

Zoning Redesign: Village Centers

Compilation of Economic Development Focus Group Reports October 4, 2021

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Project Summary

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Introduction

City staff and Utile held the Commercial Brokers and Consultants focus group on June 29, 2021. Participants were invited by City staff. In seeking attendance from a broad and diverse group, the City reached out through the Economic Development Commission (EDC) and the Charles River Regional Chamber (formerly the Newton Needham Regional Chamber) requesting participants who either work in Newton's village centers or in comparable locations within the region. In total, this focus group had:

- 6 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.

Why Commercial Real Estate Brokers and Consultants

One of the working definitions of Newton's village centers explains that they are the primary mixed-used areas serving as the commercial and retail hearts of the City. Given this, staff believe it was critical to speak with the commercial real estate brokers and consultants who are working in and around Newton with the clients who buying, leasing, selling, or renting these office or retail spaces. In addition, most participants are also Newton residents. This group has extensive knowledge of the demographics and physical characteristics of the village centers, as well as an in-depth understanding of the financials required to make projects successful. In thinking about future zoning proposals, this group offers a unique perspective because they see the challenges and opportunities that zoning could address on a daily basis.

Focus Group Notes

[Q1] Given the inroads of ecommerce, what do you think the future will be for retail in village centers? Some experts and consultants think that the future of brick-and-mortar retail is experience-focused retail like F&B (food and beverage), yoga, gyms, etc. Do you agree and how might that translate to Newton's village centers?

- Given the demographics of Newton, you should expect higher end retail.
 - There will be a need for people to buy things, but probably more premium brands.
 - Could be either national/international brands, or local boutique shops that sell premium products.
- As F&B expands in Newton, retail needs to extend its hours to align with the times of the day that restaurants are open, especially later in the day.
 - For example, if Newtonville Books in Newton Centre was open in the evening, then people would stop in before or after meals.
 - The City should investigate whether there are ordinances on the books that limit hours of operation.
- National chains typically don't locate in village centers and in traditional town centers across the region.
 - Is this going to change if workers continue to work from home? Are they going to expect their favorite chain to come to them? I know friends who are going into Brookline to get Sweetgreen or Pret.
 - Note that Panera did not work in Newton Centre is now being replaced by Tatte.
 - You do not see chains in the villages because there are not enough people.
 - Sweetgreen is in Chestnut Hill and Shake Shack is at the Street for a reason.
- Experiential retail is the wave of the future, no matter what they are selling. It's all about what can't be replicated online.
- We see a lot of struggle and long-term vacancies in the village centers.
- It is reckless to talk about retail, retail costs, without talking about the lack of housing affordability in Newton.
- The biggest issue for businesses right now is staffing.
- Trio [commercial space] worked, because we had complete flexibility within the 40,000 sf ground floor.
 - The historic village centers don't really have that flexibility in terms of space (lots of different ownership, lots of different floor plates).
 - The zoning needs to allow for flexibility to allow for both small local retail shops and larger retail as well
 - For example, West Newton has both the Paper Mouse and the West Newton Theater.
- To promote arts and cultural uses they need to be allowed as-of-right, whether or not they are thought of as an office use.

[Q2] Post-pandemic, do you think there will be a market for co-working space in Newton village centers? And if so, what does that look like? Do you think smaller professional and consulting businesses currently located in downtown Boston would consider moving to space located in the heart of one of Newton's village centers? Why or why not?

