

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 Office of Cultural Development held the Creative Communities focus group on June 25, 2021. 35 people expressed interest in participating through the Focus Group Interest Form. In total this focus group had:

- 10 focus group 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.

There is no demographic data provided here because the Census does not capture who identifies as part of a ‘creative community’ as defined by the Office of Cultural Development for this focus group.

Focus Group Notes

Q 1: Are there places in village centers that creatively engage you? Please be specific and tell us how they engage you?

- Newtonville is one of the more diverse locations in the city and the art (mural) in the Bram Way is helping to facilitate that. The Bram Way could be a model for other villages. Art changes the landscape in really positive ways.

- In Newtonville - The Bram Way Plaza and the New Art Center pop-up space/exhibition has been a great way to engage with friends and visitors. Hopeful that this idea spreads into other parts of Newton and other villages.
- There's a lot of trash, debris, and mess in Newton Centre and also Newtonville. Appreciation for the new style of benches in Newtonville. It's disappointing that the newspaper is diminishing and was recently cut from Newtonville. There's not enough communication, there should be better communication throughout the City in general. West Newton center has a lot of traffic problems and cracked concrete and bad benches.
- Newtonville Bramway is wonderful to sit in. The West Newton village could be more enlivened. The 'doors' make things much more lively in the park in West Newton (and also all over). Planters and benches could be made into artworks. Get artists to help design and make them works of art. Street fixtures could also be turned into art.
- Newton Centre, I think of the most - but I would say my engagement there is limited. Sometimes there will be a band playing at the bar on union street or limitedly on the green; I would love for a place like a maker's space, or a community - not aware of the programming there - a place for groups to meet to develop hobbies or skills - not a lot of places where you can just go to hang out, mostly banks. Love to see more community-oriented spaces
- In Newton Centre: I'm taking a tai-chi class at the Newton Centre playground, the bandshell and the Hyde has musical events + movies - problem for us are mosquitos at night.
- In West Newton - newton cultural alliance just finished renovating the Nathaniel Allen house, and it's supposed to have space for things like music events and won't know how available that will be, but certainly hope so.
- Couple of fun great outdoor places - so spring/summer, maybe fall - but no place like those for the rest of the year. Allen House is gorgeous, but they charge by the hour. We can't afford to be there. I was in talks with them for a long time - but once I heard the fee, our small theatre company cannot pay for every hour of rehearsal. We're still looking. Organizations that have a lot of money - who is that? So, for me, the search continues for a civic space - a space that's underutilized, a space where we can gather and do some art.
- Maker's space - the library has a maker's space, it's not reopened yet, but that was a great location, and I was in a small arts group that would meet regularly in the makerspace at the library.
- I totally agree with what's being said - we've been suffering through the pandemic which has also really affected our access to indoor space. So, war memorial space at Newton Hall - has always been a well utilized space. Have always used that for my ukulele group. Had our rehearsals, great experience.
- Live on West Newton/ Newtonville line - space that the city built down in the Bram Way, where we have the closed off area with tables between Starbucks and Caffè Nero, and there's a huge mural there - and now two outdoor doors there - I always go there, always busy, every table, there's a lot of good vibe, I feel engaged in that village when I'm sitting there, amongst the art and people, love that gathering space

