics Report](#) (f)). However, the percentage of people of color remains lower than the State (32%) and the Country (42%) overall ([U.S. Census data](#) (g)).

*BLM Protestors on Washington Street*



## policy consideration

In honor of Fair Housing Month (April), the City Council passed a [resolution](#) (h) commending Newton's Fair housing Committee (NFHC) in recognition of their important work in furthering fair access to housing and providing equal opportunity for all within Newton. More broadly, the Mayor's Office has created the [Overdue: Confronting Race and Racism](#) (i) series that aims to equip and empower our community with the understanding, knowledge, and skills to actively fight racism both in Newton and beyond.



*The Monologue Project: Voices of Color (created by Newton High School students of color)*

# Arts + Culture

history + policy considerations + graphics



## history

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. In addition, village centers provided a sense of identity to the neighborhood by serving as the backdrop for community artistic and cultural gatherings - parades, festivals, theater productions, etc. This remains true today through events like the Halloween Window decorating annual event.

## policy consideration

We know that truly vibrant village centers require not only a mix of commercial and residential uses, but also significant civic, arts, and culture amenities to create a unique sense of place. Zoning allows for the creation of spaces dedicated to arts and culture, but does not necessarily encourage them. New development and redevelopment in village centers offers opportunities for embedding arts and culture in spaces, programs, and collaborations. We can support arts and artist spaces through zoning that allows for flexibility, like a live-work space for artists or allowing manufacturing buildings to be converted to studios.



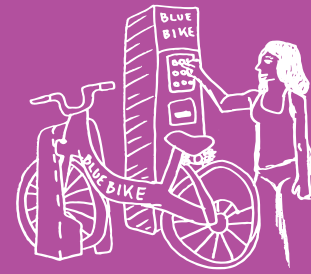
*Halloween Window Painting*



*Mural in Newtonville*

# Transportation

history + policy considerations + graphics



## history

The Massachusetts Turnpike is often blamed for creating a canyon through Newton's northside villages. But really, the Pike merely widened the already existing narrower canyon created by the City of Newton when it moved the railroad tracks below grade in the early 20th century for safety reasons. This happened, to a lesser extent, on the southside as well. Looking closely you may be able to see the variety of historic transportation layers, from carriage houses to electric vehicle charging stations.



*T-Station in Waban*



*Parking in Newton Centre*

## policy consideration

Newton is lucky to have an abundance of public transit options. In order to properly maintain and operate our public transportation systems today, a minimum density of 15 units of housing per acre is recommended. [The Massachusetts Housing Partnership \(MHP\)](#) (j) developed a [mapping tool](#) (k) in 2019 that analyzed the areas within 0.5 miles of all 261 rail stations across the State. Use this tool to see what exists around other transit stations in the region.



*Bluebikes in West Newton Square*



*Alleyway in Newton Centre*

## Past Planning and Policy Document Review

City staff have reviewed past planning and policy documents in preparation for the Zoning Redesign: Village Centers community engagement, which asks community members to share their experiences of and visions for their village centers. Doing so acknowledges that this effort is not starting from scratch. Over the last 15 years, the City, in collaboration with the Newton community, has developed these documents. The synthesized strategies/goals and actions/objectives below present an overall perspective of the pressures, challenges, and opportunities relevant to Newton village centers.

Each strategy/goal and action/objective is organized by the most prevalent themes within these planning and policy documents, what we heard during our December 2020 Zoning Redesign events, and those that the Vision Kit is built upon. The compiled table can be found at:

<https://www.newtonma.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/70377>



## Exploring the History of Newton's Village Centers

This recorded presentation is meant to be a conversation starter. Staff hope it encourages asking questions and looking at things a little differently as Newton community members are running an errand, waiting for the train, meeting a friend for lunch, or just passing through their village center. For example, why does this look like this? Has it always been this way? And if not, what was there before?

The presentation contains 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 has historically made a village center into a village center and it ends with some additional historic resources for digging more deeply into Newton's development history. The links to the presentation are:

Pre-recorded Presentation:

[https://uso2web.zoom.us/rec/play/8lp2MtE3e4uUWrqaQwz4Yx\\_HfRjnryjFvyvLsCpwG-SndxlvgoI6XXLdaMzTQFKG87opQ9cJlaureIE.VYhhQfpZRypLaqG9](https://uso2web.zoom.us/rec/play/8lp2MtE3e4uUWrqaQwz4Yx_HfRjnryjFvyvLsCpwG-SndxlvgoI6XXLdaMzTQFKG87opQ9cJlaureIE.VYhhQfpZRypLaqG9)

Presentation Only (just slideshow):

<https://www.newtonma.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/70375>

Presentation Speaker Notes:

<https://www.newtonma.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/70383>



# Links to Sources

(a) 1892 map of Newton areas requiring drainage:

<https://www.newtonma.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/46926/637423500553570000>

(b) current wetlands and conservation areas:

<https://www.newtonma.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/27801/637262371357670000>

(c) Climate Action Plan (CAP):

<https://www.newtonma.gov/home/showdocument?id=39649><https://www.newtonma.gov/home/showdocument?id=39649>

(d) First zoning map (1921):

<https://www.newtonma.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/46930/637423500562030000>

(e) Universal Design: <https://www.iaud.net/global/>

(f) Newton Demographics Report:

<https://www.newtonma.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/4370/637220927473230000>

(g) U.S. Census data for racial demographics:

<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US,MA,newtoncitymassachusetts/PST045219>

(h) Resolution commending Newton's Fair Housing Committee:

<https://www.newtonma.gov/home/showdocument?id=67764>

(i) Overdue: Confronting Race and Racism: <https://www.newtonma.gov/government/mayor-fuller/mayor-s-initiatives/overdue-confronting-race-racism-in-newton>

(j) Massachusetts Housing Partnership (MHP): <https://www.mhp.net/news/2019/todex-research-brief>

(k) Mapping tool: <https://mhpcenterforhousingdata.shinyapps.io/todex/>

## Extra Material

Zoning Redesign Booklet:

<https://www.newtonma.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/67678/637527996148730000>

Zoning Redesign website:

<https://www.newtonma.gov/zoningredesign>