- Yes, there could be space for co-working, but we need to be thinking more broadly. It is about active uses and co-working is one option for ground floor activation, but there are other options
 - All ground floor office space is not the same.
 - We could borrow the definition from the Somerville Code.
- We have very deep spaces, from a different time when on-site back-of-house inventory was critical.
 - We could allow active uses up front and other uses (offices) in the back.
- The adaptability of retail space is important. Allowing larger spaces to be broken down into smaller spaces, with shared infrastructure, creates density and the conditions for smaller more local retail.
 - Trends suggest that allowing for small/flexible space is key.
- People want to have business lunches, and that is happening in the limited spaces that exist in village centers. And now with the pandemic, I do think there will be a trend to co-working as people want to get out of their homes.
- Co-working has worked in Newton. The Innovation Center, in Newton Corner, was successful, before it closed.
 - The challenge is the demand for parking by users of co-working spaces.
 - Staffing levels are pretty consistent at varying sizes of spaces. That's why smaller spaces are more difficult to operate from cost perspective.
 - Co-working in Needham is more successful because space is cheaper and there is more parking.
 - Locations would work if you could have a meeting at 8am and then go into Boston or Cambridge at 10am.
- More density equals more people, both within and adjacent to village centers!

[Q3] Beyond retail, professional offices, and residential units, what are other kinds of uses in Newton's village centers that we should identify and consider?

- A boutique hotel in a few village centers could be great and drive foot traffic.
 - There was an issue, fixed 5-10 years ago, that made hotels illegal.
- A permanent market structure could be great.
 - But a market structure in one village center might go against the atomization of village centers.
- Need to be mindful of the uniqueness of the villages as we go through zoning and consider recommendations that:
 - Promote future development
 - Maintain some historical patterns
- We must decouple parking requirements from residential and commercial development.

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.

Project Summary

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Introduction

City staff and Utile held the Developers focus group on July 20, 2021. Participants were invited by City staff. In seeking attendance from a broad and diverse group, the City reached out through the Economic Development Commission (EDC) and the Charles River Regional Chamber (formerly the Newton Needham Regional Chamber) requesting participants who either work in Newton's village centers or in comparable locations within the region. In total, this focus group had:

- 7 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.

Why Developers

One of the working definitions of Newton's village centers explains that they are the primary mixed-used areas serving as the commercial and retail hearts of the City. Given this, staff believe it was critical to speak with the development community working in Newton, as they are the City's partners in the preservation, development, and redevelopment of Newton's village centers. This group has as an in-depth understanding of the financials required to make projects successful. In thinking about future zoning proposals, this group offers a unique perspective because they see firsthand the challenges within the current zoning for creating desirable projects that align with the City's many guiding planning and policy documents.

Focus Group Notes

[Opening Comments]

- Certainty is needed and Newton does not have it! The City needs to make the rules before the developers show up, otherwise we are always reacting and behind the curve.
- The market may be targeting non-village commercial centers (Route 9, Needham St, etc.) more than traditional village centers. This might mean that these areas are more vulnerable and may need to be tackled first.
- Parking – Trio was forced to build 210 parking spaces for 140 units. They currently have 129 units and 130 parking spaces leased - a one for one ratio. Demographics include a lot of empty nesters and graduate students. People don't want to share private lots with retail, but developers do not need so much parking for the residential.
- Parking - Austin Street is also leasing its parking spaces at a less than one to one ratio, but still had to provide more spaces.
- Parking - Other multi-family developments outside of village centers (i.e. Older garden style apartments), which may cater to a different demographic, still requires more parking. These older developments were built at a 1:1.5 parking ration and they are all full.
- Don't think parking is the biggest hurdle to vibrant retail in village centers, it is the permitting process.
- To make village centers more appealing, it starts at the street level. The Washington Street corridor is a prime candidate for a road diet.

[Q1] Given the inroads of ecommerce, what do you think the future will be for retail in village centers? Some experts and consultants think that the future of brick-and-mortar retail is experience-focused retail like F&B (food and beverage), yoga, gyms, etc. Do you agree and how might that translate to Newton's village centers?

