

## **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 Human Rights Commission held the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous & People of Color) focus group on July 27<sup>th</sup>, 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. 24 people expressed interest in participating through the Focus Group Interest form. In total this focus group had:

- 11 focus group participants
- 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, BIPOC community members represent 28.9% of the total population according to the 2020 Census data<sup>1</sup>. The distribution of BIPOC community members is as follows:

- Black or African American alone: 3% (2,670 / 88,923)
- American Indian and Alaska native alone: 0.15% (137 / 88,923)
- Asian alone: 16.56% (14,725 / 88,923)
- Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone: 0.03% (28 / 88,923)

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<sup>1</sup> <https://mtgis-portal.geo.census.gov/arcgis/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=2566121a73de463995ed2b2fd7ff6eb7>

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- Some other race alone: 2.23% (1,984 / 88,923)
  - Two or more races: 6.92% (6,153 / 88,923)
  - Total BIPOC/non-white population of Newton: 28.90% (25,697 / 88,923)
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**Focus Group Notes**

**Q 1: 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)**

- Speaker is on the Indigenous Peoples' Day Committee. Planning has not been easy in getting the City to participate. So, with these outdoor events (Albemarle Park) we need to be better at making sure the programming reflects the people we are honoring and the people who are there. Many people are averse to change, but I want to celebrate what we have now and plan for the future.
- Boston, and New England overall, has a deep sense of history. And this history is told from a certain perspective and of specific people. I would like placemaking to look at more of a future view, and not so much looking back. This is especially true as this area becomes more diverse and dynamic.
- I would like to see a blend of the first two bullets. There is a real deficit in the City of representation. Ex. look at who is using the Senior Center either because the programming doesn't speak to the diverse people in Newton and/or just feeling not welcome.
- The best spaces are made the best because of the diversity that they offer and for the diversity of people that they attract.
- As a business owner of color, I would like programs made available to start businesses here. But I could not afford any space in a village center without assistance.
- Walking, biking, accessibility
- More acknowledgment about the land - many cities and towns around the country are doing land acknowledgments - Wampanoag and Massachusetts people, including the Mashpee Wampanoag - little evidence of the historical place here in Newton and that's reflected in schools and the curriculum, children, and grandchildren of Newton Public Schools. History is taught but not the history of the whole community
- Seeing Newton become the hub of development of huge apartment complexes - sold to the community as opportunities for diversity are disingenuous because the price points of all of these apartments are way beyond what most folks can afford. It's offensive to me as a minority-represented individual, that's what I came here for
- Accessibility, I do want to put in there an example of a mom with a stroller or kids on vehicles - building on X's point, thinking about how to get from one place to another and stop being so car-dominant or car-primary because when we talk about community placemaking, people go to buildings or roads - and that misses everything else about how people get to and from places. Would love to see the city be more open, in terms of

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how we're thinking about even segregation or talking about the various smaller blocks around placemaking. I know you gave a definition, but can we re-define what makes placemaking? And not be stuck to current understandings but rather push the components on placemaking that allows the conversation to be a lot more open

- Also think about how families / different stakeholders are getting from one place to another, and how do they interact with each other? Other things I miss about Newton and would love for it to be part of placemaking: sounds cliché but community and congregating. I want the ability to congregate with people, especially now with covid (where depending on your tolerance with indoors) - outdoors is the best way to meet with people. Buildings are 4 sides - do buildings have to have 4 sides and is that an assumed part of placemaking? How do we structure spaces too? Because once you define an area as part of a location, you start defining a space - vs how can we be as open with our space? Really with the intention of bringing everyone together in community. how do I meet with someone who doesn't necessarily belong to commerce but rather being with the environment or with Newton? Hard to think of good places to congregate and be more in nature.
- Also, spaces to have spontaneous interaction with people. In retail, you go in and do your business - whereas are there other spaces that invite interaction, either with the land or with each other? Or with our history, as X would say? How do we build those layers and +15 per affordability and I think the vision that I want is, how does Newton... if we were to do an experiment, and I-90 were not built and all of the black community were not moved away, and we did not - redlining did not occur - the housing is not expensive - who would live here, and could that be our goal and what would it take to get there? And once you raise the Indigenous history of course - how do we invite those people here?
- +1 on art

### **Q 2: Do any of the village centers already represent these values? Share examples of specific parts of village centers that have or do not have these values.**

- West Newton does not. Thinking about the historical black community that was decimated following the Mass Pike. Some people know about this, but not everyone. And it is not fully reflected in this space.
- I thought of Newton Centre which is hard to get to because of all the cars that circle around that but in my mind, I thought, wouldn't it be cool if cars had to park farther out, and people could easily engage with people there?
- Living in Newtonville, it's been getting a facelift - right between the Starbucks and Caffè Nero, I ran into someone I knew, I ran into Nevena - we were just hanging out there, there were no cars going through there. It was just us sitting there, and there's a beautiful mural - just felt like you can just, unintentionally run into someone. I was planning to meet someone there and I ran into people I knew. Unfortunately, no view of the history of the land we were on - but almost got there.
- For me, Nonantum is an example that comes to mind in terms of the Italian American heritage of the community there and the public space - which I think is lacking in the other village centers, except for Newton Highlands - yes there's a Starbucks everywhere

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but, X was saying there's little opportunity to make it a neutral, non-commercial space. And of course, any space that's community-owned will immediately be developed in Newton.

