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Barney S. Heath
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MEMORANDUM

DATE: October 22, 2021

TO: Councilor Deborah Crossley, Chair, Zoning & Planning Committee
Members of the Zoning & Planning Committee

FROM: Barney Heath, Director, Department of Planning and Development
Jennifer Caira, Deputy Director Department of Planning and Development
Zachery LeMel, Chief of Long Range Planning
Nevena Pilipovic-Wengler, Community Engagement Planner
Cat Kemmett, Planning Associate

RE: **#88-20 Discussion and review relative to the draft Zoning Ordinance**
DIRECTOR OF PLANNING requesting review, discussion, and direction relative to the draft Zoning Ordinance.
Chair's NOTE Chair's NOTE: Planning staff and our consultant, Utile, will summarize the data and describe common themes that have emerged from five months of robust community engagement, for the committee to begin to discuss. A written summary is in this week's packet.

MEETING: October 25, 2021

CC: City Council
Planning Board
Jonathan Yeo, Chief Operating Officer

Introduction

At the beginning of October, Planning staff and Utile wrapped up the first phase of engagement for updates to the village center zoning districts. Since May, staff have engaged community members through multiple channels asking them to share their experiences of and future visions for village centers. The response received was overwhelming and staff had an incredible time meeting community members where they were - at community events, outside of the Newton Free Library, while they were grabbing coffee with a friend, on Facebook! Staff also hosted a panel on the history of village centers with Historic Newton. We also had incredible help from our four high school interns (who engaged over 400 folks!) and closely collaborated with City boards and commissions, and other community groups.

From this community input, staff will now work closely with the Zoning and Planning Committee (ZAP) to develop a set of village center priorities, which will inform the individual zoning proposals to be researched and refined in the coming year. What follows below is a summary of 'what we heard' from this phase of engagement. For the 'raw' data, please visit the [Zoning Redesign Village Center webpage](#).

Engagement Process and Methodology

What was the engagement? Who did staff collaborate with?

This first phase of community engagement for the village center zoning districts was interactive, collaborative, and offered multiple ways that community members could contribute their thoughts. Overall, 1,719 community members contributed to at least one of the community engagement channels offered.

Equitable engagement was one of staff's priorities for this phase to hear from community members' voices disproportionately underrepresented in previous engagement efforts. This engagement phase tripled the representation of renters and increased that of people aged 15-24 from 0.64% to 13%.¹ In addition, the proportion of homeowners who participated was 71%, which aligns with Newton's overall demographic of homeowners at 72%.² This compares with the December 2020 events, where 91% of participants identified as homeowners. Overall, these efforts led us to hearing from a broader population that is more representative of Newton, as well as many first-time participants. The community engagement channels remained true to the commitments made at the beginning in May:

- **Vision Kit:** a set of prompts for a self-led tour of a village center of one's choice where staff encouraged community members to submit photos and observations. Some community members facilitated the Vision Kit as a group discussion to consider all of the city's village centers. Staff received 102 submissions and noted 290 unique participants involved. The submissions ranged from [photos and observations](#) to [PDFs, Word documents, Excel files, hand-drawn sketches, collages, phone calls, and more](#). Staff are incredibly grateful to everyone (Neighborhood Area Councils, community groups, individuals, and City Councilors) who organized Vision Kit tours.
- **Online interactive forum (Polis):** this platform (also known as Polis) is a tool used across the world to help generate consensus around complex and complicated issues. For Newton, community members shared their opinions about village centers and voted "agree", "disagree" or "pass/unsure" on each others' comments. [The Polis report](#) shows that 1,427 community members voted and 1,249 community members made statistically significant contributions to this forum (meaning they voted on at least 7 statements), which enabled the online interactive forum results.
- **Equitable focus groups:** The equitable focus groups aimed to increase participation of younger people (ages 15-24 and 25-35), older adults (65+), BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color), LGBTQ+ community, people with disabilities, renters, and the creative community. Staff offered phone interviews to those who were not able to attend the scheduled virtual focus group. A total of 139 community members participated in these focus groups, and 18 community members helped facilitate breakout rooms of the focus group they identified with. [Here is the equitable focus groups' report](#). Each focus group was co-hosted with a relevant city entity: Human Rights Commission, Youth Commission, Council on Aging and the Senior Center, Cultural Development department, Newton Housing Authority, and the Commission on Disability.