- The definition of retail is always changing and developers and the City need to be adaptable. Example: gyms were the death sign of village center in the 80s and 90s and now boutique fitness is what everyone wants
- To promote new kinds of retail, the City needs to get rid of parking requirements - or the need for parking waivers when you change use. Right now, it costs \$50,000 to get a parking waiver.
- When it comes to brick and mortar, Newton has the best environment (wealth, density, and transportation)
- There has been a major shift in demand for daytime fast casual from workers working at home. Pre-COVID they were going to these same places near their offices.
- It does not need to be a tradeoff between parking or retail, we can have both.
- When you see a vacancy, it may be owners just watching the market and waiting on the right price. It does not mean a site is not viable.

- I think that the amount of parking in village centers is pretty reasonable. I do not believe the lack of parking is the biggest hurdle in existing village centers, rather it is permitting.
- Seeing the struggles in Newton commercial areas, specifically due to the COVID-19 pandemic, may bring about a political climate that is more friendly to retail/office development.
- There should be a tiered system for parking requirements. Smaller retail and office spaces could have no parking requirements, medium-sized spaces could require a modest amount, and very large spaces could be negotiated.

[Q2] Do you think smaller professional and consulting businesses currently located in downtown Boston would consider moving to space located in the heart of one of Newton's village centers? Why or why not? Post-pandemic, do you think there will be a market for co-working space in Newton village centers? And if so, what does that look like?

- Having office space in a mixed-use building does not pan out economically because:
 - Cities limit height and commercial space requires taller floor-to-floor heights
 - Mixed office residential/office buildings require two elevator cores, resulting in higher costs and design inefficiencies
 - Rents don't cover the cost of new construction
- Pop-up co-working/satellite office could be a great way to test things out, or to hold over a vacant front – but it is not easy.
- The office discussion is interesting in light of what happens to office space post-COVID. Clover in Newtonville opened a few weeks ago. They are blown away by lunchtime business. Where are all these daytime people coming from? One theory: there must still be a lot of people working at home. Given the evidence of more daytime workers in the village center, it might be a good time to rethink the mix on some deals.
- Cafe Nero [Newtonville] hit its first year sales goal 6 months after opening. Anecdotally I would say yes, it's busy during the day. All ages, including older people.
- When we were developing Trio in 2015, including an office component did not pencil out even though the City wanted it because of the potential commercial taxes. But now through COVID, things might be different as there seems to be a larger lunchtime population (i.e. people working at home nearby). So, things may evolve so a workable mix includes more office.
- We are in the process of signing a lease in a village center for a very desirable use – not a bank or office. Pop-ups are great as incubator opportunities. Co-working does not compete with retail rents. But pop-ups that could lead to long term tenants are a good idea (we do this on Newbury Street).
- Co-working on the ground floor does not pay (first floor retail is valuable).
- We have second floor office, even without parking, and it is desirable in the center of Concord. There is a waitlist of existing tenants that want to expand. This project was gutted from the inside and we created a series of small office spaces. There is a Café Nero on the ground floor. This was a huge success during Covid. Most tenants either walk to work or use the nearby municipal lots.

[Q3] Are There residential unit types that might be well-suited to new development in village centers? Can these units meet a market demand that isn't currently being met in Newton? Are "missing middle" housing types (4-12 units) a feasible development model in and around Newton's village centers, when considering land acquisition costs, rents, the current entitlements process, etc.?

- When it comes to smaller development, inefficiency in management makes it somewhat infeasible:
 - Between 70-120 is ideal for market rate
 - 40-55 units is ideal for DHCD/LIHTEC funded projects
 - Smaller, local developers, can do smaller projects (acquisition/building costs make this difficult, but not impossible)
- The City's permitting process makes smaller projects infeasible. There needs to be an easier path for smaller projects (less than 20-units or so)
- Owners of village center properties just don't have the bandwidth to take on the City Council. Owner of Newton Highlands properties would rather sit on the development. It is an ideal site for mixed-use development.
- Affordable Housing
 - As an affordable housing developer, we do not even look at zoning, we just assume 40B.
 - There is an additional review by a city (beyond the conventional entitlements process) because the developer is taking municipal money (could take 1.5 years extra to approve 8-units because of financial reviews).
 - Providing affordable housing in communities like Newton could reduce traffic because tenants are not commuting by car into Boston like the rest of the properties.
 - Smaller affordable deals tend to be specific to certain populations.
 - The City Council is also pitting affordable housing, sustainability, and other things against each other by not having clearly defined rules from the get go.
- I do smaller projects, less than 25-units or so, outside of village centers. One of biggest challenges for me is the land acquisition costs relative to the number of units I will be allowed through the Special Permit process.
- Newton is the most difficult community I have ever done development in. Everything requires a Special Permit and negotiations with 24 City Councilors.

