

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 Younger People (25-35) focus group on August 3, 2021. In addition, following the focus group, staff reached out to participants who registered but could attend in order to hold phone interviews asking the same questions asked during the focus group. 22 people expressed interest in participating through the Focus Group Interest Form. In total this focus group had:

- 5 focus group participants
- 3 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, younger people ages 25-35 represented 9.3% of the total population according to the 2019 ACS 5-Year Estimates¹.

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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 village center placemaking and development? 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?)

- Public spaces that I can bring a group together for a celebration, could be a public or private space.
- Spaces for temporary events that can be flexible for a variety of options.
- As a Newtonville resident I am so excited that Trio has brought more of a Brookline feel. I love the new restaurants.
- Parking is critical for young families to frequent village centers. I walk to my local village center, but I drive to others and I like to frequent them. I wouldn't go to these other village centers if I can't park.
- More frequent service on the commuter rail is critical!
- If you are trying to live in Newton without a car, you need to be close to a supermarket and not all village centers have a supermarket.
- My wife and I are a one car household and it is getting harder and harder because we don't have access to all basic needs. And then thinking about having children, I can't see getting by without 2 cars unless things change in village centers and beyond.
- I find the things that are missing in Newton's traditional village center that I want are in places like The Street in Chestnut Hill.
- I want to see village centers that offer options at different times of the day (late-night options). Everything closes early.
- Village centers need to be places of diversity...diversity of businesses and populations (age, race), etc.
- Places that attract people and businesses who are not already in Newton, they need to be testing grounds.
- Village centers are places for people and infrastructure for greater walkability and biking should be prioritized. This doesn't mean not allowing cars, but rather doing it in a way that slows them down and keeps parking behind stores.
- Village centers should be places where I can do most, if not all of, my errands.
- Village centers need to be accessible to all. For some people that means bike lanes, and for others that means parking (families with young kids or people with disabilities).
- I would prefer to see more local and independent shops instead of chains (i.e. small coffee shop instead of Starbucks).
- Civic spaces are critical, my family uses the Waban Library a lot.
- Village centers should be places to linger. I want to be able to do some work, have a working meeting, do some errands, etc. For me, this requires more long term parking because I don't live within walking distance to a village center.
- What I love about village centers, as someone who grew up and lives in Newton, is that they are places for chance encounters with people from all different parts of my life.

- Village centers should be places for 24/7, or at least more than current, activity. Current places have odd hours that are not convenient for younger people.

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

- When I moved back to Newton I knew that I was giving up walkability. I intentionally lived close to a village center to be as walkable as possible, but it is still limited and even more so in other areas.
- It was not easy for me to find housing that met my needs in Newton. I agree with walkability but I gave some of that up to find a house. I want more houses, smaller houses, in/around village centers
- We need places to walk. We need destinations in our village centers.
- Grocery stores that are co-ops and support the local region.
- We need more dog parks and spaces for pets. Particularly off-leash.
- Places that facilitate more of a nightlife (music venues). Ex. being Club Passim in Harvard Square.
- Active rooftops.
- I wish there were more fitness options.
- Parking is necessary but it should be behind the stores and the shops up against the sidewalk.
- To get the people and things in village centers needed to attract younger people requires more density. This density needs to come in the form of housing, at different price points and types.
- For my young family, I am looking for more playgrounds, parks, and open spaces (ideally shaded).
- I would like to see a greater physical (infrastructure) network connecting the village centers to each other and the region. I would like to bike more, but I don't always feel safe. I take public transit when I can, but need greater interconnectivity.
- Places to gather where I do not need to pay or buy something. One idea should be to repurpose spaces like religious institutions, which are typically empty.
- There needs to be safer places to walk, especially at night. The lighting is terrible in and around village centers.

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?

- Thinking about the Ink Block in the South End. Doesn't have public transportation, but it is trying to be a self contained village center.
- I think Newtonville does a pretty good job. But it is limited and I go outside of Newton for a lot of unique things.
- Places like Bow Market and Aeronaut are amazing and they are large spaces with anchors and then they have smaller stores and places that "attach" themselves to them

- Newton should create “corridors” that create connections not only between village centers, but also between village centers and other points of interest (i.e. industrial space turned into Bow Market like spaces)
- There is only so much space in village centers. So having connectors will alleviate pressure, create more justification for more Blue Bikes
- Moody Street in Waltham is a great example. Outdoor dining needs to be here to stay and in more village centers.
- I live in Oak Hill Park so I don’t really have a village center. I don’t find the village centers currently in Newton provide for what I am looking for and instead I go to Boston, Cambridge, and Somerville because that is where my friends live and the types of businesses I am looking to frequent are.
- Where we used to live, in Jamaica Plain, had a lot of things that Newton’s village centers should have.
- Waban is lucky enough to have all the basics, but I typically go to other village centers to go out to eat or meet with friends.

Q4: How do you think the City of Newton can better engage it’s younger community members (both those who live, work, and attend school in Newton)?

- The City needs to “prove” that they are working for younger people. Invest in things and spaces Newton already has (farmers markets at better times, outdoor dining, etc.).
- I believe this is a really difficult thing to do. Younger people are incredibly busy. For me, I was fortunate enough to find a house to purchase. A lot of my income and time goes to that. Other friends of mine have young kids and don’t have the time to get involved with something like village center zoning. And most importantly, I believe the people with the least amount of time (i.e. younger people) are the ones who support change, but I don’t know how can get them and keep them involved.
- Going to the places where these young families are, like preschools and elementary schools.
- The City should start engaging students in high school so that they get engaged and remain. Also the colleges, since there are so many around Newton.

Q5: For those who have moved back to Newton, what do your friends from home think? Are they back in Newton?

- Most friends are in surrounding towns (Brookline, Waltham, Dorchester, South End).
- I am the only one of my friends who has moved back.
- I only moved back because of the Pandemic and moved in with my family. I would not have come back otherwise.
- My wife grew up in Newton and we moved here because of that. Some of the friends she grew up with have moved back, but definitely not the majority.
- I moved to Newton this year because my partner has other family members that live here.

August 3, 2021
Young People (25-35)

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

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.