

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 Youth Commission held the Younger People (ages 15-24) focus group on June 3, 2021. In addition, following the focus group, staff reached out to participants who registered but could not attend to hold phone interviews asking the same questions asked during the focus group. 21 people expressed interest in participating through the Focus Group Interest Form. In total this focus group had:

- 15 focus group participants
- 1 interview participant

These sessions were not recorded 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 of ages 15-24 represent 17.21% of the total population according to the 2019 American Community Survey 5-year estimate¹. The distribution of these ages groups is as follows:

- Ages 15 to 19: 10.03% (8,889 / 88,593)
- Ages 20 to 24: 7.17% (6,354 / 88,593)

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<https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=1600000US2545560&tid=ACST5Y2019.S0101&hidePreview=true> (2020 Census Data is not publicly available yet for these specific age groups.)

Focus Group Notes

Q1: What kinds of values do you want to see present in placemaking? Placemaking describes both built space (building types for retail or mixed use, housing types, accessible sidewalks, etc.) and how the built space is activated through programming and use (can the public use it, is there general meeting space)

- Newton Center is a place where young people congregate
- Everyone should feel welcome- that should be a focus
- Outdoor seating takes away from the feeling that everyone can be there
- Transportation is important- many young people can't drive.
- Why do the bike lanes drop right in Newton Center? It isn't safe, and one person has seen a number of very dangerous crashes involving bikes in Newton Center
- Goes to Panera at least once a week
- Values should be- Healthy, peaceful, relaxing and safe
 - Better lighting
 - more plantings
 - climate resilience & valuing our environment
- Walkability: Auburndale has a big highway interchange. there are some small shops, but it's scary to actually get to them- "it doesn't feel Auburndale gets any love", no outdoor seating, no community feeling except at Starbucks
- Needham St is exactly what not to do- huge road with high-speed cars
 - Shift away from car - centric planning
 - expand sidewalks
 - expand bike paths. lots of kids' bike on sidewalks because they don't feel safe in the street
 - carve out a safe place for skateboarding
 - EV chargers - not just Tesla!
 - traffic calming
- As we come out of covid, we will value open space even more. aesthetic vs functionality- we should consider both, and green infrastructure helps both.
- Chestnut Hill used to have a Ping-Pong table- more fun
 - cornhole, playfulness and street activation
 - Corn hole could also be an art project
- Accessibility - people with bikes, different abilities,
- Have community space - so that it's a more welcoming environment, areas in VCs to bring the community together
- Community - designing spaces to promote interaction between people in the community, benches, open spaces - it's a space for people, and for people to be in and live in as opposed to a more transactional 'just to do this thing or purchase this item'
- Equitability - if you're using contractors, what kinds of businesses & who owns them, to make sure that process gives equal opportunity or more so, equitable opportunity to business owners of color

June 3, 2021

Younger People (Ages 15-24)

Zoning Redesign: Village Centers Focus Group Summary Report

- Important to make sure there's not a lot of big chain businesses - especially now after Covid and loss of so many local businesses
- Vibrancy - when we're placemaking, public art, community gathering spaces, where we can have public performances and private events where people can just meet up with a bunch of friends to celebrate a birthday.
- Equity - thinking about who feels welcome in a place we make? Never want a segment of our population, because of their race or disability, to make them feel like they're not welcome
- Diversity - which has a lot of meanings, in this case I mean it like - we don't want more of the same. The village centers should have unique pockets within them - we don't need 15 banks in Newton Center, we just don't need them. Diversity and types of places you can find and not just different kinds of businesses but things in addition to businesses, like kinds of art, parks
- Important for them to be forward-looking - not futuristic - I want them to look like they're for the 21st century. The transportation we encourage, the businesses that go there, the institutions we set up - are relevant and things we prioritize in the city in the 21st century. So not having outdated things anymore. Thinking about what commerce + transportation looks like.
- Very segregated by village - I live in Newton Centre - feels weird going into other villages, wishes there was some level of consistency among the village centers. There should be catering to each village center but something that also ties them all together versus being segregated, alone village centers
- Should not have any anti-homeless architecture, make sure spaces are inclusive in that way Village Centers need more bike racks for young people to travel from village center to village center or school to village center etc.
- Village Centers should be welcoming inclusive spaces for all people.
- Lots of young people like to congregate and hangout in village centers; however there are not enough open/dedicated spaces for this.
- Dedicated spaces to just be a young person that is not affiliated with a school or actual building. Example: open space with tables and chairs, green spaces to sit on and play games, spaces for young people to just "be."
- Clear distinct places that allow for socialization (chatting, hanging out), no in between/multi use space like a park or playground.
- Equitable, accessible by many different kinds of people. In all areas, not just in the big mansion areas. Sustainability – designs that are good for the environment, leaves good carbon footprints. General, nice outdoor areas but still accessible by a wide range of folks.