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Introduction

City staff and several members from the Economic Development Commission (EDC) held the Property Owners focus group on July 28, 2021. In addition, following the focus group, staff created an online survey using the same questions asked during the focus group for those who could not attend. In total this focus group had:

- 13 people expressed interest in this focus group
- 6 focus group participants
- 5 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.

Focus Group Notes

[Q1] What do you see as the unique advantage(s) of owning property in a Newton village center?

- As an owner over many years we have weathered good, bad, and the in-between times. All village centers are unique and they need to be considered that way. Look to the past in order to look to the future.

- The easy access to transit to travel into the City when necessary, but also have the suburban market surrounding. But I believe in transit-oriented development (TOD) and the village centers should be more developed.
- There may not be such an advantage to traditional village centers right now because the other areas (The Street as an example) are taking away.
- Transportation is the biggest barrier to Newton Housing Authority (NHA) residents from participating in daily Newton life. The Newton Highland property take full advantage of being within walking distance of what village centers have to offer.
- Location to Mass transit
- Proximity of mutually beneficial services. Because parking is an issue, if a customer can park once and get more than one service in that trip it is an advantage.
- Walkability
- Cohesiveness among community tenants
- Outdoor gathering areas are phenomenal (Newtonville and Newton Centre)
- Accessibility to major transportation routes (128) and modes of transportation (commuter rail, commuter bus, etc.)

[Q2] What type of businesses do you seek to attract for your retail frontage or office space? And is it easy to attract or retain tenants, explain why?

- There seems to be a trend to push retail that is the newest fad, and in my experience it does not last.
- You need things that don't compete against e-commerce.
- There are retail establishments that I currently have that will probably not resign their lease.
- The NHA manages a housing voucher program, and they can choose Newton or outside of Newton. The first calculation is price, which is very difficult in Newton. The 2nd big thing they are looking for is being able to walk to their basic needs (health care, food options, civic spaces, etc.). In Newton, there is not a lot of this in village centers, and not all village centers have those resources. So people who get a voucher and may live in Dorchester or Lynn make a really tough choice in coming to Newton where they get access to schools but lose the walkability and the community.
- Don't know what we can attract because of the issue of parking
- Would love to see a bakery
- Gift shops/ Card shops
- Food shops / Specialty cheese store
- It is extremely difficult to attract and retain "mom and pop" stores because they do not have the customer base
- There are large vacant spaces in West Newton, it seems like only banks, well financed restaurants, and medical offices are able to in the village centers

[Q3] Have recently completed/proposed development projects (Trio, Austin St, 1149 Walnut, West Newton Square Enhancements, etc.) changed your outlook for your property (i.e. maintain, redevelop, sell, etc.)?

- We are closely monitoring the new development going on all around the City. Zoning will play a critical role.
- These larger projects (Riverside, Northland, The Street) are pulling people away from our village centers. They are competing with village centers. More people beget more people. If you want to keep people in the village centers then you need more housing and offices within them.
- Riverside is going to be a city onto itself. But Dunstan East will be built in a location that can take full advantage of West Newton and Newtonville.
- Village centers need to be places where I can do all my errands in one location. Nonantum offers this. I don't think the new and larger developments will fill this need.
- Yes, it has made us dig in our heels – we don't want to sell and we don't want to develop at this point.
- All the development has created a lot of competition for us, and it has changed our marketing efforts. Since these developments have come online, the many more units have saturated the market.

