

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 LGBTQ+ focus group on August 2, 2021. In addition, following the focus group, 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. 16 people expressed interest in participating through the Focus Group Interest Form. In total this focus group had:

- 2 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

The U.S. Census does not ask explicit questions about one’s sexual orientation nor gender identity. Thus, there is no Census data available regarding demographics of Newton’s LGBTQ+ community. However, the 2020 Census data will count same-sex couples living together for the first time in history. This data is not publicly available yet. And when it is, it will provide a partial snapshot of the country’s LGBTQ+ community as many individuals do not live with a same-sex partner. Furthermore, this Census question does not indicate one’s gender identity.

Focus Group Notes

Q 1: What kinds of values do you want to see present in planning for village centers? Both in terms of the 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)

- Important that there are wide sidewalks accessible to a wide variety of mobility. Easy for sidewalks to get taken over by outdoor dining - it's great to have outdoor dining but then if someone in a wheelchair can't get through, don't like it. Not sure how that turns into a zoning thing.
- Live in Newton Highlands: like the downtown-y area, I like it. I think it's nice. There's a variety of stores and spaces to go in and around. Newton center, I go into frequently too. Green space there, I like how it is.
- I'm in Newton Centre too, I get dragged to the lake a lot.
- What do people close to the lake think about folks parking there all the time?
- Being Asian and being queer - usually I tend to gravitate towards certain village centers that I view as more open than others. I def get more uncomfortable being in like maybe Nonantum, that kind of area, than like Newtonville - which is right next to Newton North, there are a lot of younger people
- I'll walk there but don't go into any of the businesses there because they don't seem welcoming. I can't pinpoint what it is, but storefronts are very formal looking and everyone's older white people - so a cause and effect- but it's hard to tease apart
- Even if there are older folks who are accepting, it's still intimidating
- Also, it is not very green, so that can contribute to the overall feel. Very cement-y
- Appreciation for the Newton Center doors
- When I walk near the T stop, I get irritated by all the mansions. Why do they live right near the T? Why can't people like me live closer to it so that I can access it? I commute on the Green line, I work in the Fenway area.
- I don't personally know what is being 'ruined' by turning a single-family home into a multi-family home
- I like Newton Centre the most because it seems there's a good diversity of types of restaurants. And there are different types of businesses too - dentists and various businesses. I don't find myself going to Newton Highlands often, if I do it's for O'Hara's
- I love Cold Spring Park - I like the trail, the farmers market being there on Tuesday's is super great, I'd love to see more outdoor events there. Such a nice place, ample parking. Dunno if there are buses there but it's got a lot of streets there anyways, so it is walkable too. Underutilized area.
- Would like to see more musicals and plays to take place in these outdoor areas. There may also be more opportunity for development there? Would be cool if there were more businesses so people could actually go to all of them
- Values: want more openness and it's a very simple thing but you just feel a lil more reassured when you see a storefront with a pride flag, or just making it very much known that Newton has values of respect for LGBTQ+ people. Respecting pronouns. Becoming

more of a thing with zoom because you can display that on your screen - especially in terms of events that the city hosts in particular

- Want more events or spaces kind of like the flag-raising. That's the only kind of specific targeted event that I can think of, that's outside of the school. The schools are a microcosm just because there are a lot of young people and it's generally just more progressive and accepting than the city
- A+ to there being pride flags in the area
- Love the idea of a Pride picnic and age friendly
- Can't think of queer-owned businesses
- School has the GSA - both north and south have 'To be Glad day'
- Vibrant, welcoming village center
- That there's activity – that there's places to gather, outdoors for now
- Things that help us value a sense of community in a village – openness to new folks
- Live in Newton Highlands but halfway between Highlands and Waban – so don't feel connected to Waban but go there more often because of the stores that are there. Good small grocery store, good deli – a Starbucks. In Highlands, it's more so of a place because of the Hyde Center and Village Days – trying to think of her kid's school, halfway between Highlands and Waban – so being able to have activities in the village centers. Felt more connected when I had young kids.
- Walkability & accessibility
- Hangout space because right now, ifn Newton Centre- really no place to go to in terms of commercial establishments to hang out. So how do you attract businesses that encourage hangout space? Whether that's like the benches in Newtonville?
- Greenery – spaces that if you're a family, kids can do something while you're grabbing a loaf of bread
- Places people can sit down and hang out where there could be performances
- Attraction of commercial space that is not valuable to banks – is so antithetical to any community building, nothing to do in a bank, no need to go to many banks. When I think about wanting my kid, teenager, to go to a downtown area to get an ice cream cone or browse a store – those are the things I would love to see, and I don't see it right now very much. So, there's very little sense of community feeling when you go to many of the village centers – either because it's so sterile or who you're attracting in commercial space is not conducive to this hangout culture
- There is a locally-owned café in Brookline – made a clear decision that they would not offer Wi-Fi – so that people hung out with each other, not people to do work on here by themselves. We need to respect that businesses need to make money – whether that's a community center, or even a library auxiliary space, where you have tables and maybe some best-sellers in each village – where people can hang out and take out some books but have to be realistic about revenue-based models of businesses and rents that are crazy.
- Exclusivity – grew up in Newton, moved away for college and then back for their first job – having the Green line accessibility has been much better. I like the suburban feel. I know there's been a push for multi-family , and I'm not opposed to that, but I personally like the suburban-esque feel. I like having houses with yards. And I prefer living in a place like that versus a place like Brookline with taller apartment complexes and much less per-person allocated.
- Accessibility – both from a public transit perspective and private transportation. Personally, I don't think there's a way to resolve the traffic problem. So appreciate initiatives taken with bike paths.

