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Barney S. Heath
Director

MEMORANDUM

DATE: May 21, 2021

TO: Councilor Deborah Crossley, Chair, Zoning & Planning Committee
Members of the Zoning & Planning Committee

FROM: Barney Heath, Director, Department of Planning and Development
Jennifer Caira, Deputy Director Department of Planning and Development
Zachery LeMel, Chief of Long Range Planning
Nevena Pilipovic-Wengler, Community Engagement Planner
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RE: **#88-20 Discussion and review relative to the draft Zoning Ordinance**
DIRECTOR OF PLANNING requesting review, discussion, and direction relative to the draft Zoning Ordinance.
CHAIR'S NOTE: *For the following item our consultant, **Utile**, will join Planning staff to discuss some initial desktop research on village centers across the City. In addition, Planning staff will present on the detailed community engagement efforts that will take place over the next 4 months, with a specific focus on how the Newton community can provide input through the multiple channels.*

MEETING: May 24, 2021

CC: City Council
Planning Board
Jonathan Yeo, Chief Operating Officer

Village Centers – Initial Citywide Analysis

Following the kick-off of Zoning Redesign: Village Centers (Phase I) at the April 26th ZAP meeting, our consultant, Utile, began their initial desktop research looking to gather and analyze quantitative data to better understand what makes a village center a village center. At the upcoming ZAP meeting, Utile will present some of their initial findings, including:

- Citywide Analytical Maps – that identify a) village centers as they have been presented in past efforts, such as the Comprehensive Plan and Pattern Book, b) highlight the currently existing taxonomy of village centers from these past efforts, c) show village centers in context of other nearby commercial and industrial land-uses/districts, d) identify relevant MBTA stops and ridership levels, e) situate village center in relationship to nearest interstate interchanges and other major thruways, f) identify relevant civic institutions and arts + culture venues
- Qualification and Identification of Existing and Emerging Uses – An initial list of conventional and emerging uses broadly found in village centers.

All materials are works in progress, which will be further refined through feedback provided by the ZAP Committee and the multiple community engagement efforts (qualitative analysis) taking place in parallel.

Village Centers – Community Engagement

Since last meeting in April, staff have been working hard to build out the multiple pathways for the entire Newton community to participate and help shape future zoning recommendations for village centers. On May 20th, 2021, staff hosted a general information session on how individuals and community groups can access and use the Vision Kit and Polis interactive forum. A recording of this presentation, as well as links to the different engagement materials, which are now live, can be found at: <https://www.newtonma.gov/government/planning/village-centers>.

Vision Kit

The Vision Kit is an interactive document that helps the Newton community explore their village centers, reflect on how they currently experience them and imagine what they could be in the future. The Vision Kit is an easy and quick activity to do individually or with a group. It is also flexible, in that users can jump to any of the different themes they want or go through it from beginning to end.

Polis Interactive Forum

Polis is a tool used across the world to help generate consensus around complex and complicated issues. Rather than simply asking questions for people to answer in a survey, Polis asks respondents to agree or disagree with submitted statements as well as submit their own. Like the Vision Kit, you can reply to some or all the material.

Focus Groups

The focus groups are facilitated conversations to get feedback using the vision kit as guidance. In addition to the citywide outreach of the Vision Kit and Polis survey, the following focus groups have been identified to further equitable engagement. The focus groups are primarily an opportunity to facilitate the vision kit with groups that have been underrepresented in our past engagement efforts.

Economic Development Community Outreach

Businesses are such a critical element of village centers. Targeted engagement for Newton's business communities (business/property owners, real estate brokers, mixed-use/small scale developers) is being co-designed with the Economic Development Commission (EDC), including focus groups, surveying and mapping.

On The Spot Surveying

One final way we hope to reach Newton community members who do not typically attend our events is to go out and meet them where they are with the Vision Kit or Polis. This will include going to different village centers at different times of the day, as well as nearby amenities (dog parks, transit stops, playgrounds, etc.).

At this upcoming ZAP meeting, staff will go over the specific community engagement efforts, with an emphasis on how ZAP Committee members can help increase participation by sharing the material with their constituents and/or leading an in-person or virtual Vision Kit. In addition, staff will provide an update on the focus groups, which aim to equitably engage those voices disproportionately underrepresented in previous Zoning Redesign and general Planning Department outreach. More about this targeted outreach can be found at the link provided above.

Looking Ahead

The engagement of Phase I is now scheduled to take place now through the end of September to allow ample time for individuals and groups to avail themselves of the vision kit.. Together, the desktop research (quantitative) and community engagement (qualitative) will serve as a foundation for staff and Utile to develop a prioritized list of technical zoning recommendations to be researched and refined in Phase II. Phase II will have its own dedicated engagement focused on the technical zoning recommendations.

Lastly, at both the information session and the April 26th ZAP meeting, participants expressed a desire for more information on how the Polis interactive forum functions and what protections are set up to prevent manipulation. Please see background on Polis analysis (Appendix A) that addresses these questions and concerns.

Appendix

Appendix A – Background on Polis Analysis

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Polis conducts its analysis via what is called dimensionality reduction and clustering. You can read much more detail about its algorithms and methodology at this link (<https://compdemocracy.org/algorithms/>), but a quick description of these methods is here.

Dimensionality reduction is a data analysis technique that takes the very large dataset representing each voter's answers to each of the submitted questions that they answered (a "multidimensional" dataset) and simplifies ("reduces") it down so that the same pattern roughly fits onto the final two-dimensional chart visualization. This creates the final computational graph showing how all the voters and statements relate to one another. A good interactive overview of how dimensionality reduction works can be found here: <https://dimensionality-reduction-293e465c2a3443e8941b016d.vercel.app/>

Clustering is a data analysis technique that takes a bunch of items that are interrelated (the resulting graph from the dimensionality reduction described above) and tries to group them in a way where the members of each group are more related to each other than they are to the members in the other groups. This is purely statistical, and not based on the actual content of any of the statements. There is no interpretation of the words or meaning of any statement. The votes and statements are categorized using these techniques exclusively based on the relationships between statements and voters based on how respondents vote.

Identifying Respondents

It is possible to mark some statements as metadata, like "I own my residence" or "I rent my residence." Statements marked as metadata aren't used in the clustering or data analysis to determine groups, but they are still reported out separately in the results, so that it's possible to see the degree to which people overall and in each opinion group match those statements. It is important for the process, however, that we limit the number of metadata statements, so that respondents are advancing the conversation rather than just filling out demographic information and feeling like their time is being wasted.

Loud Voices

Finally, gaming the system and extreme opinions is something Polis has thought a lot about, and here is what their website has to say:

- Many people who are considering using Polis are worried about "extreme opinions".
- Yes, people will make all sorts of comments in your conversation.
- A part of the Polis process and analysis is, in effect, intentioned to find out whether given opinions are so extreme — if it turns out half a population agrees with a comment, who is to define it that way?
- It is valuable to have so called "extreme" populations show up. They tend to produce a lot of data, and they tend to turn out to agree with lots of other statements. This is healing, and possible, and happens all the time in conversations.
- Do not moderate out what you as the moderator view as extreme opinions unless they are abusive, hateful, etc. They are very useful signals.
- Extremism is not gaming the system. Lots of people showing up from one opinion camp is extremely valuable.

- You may know less about their thoughts and feelings than you think.
- You might know less about how their opinions index against other populations than you think.
- They may never have had a chance to interact with other people's opinions.
- For most organizations, gaming is not a concern.

Go Try It Out

Newton's Polis is set up and live now! Join the conversation here: <https://pol.is/4vfmwwzdds>