[Q4] Is there anything else you would like to tell us about what makes for an economically vibrant village center in the future?

- In my opinion the best functioning village center is Waban. They have not changed in 25 years and there are no parking meters.
- If things are going to change, you need to get smaller units and more affordable places for families if you are going to change things.
- Amazon is here to stay and certain types of retail just can't compete. We need a new way to get people out to village centers by providing user experiences.
- Temporary/Pop-up events can be very helpful (August 4th/5th is the night out with the police in West Newton)
- Village centers only draw customers within a half mile radius. Beyond a half mile from a village center, those customers are closer to other competing commercial attractions (other village centers, malls, Northland/Needham St, Riverside, etc). So without enough customer density within a half mile radius surrounding village centers, village center tenants cannot survive in the long run.
- Parking is scarce and we desperately need more parking. We need more parking for patrons and staff. If room, build a free standing parking structure.
- Develop the [Newton Centre] triangle and relocate parking to the periphery.
- Pedestrian crossings need work – waiting for lights are too long and once the crosswalk light comes out it is not long enough.
- Meeting areas [outdoor space] in West Newton do not work – benches are metal and hot; air quality is poor; ambulances and fire trucks run all the time.

- We need apartment buildings over businesses – in Newton Centre this be from the Walgreens to the dry cleaners.

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Introduction

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- 13 people expressed interest in this focus group
- 8 focus group participants
- 9 interview participants

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Small Businesses

“Small, locally owned businesses play an important role in any city, but especially in the villages of Newton. Small businesses have a great impact on the local economy and add flavor, uniqueness, and character to downtowns and village centers. The small businesses in Newton are struggling to remain viable due to high rent for space, parking challenges for customers and employees, and declining spending due to online sales.”

- Economic Development Action Plan for the City of Newton, January 2019
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Focus Group Notes

[Q1] What do you see as the unique advantage(s) of owning property in a Newton village center?

- Always wanted to have a retail shop and looked at lots of different communities, Nonantum location opened up and thought it was a great location. Thought Ace Hardware was a great anchor. Could draw customers from nearby communities. Love the history and tight knit nature of Nonantum.
- Location – live around corner from shop. Tight knit community.
- Pre-existing shop I worked in and good foot traffic. Neighbors are great at supporting businesses. So close to Waltham/Watertown/Belmont
- Bought a long time business (Johnny's). We were the only buyers interested in keeping the business. If we can keep the banks out then Newton Centre is great. Parking, lots of foot traffic.
- Being close to a train station really important for restaurants for staffing. Really crucial piece. Had restaurants for 18 years. Transit access, particularly at difficult times, is a major factor. Better position than other restaurants due to train.
- Parking is also a benefit. Having a couple public lots is important. And turnover on Watertown.
- By accident of having husband's family own significant properties there.
- Impressed with the uniqueness and affordability/old school family vibe (Nonantum).
- Provided co-working opportunity.
- Late business partner lived in Newton and late husband knew a landlord in the center.
- Space opened up
- Very loyal clients in the community
- Good visibility of the location and ability to expand
- Close to 128 and Mass Pike
- Good place to walk
- Clientele lives in Newton
- Outdoor seating is a real attraction

[Q2] Have recently completed/proposed development projects (Trio, Austin St, 1149 Walnut, West Newton Square Enhancements, etc.) changed your outlook for your property (i.e. maintain, redevelop, sell, etc.)?

- Been a bumpy year and a half, hard to say. Have spoken to owners in West Newton and they were having a hard time with length of time to do street improvements. Compounded by covid. Moody street did such a great job in Waltham and that impacted West Newton.
- City has done pretty good job of allowing restaurants to have outdoor seating. The more we can allow outdoor seating, the better.