Q2: Based on these values, what do you think Village Centers need to be more equitable for young people and to better fit young people's needs?

- Young people care about climate change- Boston is 4th most vulnerable city in country to damage based on climate change

June 3, 2021

Younger People (Ages 15-24)

**Zoning Redesign: Village Centers
Focus Group Summary Report**

- I don't drive- I don't ever want to drive a car and while it is feasible to be car-less in Newton, the city could be doing more
- Auburndale commuter station is not ADA accessible. The MBTA is not reliable, and service cuts have had a very negative impact. This makes it hard to move away from using a car, even if you want to. Very interested in using bikes more, but it doesn't feel safe
- Making the city more accessible is good for young people and disabled folks
- If you get rid of parking, maybe people will walk more.
- interest in livable streets/complete streets
- I have dietary restrictions - a lot of places in Newton Center, I'm very limited in where I can go out and eat. Want to support local businesses but find I'm only going to one or two spaces because dietary restrictions leave for desire
- I want more of a scene, especially in terms of nighttime. It's not really enticing - not a lot of enticing places to go out with friends at night or in the afternoon - we talk about going into Boston as the only option we have. Having more spaces for young people to hang out, go to a show or go to a music concert - more opportunities for that.
- Concrete ideas: encourage businesses to stay open later, they close so early in Newton. Shuts down the area.
- More spaces for events and have more events encouraged. To have ones that are not only family events. Went to the Hyde Center a decent amount when younger for family events in the summer - but that equivalent doesn't exist for teenagers in Newton
- Not just have young people survive but thrive in Newton - making the T a more viable option as transportation - gives young people independence, it's sustainable
- Housing of all levels and housing that's affordable for young people to move into. Common experience for Newton young people to be asked by adults, "why don't young people stay here?" It's point blank, too expensive. Especially housing around village centers because if young people don't own a car, which most of us don't, transit and proximity is the main way for us to get around
- Bike infrastructure - biking through Newtonville is terrifying and I hate doing it. I think it's a rite of passage for every Newton North student to get almost hit by a car. It's really sad. We need protected lanes, less parking. Because that's ultimately what gives young people agency and dignity to move.
- Echoes wanting reliable and accessible transit
- Community space with art + fun events where people can gather. Newton gets this rap
- We know we can't live here, so we have to create this image that it's so boring here.
- Works in the toy store in Newtonville - Henry Bear's Park - can't tell you how many times we've had to sadly kick out a group of teenagers because they chilled by our back door but don't feel like they have another place to go
- Echoes housing issue. As a graduate student, I'm really lucky that my girlfriend's mother lets us live in her basement. Otherwise, it's just impossible. We'd like to stay around here, but it's absolutely impossible. In Newton, for older students - there are a ton of graduate programs nearby - so to make it accessible for up to the graduate student age is really important. That would draw a lot more people here - why would I want to live in

Boston, pay a ton of money to live in a teeny tiny place when I could live in Newton and get to my classes on the T?