- I love that space in Newtonville that was talked about - I've had so many beautiful mornings there - agree with X, I would pick Newton Highlands. Feels like local businesses, you can walk into the stores/restaurants and you know for the most part the owners (not much commercial there) - I love the park nearby, within walking distance of public transportation. So, if I have a friend in town, we can meet there - and we can connect. A place that can be gotten to in different ways, I bike there it's really accessible, I love that. It's interesting - when you were talking about Newton Centre - sometimes a lot of the really beautiful and wonderful spaces, especially that involve nature, actually if anything are the least open spaces because the air it gives off is exclusivity and exclusiveness. Something I do \*not\* want in placemaking in Newton - I think people, I'm probably projecting and thinking through - if there is something nice, people want to protect it and not have more people be part of it because it intrudes with the privacy of their homes - it doesn't feel as open. An example is Crystal Lake - you can't park around the lake because I'm pretty sure the residents complained about it at some point - and so the majority is so inaccessible - which is great cause it encourages you to bike there but there's also no bike rack - you'll have that angry local homeowner who is vehemently against it and wants it to stay in that place. So, I think that's going to be one of the bigger hurdles and it's a bummer.
- Can we use the word 'share' instead of 'lose'? Sharing is a value to add to the first conversation: a place that we can all share - which requires a sense that it's OK if we don't get it all the time
- +1 to Sharing
- So, a question: how do we convince many Newton residents that - for instance, Newton Highlands, I have a son who lives there, great to visit him and grandkids - wonderful town park - how do we convince Newton residents like me who are fearful that within 10 years Newton's going to turn that park into an 8-unit apartment complex? Because it's walking distance to the T, it'll help diversify Newton, and we're going to lose more public space, I think there's big concern with a large # of Newton residents that are not listen to or don't speak enough about it - but the rush to develop Newton is eating up Newton
- Well, housing is a big part of that
- I'm offended by what you're saying: the prices of the new places are well beyond the price points of the people who are living close to the edge. We're not going to diversify - these apartments are going to cost X to Y - look at the income level required to support a development happening right now in Newton, it is not going to diversify Newton
- By diversify, I don't mean culture - there's some truth to it but I mean diversify housing. Give more housing options, supply + demand. When you have more supply, less demand.
- But you're right, if we as a city could build it ourselves without a developer who wants to make money, we would - you can make all housing cheap. And they need to make \$ somehow, it gets complicated very quickly, those price points - they're not cool.

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- I walk sometimes to Newtonville, but don't visit others. Newtonville has a lot of empty spaces. Why? It is a waste. Neighborhood has changed so much due to empty storefronts
- I have never been to Waban or Auburndale, because there is no draw there.

### **Q 3: If we had no barriers - did not need to worry about budgets or the law of physics, etc., everything is on the table - what would be your dream Village Center? What would look different in the village centers we just talked about?**

- Housing must be part of any future village center. Historically, there were residential units above commercial spaces in our village centers. Putting housing here would not be as contentious as pushing more housing in the surrounding neighborhoods.
- As a business owner of color, I would like programs made available to start businesses here. But I could not afford any space in a village center without assistance.
- The City needs to hire a DEI (Diversity, Equity & Inclusion) coordinator to help develop strategies and programming to get village centers open and welcoming to everyone.
- We need more diversity of housing generally. Village centers are one place for this, but it should be everywhere. When you have a diverse housing stock, diverse people will follow.
- I have to go to other cities and towns to eat my food, hear my music, etc. etc. etc. I know this won't happen overnight. But maybe we can have more temporary spaces so these things can happen on a regular basis. I love my community and I want to keep my money here.
- The placemaking could be future forward spaces (incubator) that embraces ever changing and evolving businesses. Ideally, they would then be able to find permanent spaces as they succeed.
- A dream would be some of what's already been discussed but - places for families or young families, older families, to go and have a place to sit outside. I would like more of a community center-ish vibe. During good climate, different bands come and play different types of music. Have more diverse events, so that we can all continue to learn from one another. Giving some local artists an opportunity to sell their art at this magical dream park with places to sit, parking or accessible via what's that new thing? NewMo! Give high schoolers an opportunity to sit with the elders or young families with babysitting - volunteer - sometimes we just need a little help or an extra body to do something - and I know Newton Neighbors Helping Neighbors are a great resource, but if we could connect on that level where people go and feel that awesomeness and feel comfortable with each other- I think we could all network and support each other - that would be a dream
- In Italy - it was such a cool way to experience community, sit out on the courtyard, eat gelato, interact with the locals
- I'd like to support what you said: traveling to Europe, all the outdoor venues and restaurants, perhaps one of the only decent things that's come about with the last year is the opportunity for more restaurants to have space outside and it's created a different atmosphere and certainly, that's what you feel when you travel to Europe. I spend a lot of time in France and see that there - creates an opportunity for communities to come