- Tiny space at Bram Way but very welcoming. But I will go to CVS, I will go to the city market or something like that, in one place, and I can do a few things. But it's tiny and there's no shade. It's not a beautiful space, there are just tables and chairs, open to people. Would much prefer something with trees for shade. But it's tiny, are there 20 chairs there?
- Little thing in Newton Centre - picnic tables - gets occupied quite quickly and people leave their trash
- I live in Newton Centre and I find that I don't do very much in Newton Centre - I go to the post office, sandwich works. Not really a coffee shop to hang out. I know Tatte is coming and Tour de Jour - I like finding places that I can go and buy a sandwich for less than \$13, so I feel very uninspired by Newton Centre. Can't walk to get groceries, can't go to a bakery.
- About arts in Newton Centre - are tremendous economic drivers for businesses, never totally felt that people have really understood the importance of the arts. When we were looking for places to get a special permit, usually a parking waiver we needed - restaurants were getting them right and left but not arts groups - councilor told me not to ask about this for 5 years.
- War memorial is great but so echoey. Loved the library space but it's small. And whole thing we're told with the schools - "well that's the school and not the city"
- At least Newton Highlands as some more affordable things to walk into
- Hyde Center is another example of that, people go there, it's a central focus
- Mostly I go and do things in Brookline - where I feel like I can get those things - get multiple needs addressed at once.
- Newton outdoors - in conjunction with the city, community pride put together OutDoors. 2-4 of those doors in each village center, encouraging people to walk around + public art display. Encourage economic vitality by using public art as a vehicle.
- Having a gallery in Newton Centre would be really cool - or one that had frequent openings - even if it had a space to make art too. That would be so cool. We don't really have a dedicated space for that in Newton Centre, and I can imagine it would be hard to sustain financially - so the city should invest in stuff like that.
- Was looking at the New Art Centre classes and they're so expensive. There's no way I could afford to do one of them. So, having places where art classes are more affordable would do a lot to make them more accessible.
- I'm theatre but the public art - every time I see a door, I get happy. I love the painted barriers. And whenever someone asks me to have a meeting, I say 'Caffe Nero.' it's that vibrancy, the energy - so public art, a gathering space where you can have coffee and people watch, brings people in. I will say, meet me at Caffe Nero because of the experience.
- Feels very European there.
- New gallery just opened in Newton Centre

Q 2: How are village centers currently encouraging creative practices?

- NCP has been doing a great job (Newton AI Fresco/Newton OutDoors). There's no consideration from the City about how to get municipal departments

(engineers/architects) to make street fixtures as works of art. Approached City previously and was shot down. There was no conversation or openness to incorporate art into the City landscape.

- Shoe barn, all-inclusive area that's really inspiring
- More of what they did on union street in Newton Centre to block off half of the traffic. What if that was all pedestrian? I sometimes park in that parking lot. Imagine that's a green space where anything could happen. What an incredible gathering space. Less cars though I know we need parking. But NewMo - wow, what if we were able to use that and it brings us to the village centers!
- Utilizing space that's in the center of Newton Centre - if we had festivals or events that took up that whole space; that would definitely do a lot to engage people
- Love being out in the villages, in the community, for outdoor performances. You need a sound system - need to have access to electricity to make these things happen. Love the Hyde- would love to take the Hyde and make it 3 times as big and put it in the bowl of Newton Centre - it is the green space behind Mason Rice school, on the flat grassy area. Because of Covid, that's where I moved the outdoor concerts. Would love to see a permanent performance pavilion there, fully supported with lights, tech capability, etc.
- A lot more mural art and semi-permanent public art. So, if we could encourage the city to be supportive of landlords or city space to display mural art. Sure that community pride could find the artists and do the fundraising towards that. Even in cities in the Boston area - like Salem or New Bedford - there are murals everywhere. They are so vibrant and exciting. Really generate a lot of energy + pedestrian economic vitality.

Q 3: What would a more 'creative' village center look and feel like? You can be as specific or dream as big as you'd like.

- The arts and culture should be considered as part of the economic plan as much as physical infrastructure. Many other communities have creative/painted crosswalks. Let's think about reimagining infrastructure projects creative and with an artist perspective.
- Having recently looked at a lot of the villages with a creative eye (in reference to the 'doors') it's necessary to be thinking about creative placemaking in ways to draw the public in with seating and entry ways. There's disjointed thinking for instance in designing streets and parks. They bump into one another and are not thought about one collectively, only separately.
- Private funding is vital to create the public engagement for creative placemaking.
- The City needs to think creatively about development not only physically but also the funding sources.
- Reallocating funds from some City projects should go to art. Heard somewhere that it costs the City \$1,000 to plant 1 tree. Maybe there could be ways to cut spending in some departments and allocate it to public art.
- City Hall has shut down the idea of "creative crosswalks" when presented to the City. It's frustrating. Was told it was not possible and that was it.
- There should be much more collaboration of municipal projects with artists. Artists should be part of the plan from the beginning, not as an afterthought. Projects should be considered with art/creativity in mind.