- Would love to see a bus structure that actually works and is accessible.

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.

- John Rice at the Hyde Center – he was always very friendly and welcoming.
- Lately been going to the Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council – feels less welcoming and didn't want to go to the meetings. If it could be improved somehow.
- There's a Google Group for Newton Highlands that sometimes is good, other times gets into arguments over things.
- Having coffee shops where you could sit down – in Highlands, one where you can't sit down and the other one is on the corner of Walnut & Lincoln, 3 tables max, not somewhere where you could go easily and hang out.
- Visibility – there's a church in Newton Highlands that has the rainbow symbol and periodically has welcoming sayings / messages. That's right in the middle of the Highlands – so visibility like that helps.
- I don't think any of them have it down – the worst of them is Newton Centre where, except for the green space in the center there – but there is really no soul of Newton in that place except maybe J.P. Licks.
- Newtonville I like very much because there's a small time feel, a grocery store, some eateries that are easy to grab from, a bakery. But even so – if you think about windowed browsing or, 'hey, did you see that shirt or that photograph?' there's none of that in Newtonville either. But there is an element of getting ice cream and being able to eat it outside.
- Newton Highlands – the area is very conducive to having some interesting retail and community space – but nothing there. Like hair salons, banks. Several empty storefronts. Seemed to me when we first moved here – how cute – a space where you could imagine meeting a friend and having a cup of coffee – but there's, maybe because of the rents being so crazy, it hasn't risen to the occasion. In terms of cuteness and accessibility, Highlands has the best.
- Newton Centre is pretty good at hitting all of these. You've got the T-stop right there, there's a very nice conglomeration of roads, bike paths are not great but not terrible.

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?

- Pet stores, queers love pets -
- Would like a fenced-in dog park
- Everyone loves ice cream, but we already have JP Licks
- Green areas to sit down with your friends, places to hang out for a while, as well as places in the shade, outdoor seating that's ideally not attached to a restaurant where you can chill and don't have to purchase
- Along the line of pets but PLANTS.
- Picnic areas
- Nice to be able to both buy plants but also have a ton of plants along the sidewalk
- Agree with performance areas and an outdoor stage
- Where I used to live had a bandstand where there was both scheduled and unscheduled stuff - def not a queer specific thing but whatever

- Also, for younger LGBTQ+: love the farmers market and def see a lot of queer couples at the farmers' market
- More programs directly in the village – Hyde Center is great but it's a little way out.
- When I've done these vision kits, we've met at Rodney Bakery – that would be a nice place to have regular music or ... the store there keeps on changing hands. For the longest time it was called Ice Cream Works – since then it has gone through a different ownership.
- More places to hang out in the village. Another little garden at the corner of Lincoln & Walnut – but nowhere really to sit.
- Times when the streets were closed off – for that to happen more often than just the Village Day. Block party type. Able to direct traffic so people were less concerned about cutting through the local neighborhood if Lincoln St got closed down.
- More things for all ages. Village Day is geared towards kids and families with kids. Been a while since we had a little carnival type as part of it. So not sure how to have events geared towards different ages – more spaces for young adults and older adults.
- Place in Newton Centre which kind of functions like that – on the corner of Union & Langley. They have had open mics every week. All winter long. So, more things like this – have different themes, have an LGBTQ+ night, have a recent immigrant night, have an Asian American night.
- Different events in that field – there's a Taiwanese Cultural Center right there, they have a festival every summer. This summer, Juneteenth was celebrated there. The ability to have more festivals there –
- While there was the pride flag raising – maybe there's something more specifically for LGBTQ+ folks
- Just having different prices – rather than it being so expensive to live here. Living closer to a Village Center, theoretically smaller units and not needing a car, could make it less expensive to live here. Could make it more friendly and welcoming for a lot of people.
- Would love to have a community center in each village that was open, available for meetings, that you could have with your local club, or work on the internet, or study, or do your work. Would be an amazing welcoming place, saying – we're all welcome here – library puts in 30 books a week, on a rotating basis – that would be ideal to be able to have that kind of open space.
- Allowing local businesses to open, to have space that is only dedicated to locally owned businesses. No chains, no banks. Only a certain % of space that would be available for retail or restaurant establishments that were locally owned had a lure of street traffic. A record shop that doesn't exist anymore or a funky gift shop, or a cool coffee shop that has pizzas on Thursday. If you go to Harvard SQ now, so little locally owned.
- I would love to say, 20- 30% of our stores are required to be local businesses. There used to be a junky shop – they had bins of stuff, some of it was junk and some was fun to get into. When I was a kid, you could go into a store and get 10 erasers in the shape of a car, and it was fun – especially for a kid, especially for adolescents who have \$10 in their pocket, spend it and be independent. That's important.
- And then I would also say – I would love to be able to go out for dinner and go for a movie – no venues in Newton to say let's go see a show! Or let's go dancing – so would love to see more of that
- I'm 50, almost 55 – so my days of going out clubbing are long past me. But I do think that if someone said, hey, where should we meet? I'd like to say, hey, there are 3 places

