

Project Summary

The City of Newton Planning & Development Department held a series of 12 focus groups between May and September 2021 as part of the overall engagement and outreach for the Zoning Redesign: Village Centers project. This phase of the ongoing Zoning Redesign project focusing on village centers began by asking Newton community members to share their experiences of and their future visions for their village centers. The input gathered will help the City of Newton identify areas of research for how to update the zoning for village centers.

Eight focus groups were identified to further equitable engagement in an effort to facilitate outreach with groups of the Newton community that have been underrepresented in our past engagement efforts. When possible, these sessions were co-facilitated with the appropriate Newton board or commission, like the Commission on Disability, Youth Commission, Council on Aging, the Human Rights Commission, and the Newton Housing Authority. Four focus groups were identified for the village center economic development communities, which were co-facilitated by the Newton Economic Development Commission and our consultant, Utile.

Introduction

City staff and the Newton Commission on Disability held the focus group for people with disabilities on August 23, 2021. In addition, following the focus group, staff reached out to participants who registered but could not attend in order to hold phone interviews asking the same questions asked during the focus group. 11 people had expressed interest in participating through the Focus Group Interest Form. In total this focus group had:

- 12 focus group participants
- 2 interview participants

These sessions were not recorded in order for participants to feel comfortable and speak freely. What follows below are the “raw” notes compiled by the focus group notetakers and co-facilitators.

Demographics

In Newton, people with disabilities represent approximately 23.1% of the total population according to the 2019 ACS 5-year estimate.¹The distribution of people with these disabilities is as follows:

- 3.2% with a hearing difficulty
- 1.8% with a vision difficulty
- 5% with a cognitive difficulty

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<https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?t=Disability&q=1600000US2545560&tid=ACSST5Y2019.S1810&hidePreview=true> (2020 Census Data not yet available for this dataset.)

- 5.8% with an ambulatory difficulty
- 2.4% with a self care difficulty
- 5.3% with an independent living difficulty

Focus Group Notes

Q1: Do you feel connected to Newton's Village centers? If so, how?

- Yes, I feel very connected to five of Newton's villages: West Newton, Auburndale, Newtonville, Newton Upper Falls, and Newton Lower Falls
- I visit all of the village centers. For ones nearby I use my wheelchair, for ones further afield I use my van.
- I feel connected to Newtonville and Newton Corner because I go there a lot
- I live in West Newton and go to West Newton village for the post office, CVS, and the West Newton Cinema. I used to go to the bank there. I work in Auburndale. I used to go to school and get my hair cut in Newtonville, and I still go to Newtonville to eat at Cabot's. My sports programs take place in Newton Upper Falls and Newton Lower Falls.
- I go to village centers to go to the bank, grocery store, and post office.
- I enjoy the outdoor space in Newtonville on Austin Street - it's a good place to gather with friends and relax. I hope they put in more trees.

Q2: If there were no limitations or barriers to think about: what would make your most ideal Village Center? What would exist there, what would it look like?

- My ideal village would have a number of crosswalks, traffic lights with crossing instructions that you can hear and enough time to cross the street, curb cuts for wheelchairs and strollers, benches near the bus stops, a bank, a pharmacy, a restaurant or pizza place, and a post office. Also, store owners would be very good about shoveling their sidewalks in winter.
- Sidewalks are a huge problem- some are in terrible condition, and impassible in the snow
- The needs of wheelchair users have been ignored in the past, and should be listened to in zoning redesign
- There should be an option for affordable housing that can facilitate physical therapy and provide access to needed services for people with disabilities
- Village centers should provide better access to healthcare
- Big projects, like the construction on Needham Street, are going to cause even more traffic
- There needs to be more accessible parking, more safe crossings, and less dangerous traffic.

- “I am always looking for curb cuts- without a curb cut, I cannot access anything” - crosswalks and curb cuts are crucial to provide equitable access
- I would love to see a village center where I don't have to go up a step- steps can be an everyday challenge
- Many old buildings, including shops in village centers, only have stairs to get in, so I am excluded and unable to go in them
- We need more accessible parking stalls
- Be more strict in requiring store owners to clear more than just a shovel worth of snow in front of their buildings- especially near sidewalks. Often there is not enough room for me and my guide dog.
- Businesses are usually ok about snow removal, but residential areas on the periphery of the village center are not. I am often forced to drive my wheelchair on the road because the sidewalks are not clear, which is dangerous, or give up independence by having someone else bring my kids to and from school when it snows.
- Curb cut maintenance needs to be better. In winter the road actually drops down lower sometimes, so there is a big difference in height that can be dangerous and challenging in my wheelchair.
- The city should be more proactive about maintaining streets in winter- more plowing and sanding is helpful not just for the disabled, but for everyone to be able to walk on the sidewalk safely. People get hurt every winter and it doesn't have to be like that.
- The city should provide better information for homeowners etc about how important clear sidewalks are
- There should be designated parking for recumbent bikes and e-scooters
- Affordable housing should be accessible to someone on a low SSDI income. The city has made contracts with developers where units are set aside for lower AMIS, but the reality for many on SSDI is that even that amount is too expensive. Village centers are ideal for low income people and those with mobility impairments, so they don't need a car and can use public transport.
- I would like more affordable homeownership opportunities
- The standards for household numbers for affordable units can be limiting- if you need an in-home care person, can you count them? “Nontraditional” family types are often excluded from affordable housing opportunities
- I have respiratory issues- areas near main roadways make it hard to breathe. There should be more awareness about the impact cars have on health.
- At a certain point it comes down to basic human decency- if you are lucky enough to have a house, just shovel your sidewalk!
- People often block bike lanes, which is dangerous- we should better enforce people who idle and block the lane
- All stores should be at least ADA compliant

Q3: As we consider zoning changes for village centers, how can we make sure people with disabilities are heard in the process? What can we do better to facilitate participation for people with disabilities in this process?

- Can we ensure that remote meetings can continue?
- The changes made to public meetings during COVID have enabled many to participate in more meetings- we should continue to allow that.
- NewMo should be accessible to all ages
- NewMo does not help me when it comes to evening meetings- it ends at 5. It should be expanded.
- Advertise NewMo better- people don't know about it
- Lyft has transformed my life- it helps me get around in a way I never could before, because public transportation is not always reliable and doesn't go everywhere I need it to.

Q4: Is there anything else about village centers that you want the city to consider? (For example, the environment, accessibility, housing, inclusivity, transportation, and more.)

- The Hartford Street opening is too wide- drivers do u-turns that cut over where pedestrians and wheelchair users are and it is dangerous
- Every element of the zoning ordinance should have something addressing accessibility
- Everyone who makes policy for the city should try to navigate the city for a day in a wheelchair and see how hard it is with the way things are now
- The city should immediately stop using or remove signs that say "handicap parking" wherever they find them in the city- it is offensive
- Disability is a broad spectrum, and we need to change people's mindset, not just the physical environment. Group homes proposed near village centers met a lot of resistance from the community. education around universal access, and inclusion across a broad spectrum in the community, is crucial
- We should focus on universal disability- someone who is pregnant or has a broken leg often has the same limitations I do. During the epidemic, it's been clear that all of us can be limited for a short time or a long time at any moment.

Next Steps

The community findings from these focus groups will be compiled with the other forms of village center engagement and quantitative analyses to establish synthesized community desired outcomes to assist the City Council in determining policy. If you have any questions on this report, please email zoningredesign@newtonma.gov.