

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 held the Renters virtual focus group on July 22, 2021 as well as in-person focus groups with Newton Housing Authority (NHA) renters in Mandarin, one group in Newtonville on August 24 and a second group in Newton Centre on August 26 (facilitated by city staff, NHA and Neighbors Helping Neighbors.) In addition, following the focus groups, 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. 17 people had expressed interest in participating through the Focus Group Interest Form. In total this focus group had:

- 6 focus group participants
- 15 NHA Mandarin-speaking renters participated in in-person tours (observations from these renters have an asterisk* in the notes below)
- 1 interview participant

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, Rental units represented 28% of the total housing stock according to the 2019 ACS 5-Year Estimates¹.

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<https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=&t=Owner%2FRenter%20%28Householder%29%20Characteristi>

Focus Group Notes

Q1: As a renter, do you feel connected to Newton's Village Centers? If so, how? What do you go to them for?

- I don't think there is a difference between a homeowner vs. renter. I have been both a homeowner and renter in Newton. But now as a renter, I had to move further away from a village center, which requires me to drive to all the different village centers for my everyday needs.
- While living in Newton Corner I did not feel any connection to the village center. I mostly went into Brighton if I was going out.
- As a new renter in Newtonville, I love it and feel connected. However, I still go over to West Newton regularly because that is where my service providers are.
- I live equidistant from Moody St and West Newton, but it is significantly easier to get to Moody St, and much more pleasant. And the Pandemic changes to Moody St are significantly nicer than what is going in West Newton.
- I do feel connected to multiple village centers for different reasons. I do many errands in Nonantum because there is a variety of businesses, particularly local ones. And I go out and meet up with friends in Newtonville because there are more food options.
- Excited that there will be a walking track in the new Senior Center*
- Feel connected to the mural and public art in Newtonville*
- Really like the Newton Doors in Newton Centre*
- Appreciate Union Pharmacy RXS [in Newton Centre] because they have Mandarin speaking staff - including a pharmacist - so I can get help directly. They also have Russian and Vietnamese speaking staff*
- Banking, for the post office*
- For the food pantry, when it existed in Newton Centre*
- Visit village centers at least once a week or more to meet with children and grandchildren*

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?

- I have not had a car for the past 7 years. I live close enough to Newtonville to walk and I regularly do. But walking, or biking, is difficult because of the quantity of cars and traffic, which is preventative and loud. At the beginning of the pandemic, I saw how things could be different with less traffic. I began biking much more and it was wonderful. Now that traffic has returned, I don't feel safe biking anymore.
- Not a lot of variety of stores in Newtonville (restaurants and banks) and in village centers generally. We need more diverse activities. The only reason I go to the village center is to walk through it. I don't have a place to stop. (others agreed, and they go to other village centers or outside of Newton to fill this void).

- We need more housing in village centers. More dense housing.
- As an older person, I want to be back in village centers in housing above active stores.
- I moved to the area to be close to the Commuter Rail, and what we have now is awful. The movement and flow is terrible. I want there to be a seamless connection between transit and the village center.
- Better transit is an absolute essential. I am a lifelong taker of the express bus into Boston. I have moved since the Pandemic and I have no idea how I am going to get to work.
- Village centers need more green space. In Newtonville this would be great if the Green Space decked over the Pike.
- Because I live in a building, with limited space for storage and other extra needs, and on a fixed income, I want my village center to help fill/provide my needs, and other general community needs that could be met through the public realm:
 - Public open space (yard/green space/plaza)
 - Drop boxes for public services
 - More alternative transportation options (bikes/scooters/etc.)
 - EV charging stations
 - Maker spaces/Art studios
 - Rentable entertainment spaces
 - Clean public bathrooms
 - Places to do things for free or for cheap
 - Affordable homes (ownership/renters)
 - Libraries...at least a reading room/business center
 - Social services and healthcare
 - Keep the outdoor dining
 - Sharing shelves/swap shop
 - Gym equipment
 - Bike/walking routes to connect village centers and the surrounding neighborhoods
 - Performance spaces
- Cars and parking should be kept to the periphery of village centers
- Very worried that we are going to lose West Newton Cinema. It really means something to me and a big sense of my Newton identity.
- I like the way Nonantum is now, but I understand the need for Housing in Newton and across the region is so great. If housing is developed, I want ownership prioritized over rentals.
- Continue to improve on the safety issues, like the recent street improvements in Newtonville have.
- To me, what makes a village center is the mix of local businesses, which I feel new development displaces. If we have new development, maintaining and promoting new local businesses should be required.
- More affordable, diverse grocery stores that carry Asian vegetables and fruit which would increase their likelihood of visiting the village center.*

- Multilingual services/programs for the senior center along with reliable transportation options.*
- affordable, diverse grocery store for easier produce shopping.*
- Scheduled transportation options such as free/low-cost buses that loop around village centers in Newton where tenants could utilize.*
- Enhanced lighting/more street lights for better visibility when walking in the evening. Both on the main road and some smaller side streets along the main road.*
- Increase flashing crosswalk lights (those yellow signs with solar power) to enhance safety due to heavy traffic in the Newton Centre area.*
- Multiple languages for all City flyers/memos/communication.*
- more programming & info in other languages for accessibility of village centers & city programs*
- want more info on the villages - I had no idea Newton had all this culture in Newtonville*
- More walkable concerts & community events that include more cultural diversity*
- grocery/food options that include more cultural diversity*
- Community meals*
- More programming in various languages*
- Reliable shuttles & transportation*
- Permanent public bathrooms especially for older folks & kids*
- Better hours for busses*
- More benches & shade*
- More concerts*
- Free church meals*
- Centrally located community center, with more programming closer to our culture*
- No reliable shuttles exist for NHA renters- would be super nice to have shuttles for Parks & Rec between housing spaces and public spaces*
- Increase # of public restrooms outdoors, for both elders and kids*
- Adding public exercise equipment*

Q3: In our past engagement, we have seen a large disparity between participation from homeowners and from renters. As we consider zoning changes for village centers, how can we make sure renters are heard in the process?

- You need to reach out through landlords and building managers
- I have rented in Newton for more than 20 years and have never participated before. Typically, people in Newton get involved through their children's' school. I do not have kids and I always felt disconnected. I heard about this focus group through my landlord and just the fact that the City reached out directly to renters, like me, is why I am participating now.
- There are many listservs for neighborhoods, religious congregations, other community groups, buy nothing for Facebook groups, street google groups, etc.
- You need to remove the stigma. When I moved to the rental I live in, the neighbors came by and said, "oh you are the new renters". Since then we have become very friendly, but

it didn't start off that way. Also, previous City Councilors who were renters really didn't publicize this.

- I originally got involved because of past developments in village centers, like Austin Street. Since then, I have heard most things from the channels I registered for during that process.
- I like that our opinions are getting directly asked by the Planning Department*
- More educational programs around recycling in multiple languages*

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.)

- More publicizing on what we already have (ex. New Arts Center in Newtonville)
- We need more density to support the things we want
- We need to be able to communicate with non-family residents. As a single person who has lived in Newton over 20 years, the City does not really reach out to us.

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.