in Newton! Oh, and hey, then we can go here for dessert. And then we can walk around and see the street musicians. The idea of wanting to stay here and not feel like you're in the burbs where everything's a bank and nothing is open past 6pm.

- The visual element of the parking lot in Newton Centre is so unappealing, so uninviting.
- Probably Newton Centre as it is now. Maybe with a little more housing, which runs kind of counter to my earlier point.
- Want a lot of space and want it to be cheap, and those two are not possible to achieve at the same time. But if there were actually truly no limitations, that would be great.

Q 4: How do you think the City of Newton can better engage its LGBTQ+ community members (both those who live, work, and have children attending school in Newton)?

- If there were more multi-family houses, townhouses, etc. that would be much more doable and you could get a lot more younger people, people who work in the town.
- Cool that focus groups like these are being done. Especially targeted towards queer communities, it's a really big blind spot even though queer people are in MA and in Newton because it's more accepting than other parts of the country
- Library has a great queer space and hosts a lot of great events - partnering with the library could be a worthwhile pursuit. Friends of mine who are queer already engage with the library
- There are all of these events for families with kids – there could be different themes along those lines
- Even just knowing that those things are going on, even if I'm not quite in the senior center – they're all older than me
- These kinds of events make it feel like there's more of a community
- Knows Holly Ryan was an LGBTQ+ liaison –
- I know that the Mayor every year does this flag raising thing – which is kind of cute – but I see that as being very superficial and not systematic in terms of, what does this mean in terms of the city being a welcoming place?
- Through my kid's school there's been nothing but support, no eyes rolled, or questioning looks for anything – my kid's gender fluid, I'm a divorced lesbian – no one blinks an eye
- But when I think about the town center – I rarely see rainbow flags. If you go downtown for pride month, everyone and their mother has the flag up. That's superficial also because it's just a flag – but when Mida opened up in Newtonville, they had a huge pride flag up in their window – and I noticed it and my kid did too. It makes a difference when you see that in a new business establishment – and wouldn't it be great if we had something not only for Pride month but also, “here are 3 queer owned businesses who would love your business”! Or we'd love to give special appreciation to our gay employees at 'X' workplace.” We want to make sure that these spaces are available and open for LGBTQ+ groups to meet – there are many kids groups, including some of the MetroWest pride groups for kids – I don't know where they're meeting right now but I know they're not meeting in Newton.
- I don't see much LGBTQ+ in Newton at all. We're not a place where queer folks are more visible – but I would love to see some look and feel for that through our businesses, through the mayor saying – we're going to give a gay pride flag to all businesses and hang them up, just like we do 'happy Christmas' – and, what would it be like if we had that 20% locally owned requirement, what would it be like to say, we want

all new businesses in newton – esp. 5% queer owned – that would be an intentional approach to say, hey, we welcome queer people not only to our schools. Mentioned as a safe and wonderful place for queer kids in the city – not only in our schools but also in our commercial centers.

- And I just don't see it. Again, it doesn't seem to bother anyone.
- There was a Newton Queer Parents yahoo group years ago – I joined it, but they were petering out. But there is no such group now. There is no Newton queer group at all. And I'm not saying it's the city's responsibility to do it. But it's an absence – we have no queer parent or adult organization in the city. And I think that's really absence.
- I wonder if you could start with the schools – queer teachers – even if including them in your efforts, because they're city employees too –
- People who want to celebrate themselves and enjoy their queerness don't seek it out in Newton. If we had more overt clarity that the villages are welcoming – or if we had a queer village – it would do a lot to say, oh, I don't have to go to Roslindale or JP – I can actually see queer community here in Newton.
- Having these focus groups in the first place was a really good way of doing it – I would not partake in a normal meeting, I'm too busy. But having something that requires less commitment than physically going somewhere is impactful.
- A friend pushed me to do this
- Big problem – question of time commitment? People who tend to have their voices heard are those with a lot of time on their hands. So making it easier to do this is a better way to engage this.
- If you send out surveys, I'm sure there are people who could sign up for that – especially questions that take less than a minute.
- Live in Auburndale – make a run down to Waban and back up Comm Ave – when I see posters on the side of the street, that's how I learn the most about what's happening in the city.

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.