- As someone who started biking around Newton this year - the place I think about the most is Newton Center which has a parking lot smackd in the middle. At 6 or 7, it's filled with cars. Whether they're getting takeout or whatever, it's a massive traffic jam. Really not an appealing place to bike around then. Especially when there aren't even bike lanes in that area.
- Newton Center too - cost is a big deal. I'd love to get coffee, but I can't pay \$7 for a drink and have to go to Starbucks for a \$4 drink. Things are tremendously expensive here. Wish I was in HS and didn't have to worry about where I was going to park or live or what grocery store I was going to go to. Newton has a good reputation because it's very affluent - there's no hiding that - but also it would be more accessible if generally costs were lower and there were businesses that are sustainable environmentally as well as will stick around (not turn over every 2 years)
- Thinking about Newton Center and the parking lot - a big part of VCs is having it be a circular space - especially can't do that in Newtonville and just how the city is built, can't rebuild everything - but having some sort of communal space where there are businesses around it is important. My friends and I literally sit in the parking lot, because it's just in the middle of Newton Center. Better to sit in a place that's surrounded by businesses than to go to the Senior Center in Newtonville or the Washington park near the New Arts Center - having a community gathering space *inside* the VC
- Newton Center- only 4 benches that get filled up very fast. Ends up sitting in the playground/ park area - people who don't have kids feel kind of unwelcome there and get looked at by parents. Teenagers or young adults w/o kids can feel like, where do we go? Also feels like people just think we're causing trouble
- Addition of green space - would love to see that parking lot taken out of Newton Center - have more green spaces + residents, even down to the reservoir. There's a strip of land, there's a teeny tiny bench... adding various areas for seats.
- Before Covid, there were always the summer concerts - green area in the middle with the 4 benches and the piano - fills up like 5 seconds in, can't find anywhere to sit.
- Newton Center park: a school or some kind of public building - in those types of spaces, could consider putting an amphitheater type space, a semi-permanent concert venue (x3)
- More parklets! (x2)
- The need for more bike racks
- Transportation from center to center, whether its via public transportation or bike
- The need for more bright, vibrant spaces
- Public art spaces; from members of the community, artists
- Public art: draws people in and creates a welcoming environment
- Example: Doors Project
- The need for more lighting - ex: large parking lot in Newton Center where the benches are. It's a great space to hangout, however it gets very dark
- Small local community center where you could take classes and kids could hang out. Having a councilor there to help with mental health stuff if they can't get it at home. More

green spaces – I think Newton is already pretty great with this but having parks and outdoor spaces that are more sustainable and people can enjoy in the nicer months and indoor for the colder months. Obviously, there's a library but you can't talk or eat in there – so a space that is a bit more open.

- If there was a community center, it would be cool if there were eco classes as well.

Q3: Do any of the village centers already have these things? If so, please provide examples. What do they not have? What's in-between?

- Having a central green + seating near stores is important- Newton Center has this but not many others. few have lighting at night
- The big parking lot in Newton Centre dissuades some from wanting to hang out there
- Needham St- trees are nice but nowhere to sit. nowhere to cross the street. convert parking lot, add general meeting space
- Why can't we have community led shows in village centers? The piano on the green in Newton Center- when people play that, people congregate, and it is a community event
- Have some space where pedestrians are prioritized- in Auburndale and most village centers, everything feels disconnected
- Overall, we need more investment in village centers, and we need to take this change seriously. In the short term we can do easier improvements, but should not lose sight of the harder, larger changes- there is room for both
- Public space is not being activated to its fullest
- Need more outreach done through Instagram
- Make it more clear how young people can get involved
- What can we do now? We want to start changing things now
- Covid has brought to light the outdoor gatherings - not that we only want that - but the outdoor space we have is nice and more if it would be nice too
- My sister is having her dance recital in Lexington because it's the nearest outdoor performing space
- Bike racks - don't want to lock my bike to a tree anymore. There are a few and they're all filled
- Tables and chairs - more places to hang out.
- Newton Centre has some tables and chairs, always filled by people taking meetings there or just hanging out with friends. That's my go to place to meet up. That's the ideal place where you go to meet someone.
- Outdoor seating for restaurants
- Don't feel like we have a cafe with a lot of outdoor seating
- Keeping outdoor seating permanent for restaurants - but takes out 3-4 parking spots - so not sure what the incentives are for those businesses
- Get the sense that there are a lot of empty parking spots, like in the Newton Centre parking lot - always a lot of empty spaces - there is space that we could reserve or take out parking spots and reserve for seating or expanding the park space or the greenery
- Housing above retail - seems like something every village center should just have. There's just so much untapped potential. We'll grow our commercial tax base, and it