- Love outdoor seating and want to retain that. As a business owner, it adds vibrancy to the neighborhood. More people around and they see the other shops.
- Outdoor seating adds vibrancy. Keep shop doors open and you hear people outside. Have had a lot of new retail customers. Outdoor dining may be drawing people into the village center.
- As restaurant owner the outdoor dining has been critical. Customers love it. If moving forward, we need to find equity. If a restaurant has good relationship with neighboring non-restaurant retailer they can extend in front of their store. But some restaurants don't have that ability. Make it work for as many restaurants as possible.

[Q3] Is there anything else you would like to tell us about what makes for an economically vibrant village center in the future?

- Need more cafes – places where people can congregate and linger. People stick around longer and then can continue visiting the other businesses.
- Nonantum has something special – mix of uses? Narrowness of street? It is a tight knit community. Business owners know each other.
- Have watched banks take over village centers. Need to stop more banks. Banks don't draw people and are not wanted by community at large. Need to find a way to creatively work with landlords to create spaces available to small local businesses.
- Need to treat retail space like affordable housing and carve out space for local businesses. Need to refocus on what makes village centers exciting. Limit banks and realtors to above ground floor or limit their floor area.
- Like the idea of banks above ground floor, but would need to allow atm on ground floor
- Like the idea of going to a village center and be able to access multiple needs
- Mix of businesses is critical. Cluster impact. A lot of activity and together businesses draw more and increase customer base because they are all there.
- Having parks and events is also a big part of vibrancy of neighborhood.
- Newton Centre could use more open space and regular events – more creative use of center green and potentially the parking lot.
- West Newton is noisy and congested. There is also a problem with parking, so much of it has been taken up by the City itself and by the post office
- The City should make better use of its parks, including those in the centers; need more community events which are critical to increasing foot traffic.
- Don't understand the emphasis on bike lanes (West Newton). The road redesign seems to have taken away more parking spaces.
- Village centers require an anchor—whether that be a cluster of revered stores (Nonantum - Antoin's, Swartz Hardware, DePasquale's Sausage Company), movie theater (West Newton), cluster of restaurants (Olivia's, Moldova, etc.), liquor store. CVS really don't add to foot traffic to other businesses or vitality because the parking lot is out back and entrance is remote from the street.
- Loss of theater has hit retail hard in West Newton
- Transportation connection in West Newton is poor

- Consider street closures and events
- Need more experiential retail
- Allowing residential above retail is important to village center vibrancy—allow mixed use
- Provide for senior housing in the centers as additive to residential
- Loss of mortgage department and headquarters of Village Bank has negatively impacted Auburndale businesses—it provided an anchor and foot traffic
- In addition to anchors, the business mix is important.
- Yes! More retail shops rather than banks and nail salons.
- Community support via local officials being present and engaged in our small businesses to drive more reluctant customers to support as well. Typically if the person they voted for is in support, most will follow suit.
- Better use of space for the Greens in Newton Center. The pandemic proved how much customers enjoy the outside and for us, as a restaurant owner, and our customers it will be beneficial to accommodate that space for more tables and outdoor dining for all the local restaurants to use.
- Parking! We serve elderly people, and they find it very difficult to navigate the area in terms of parking and wheelchair access to our front door.

[Report Out]

- Vibrancy, lots of people around and mix of businesses that can benefit each other
- Permanent outdoor dining with equity across restaurants
- Create new opportunities for local business and limit non active ground floor businesses
- Work with businesses and don't hamper them
- Housing is also important
- Areas where people are co-mingling
- Breathe life into village centers – festivals, events, first Fridays, etc.
- Anchors – what are those tenants that are strong anchors that drive foot traffic
- Mix of commercial and residential above ground floor – creating foot traffic for day and night
- Ease of transportation
- Utilize farmers markets better. Doing it at the high school doesn't help people to visit other businesses

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