- There needs to be more performance art in open/public spaces. Wandering into villages and finding cultural experiences right there (instead of going into Boston) is important to keep engagement and focus local. We should enliven spaces with performance and music.
- There should be an Artist in Residence in the City. This would help make arts/culture immersed and break down barriers for artists to make/create art in the City.
- We should be tapping into youth/High School students more into thinking civically and creatively.
- Newton should have an amphitheater outside. Why can't we have performers and music outside in a designated space? Maybe bookstores could have author talks even? Political candidates, lectures, etc. could all use these outdoor spaces to engage the public. We have satellite places that could be engaged more. Some parks are underutilized.
- Changeability is a big part of enlivening a place. There's something about temporary pieces of public art that CHANGES and involves people and engages people that's not static and permanent and people get immune to.
- The City should be able to issue busking licenses so that music CAN be accessible in all these open spaces.
- Newton Highlands has the Hyde Community Center that allows them to have these community events which is great. Having a dedicated person in each village who can spearhead cultural activities - it makes a difference. Having the physical space will encourage people to take ownership over pushing cultural experiences forward.
- In terms of zoning, there needs to be forethought and purpose in defining cultural spaces. Trio exhibition spaces were an afterthought.
- Unused churches should be repurposed into cultural spaces.

Q 4: Is there anything else about village centers that you want the city to consider? (For example, the environment, accessibility, housing, inclusivity, transportation, and more.)

- I'm concerned that Newtonville is pegged as a transportation hub. There's no transit capacity to put T platforms in Newtonville. I wouldn't rely on the fact that people will increase their use of the T. 40% of workers don't want to go back to work. It may be good for other villages, but not for Newtonville.
- The City makes art an afterthought in their budgeting. There's SO much benefit to putting the arts/artists as a priority in the City. There needs to be a more serious look to FUNDING arts and culture from the City.
- Green spaces could use more art. Infrastructure (bridges) could be memorable if we make them works of art.
- Arts need to be more generously funded. Also, other cities have a public art commission or plan, and Newton doesn't. Having a public art ordinance would make all of the challenges discussed today key to solving them.
- We need the City to be less reactive to complaints and hold strong onto keeping art in our places (EX: Blackboard in West Newton).
- The weather in New England is a consideration, but that shouldn't stop us from engaging creatively! They do it in Toronto, CAN. We can deal with the weather.

- Housing - there's nobody my age who lives here who doesn't live with their parents, it's just impossible. That's a big barrier to newer artists moving here and having a more diverse + artistic community. So exclusive here, limits our chances to grow
- Second that. More than anything, more than vibrant arts centers - for me, is affordable housing. It's shameful that we don't have enough of it in Newton - so we can have all this awesome art but it's for a very small group of people. That's why I got involved with this in the beginning
- When we have affordable housing, it's not affordable enough. The median income here is so high that even if you have 50-80% of median income, that's actually relatively high. We need a bunch of affordable housing that is at a lower economic level. We're basically redlining out people who make less money. 80 to 100% of the median income is usually what's called 'affordable' -
- Live right in the middle of Newton Centre - within 2 blocks of my house, at least 7 homes were 'naturally affordable' - that had become condos, 2 condos usually - always expanded into the property - and they sell for over 1.5 million homes each. Talking about what were multi-family dwellings and were somewhat affordable. I don't know how that stops - nobody's breaking any rules or anything. But those were naturally affordable places. Where 3 people who were fresh out of college/grad school would get an apartment together. A lot of times those people are doing arts. So affordable housing concerns me - I could never move to Newton now, never never never. So that concerns me that my colleagues can't move here, can't send their kids to the newton schools.
- Apartments above retail would be awesome in Newton Centre

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.