would be cool to live in housing above retail. Something a lot of younger people fantasize about to go to do when they leave Newton

- I agree as someone who would definitely do that. Only concerns are sound proofing and making sure (a) housing is affordable and (b) pet friendly
- omg you know what parking lot I have never seen close to full in my life is the Newton Centre CVS (and other businesses) one
- Can the city have any control over capping the rent?
- Definitely yes to more housing above retail
- Yes, it feels like this [housing above retail] could add to vibrancy. That kind of housing is not as appealing if you're outside a parking lot or above a store that isn't engaged much
- Nonantum is not a place I frequent that much - but I would so much rather do that and then drive or bike to the places I do want to go. In general, even if you don't love everything right around you, it is far more convenient than living in a part of Newton that's more expensive.
- Importance of being transit oriented - do not have to live in your favorite part of Newton if it's easier to get to the parts you love
- There's this assumption that apartments above retail would be young people only - but that's not true, around the world bigger families live above businesses - but above us in Austin St, so many families live above the toy store. As a city, we have so many big homes on big lots, assuming that's just what young families want. If you expand the options, a lot more people will move in.
- Older single people in 40s and 50s would definitely move there
- 2-family homes and duplexes are very convenient as well.
- Would love to see more rental options coming into Newton that are obviously in the affordable range
- Accessible apartments - should have them city wide - but my coworker lives in an accessible apartment near Newton Centre and can only afford it because the landlord way under-charges them - that's the only reason they're in Newton. Accessory apartments are a lifeline for folks
- More space for sitting where young people are meant to be at - space between Starbucks and Nero in Newtonville
- Angier is very lit and welcoming
- Austin Street Mural (bright)
- Wider sidewalks and fewer cars parked on streets
- Consider blocking off streets for better walking - example Moody Street in Waltham is closed to parked cars
- Not all village centers need additions; example: adding the green space to Waban that is not being used.
- The bike racks that existed have been taken down for outdoor seating and needs to go back, all villages, parks, sports fields, and schools
- Bus stops not visible enough and added seating would be great
- Decision makers need to understand how big of an impact schools have on village centers: North students visiting and supporting local businesses in Newtonville and South students visiting and supporting local businesses in Newton Centre.

- Having more community centers – having areas for engagement or having parks and stuff like that. In big towns / cities like Newton, there can be less engagement – things can get outsourced to private entities. Having areas that are valued by the community. I used to take classes out of the community center in the town I used to live in. Also teach about important things or the environment – or have classes about major city issues, or have outreach like this.
- This is amazing that you are doing this outreach program – I would have never heard about it, but I did because I'm really politically active.
- I have lived in Newton for 3 years – closest I have found is the school. But I feel like I should talk to my sisters about it because they are 11 and 14, so they're at the age where they would be using those community spaces. I haven't really encountered anything that's stuck out in my mind.
- During Corona, we would hang out at Cabot a lot. A lot of teenagers hang out at Starbucks or a café. Any green area with seats or any indoor area with seats.
- Small businesses in Newtonville get flooded with kids.

Q4: How can the city better engage the younger people of Newton?

- Talking in schools is one of the best ways to do it. I have talked to so many people about getting involved with stuff. Biggest issue isn't lack of enthusiasm, it's just lack of knowledge about how to get involved. It's easy to repost on Instagram versus actively seeking out people.
- Focus groups like these.
- I think a lot of people aren't bothered by trying to make Newton better.

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.