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together and so I would hope that these opportunities for these restaurants to set up their jersey barrier and protect them from the traffic would actually lead to less traffic and converting more roads to pedestrians, to restaurants, to the community - you can sneak around Newton Centre by going this backroad - why not take advantage of this unfortunate lesson that we've had to learn? Maybe there's a silver lining with restaurants, stores, that we should think about

- Everything we said we couldn't do, we ended up being able to do
- Another word I'd love to put into placemaking: FOUR SEASONS. Thinking about accessibility and openness, I hate the cold. But what I realized covid made me do is think about 4 seasons, design placemaking in a city that really welcomed all kinds of weather and just enjoy our spaces of 4 seasons - because when I think about where I want to go in the winter, I rarely venture out to Newton - I actually go elsewhere, which is sad to say. And when I think about bumping into people. The weather and seasonality are another dimension to look at openness
- I would endorse what was just said - go out west and any town out west, they're 4 seasons and we tend to shut down. I think that's a missed opportunity
- Only other idea/ word I would add: this idea of liveliness. I want to go to a village center and feel like it is lively. Not only that there's people out there eating - thinking about Barcelona, nine blocks, no cars, everything's pedestrian... but also thinking about not only consuming but like other community art projects - community gardens is something I'd love to see. But most conversations I've had - we have a little garden in our front yard but when we're out there and people are walking, we have those chats with our neighbors - it provides a conversation piece. I love the idea of cross-generation piece - our elderly are shut away somewhere and if there's a way for us to have cross-generational interaction, shared wisdom...
- But if our intent here of this evening has to do with diverse communities: would we think about that, centers need to encourage the presence via art, via restaurants, via public spaces, the diversity of the peoples in our community, because otherwise, they become homogeneous, Starbucks, generic Americana. And if our conversation tonight is about something else, then that needs to be kept in mind. Right now, a lot of our communities are pretty generic - and that's OK - Newton is a wonderful place - but it could reflect more
- If you're taking opinions from Focus Groups but opinions, are the opinions weighted to take into account? From groups that are more marginalized? And from a zoning perspective if the values are, we want small businesses, more local artists? How does the zoning and permitting favor those particular kinds of businesses?
- If the city itself has a value for diversity, we have to make that accessible through all of our systems - zoning, permitting - that's a big one - that speaks to a systemic piece
- We need a real ice-cream store!
- More vibrant. more small businesses- less banks and nail salons.
- Sad about the closure of diner in Newtonville, which was a nice thing to have.
- Parking is difficult- better education about the parking that is available might mean that less parking is needed in the future.
- Why does the bike lane just stop in Newtonville? it's dangerous

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- Need better pedestrian crossings
- Why is there street parking? get rid of it for a bike lane.

### **Q 4: How do you think the City of Newton can better engage it's BIPOC community members (both those who live, work, and have children attending school in Newton)?**

- As a person of color, and having only lived here for a few years, I have struggled to feel confident to engage in the process when people who are lifelong residents begin to get loud.
- We need to maintain virtual sessions. As a young parent, I cannot come to City Hall to attend meetings. (x2)
- You need to ask specifically what "x" group is looking for...be specific!
- Take existing holidays/celebrations and use them as jumping off points to engage people at them.
- Places and spaces need to be made for the non-majority. People don't want to engage because they don't feel like there is anything to engage on that they care about.
- I would applaud what you're doing here tonight - I've lived here 23 years, and this is the first such invitation for communication - so showing that Newton is welcome to other voices, a very small population of other voices in Newton but just showing that you're interested in other voices sends a message, so that's great
- In my experience with the city, I know they're listening now - so let's show up - may not have always been the case but using these moments is powerful
- Something I spoke with Nevena about - I think getting the message through in terms of anything that we have going on with the City by connecting with the PTOs, by connecting with FORJ - getting those groups involved so that we can get some responses. Because I think what I'm hearing is that we may not have enough people kind of coming to the table and responding. Putting things into other languages for the constituents, for the people who live here in Newton - that should be the norm, that should be common, shouldn't be an issue. If someone needs to talk to someone at city hall, having someone accessible who speaks Cantonese -
- That's exactly what I was thinking - understanding who the nodes are in the community?
- And since you mentioned METCO - one of the things, this is not to this point - thinking about police presence in public spaces, police presence - people experience it in very different ways and being very sensitive to that
- We need more social workers working with the police
- I would love to stay connected in area's we discussed - how can I help & volunteer?
- Continue to provide opportunities for BIPOC focused feedback, carve out time just for this group

### **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

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outcomes to assist the City Council in determining policy. If you have any questions on this report, please email [zoningredesign@newtonma.gov](mailto:zoningredesign@newtonma.gov).