¹ Percentages from the December 2020 survey and the Polis survey

² Total of Population (2019 5-year ACS Estimates)

- **Economic development engagement:** Staff and Utile worked with the Economic Development Commission on targeted economic development engagement. Focus groups were facilitated for brokers and consultants, developers, property owners, and business owners. Here is [the compilation of the focus groups carried out with the EDC](#). A total of 41 people participated in the EDC channel of engagement (27 participated in the focus groups and 14 completed online surveys).
- **History presentation:** Staff created [a history presentation](#) on Newton's village centers and collaborated with Historic Newton to host [a webinar with a panel of community members and a Q+A](#). 88 people attended the virtual webinar and the history presentation recording has been viewed 165 times.
- **On-the-spot surveying:** Staff collaborated with the city's Assistant Director of Youth Services in Health & Human Services and had four high school interns do on-the-spot surveying with Polis. The high school interns did shifts in village centers (Newtonville, West Newton, Auburndale, Newton Centre, Nonantum, Newton Upper Falls, Newton Lower Falls, Waban, Four Corners, Newton Highlands, and Newton Corner), in front of the Newton Free Public Library, and in the West Suburban YMCA. In addition, staff and interns tabled at community events including Festa, Newton Open Studios, Juneteenth at Hyde Playground, Family Fun Day, Tour de Newton, the Farmers Market (at Cold Springs and Newton North), Newton Coalition of Black Residents' Picnic, LGBTQ+ Pride Flag Raising, Newtonville Village Day, and Upper Falls Village Day. These efforts resulted in engaging over 500 community members, often people who either did not know about Zoning Redesign or the current engagement effort.

In addition to the original commitments listed above, unique and serendipitous opportunities arose through collaborations and new community relationships. This includes two in-person tours of Newtonville and Newton Centre in both Mandarin and English, in partnership with the Newton Housing Authority and Neighbors Helping Neighbors. These tours involved presentations from and visits with Newton Community Pride, New Art Center, Newton Senior Center, multiple restaurants, the Newton Project Pop-Up, and Union Pharmacy. Another example is partnering with the Senior Center to put engagement flyers with the Polis QR code in NewMo vehicles.

All of this engagement depended upon building relationships with as many community members as possible. Staff individually reached out to well over 50 community groups, businesses, and city entities, inviting them to engage as well as asking them to spread word in their networks. Staff asked local businesses to put up flyers about the engagement in their windows. Instagram and Facebook accounts were created, and staff requested permission to post in multiple Newton Facebook groups. Monthly newsletters were sent out, highlighting the engagement that was taking place and engagement opportunities.

As always, there is so much more that could have been done and stronger ways to equitably engage Newton's community members. Staff look forward to cultivating lessons learned and moving forward to further civically activate Newton's community members.

What village centers were focused on?

Staff presented a working definition of village centers at the start of this process. Village centers are Newton's primary mixed-use areas serving as the commercial and retail hearts of the City. These centers often provide an identity for the neighborhoods that encompass them. They are walkable and

pedestrian friendly, typically, and serve as places for community gathering, socializing, and shopping. Many are accessible by at least one form of public transit. Many were originally civic and cultural centers, and to a lesser extent they still are today. In addition, staff specified that the quantitative analysis would rely on the village center boundaries within the 2018 Pattern Book. However, the engagement channels themselves clearly allowed the participants to put forward their own definitions and boundaries.

The majority of submissions received were not village center specific. Participants typically spoke generally of their desires for overall village center improvements. This was especially true for participants who identified as not living within walking distance to a village center. Also, many community members shared how they use and frequent many village centers depending on their needs (i.e. walk to their local village center for a morning coffee but drive to a larger village center to hold a business lunch or run multiple errands). That said, some village centers were consistently mentioned more frequently. These included Newtonville, Newton Highlands, Newton Centre, West Newton, Waban, and Nonantum.

Synthesizing the data: vision kits, focus groups, on the spot surveying

As you can see from the quantity of input received, offering multiple engagement channels led to a more accessible process and thus a broader representation of the Newton community. However, compiling and organizing data from multiple streams into digestible takeaways is challenging. To develop the key takeaways (what we heard) all feedback received through the equitable focus groups, Vision Kits, economic development focus groups, emails/phone calls, and in-person events were transcribed into a single database. Staff then analyzed the data for overarching sentiments within and across the broader themes (housing, transportation, environment, etc.). To identify more detailed recurring patterns within those themes, each statement was also tagged with a number indicating a sub-theme. For example, under “Transportation”, staff created sub-themes like “improve public transit routes and frequency” as well as “availability and quality of parking is an important aspect of village centers”. The prevalence of these sub-themes allowed us to determine the key takeaways.

To make the data as usable as possible for informing zoning policy, categories were combined and made more inclusive. Staff acknowledge that the synthesis and tagging process is more of an art than a science. As this is qualitative feedback there is room for interpretation, and our primary goal was to highlight the emergent patterns in statements and what resonated across different engagement channels. We also sought to distinguish between what zoning has the capacity to change, and processes that are managed elsewhere in the City’s rules. As always, we welcome questions, comments, and feedback. Finally, if you would like to dive into the data itself, all the community feedback, and their tags, can be found in a downloadable Excel table [at this link](#).

Synthesizing the data: Polis - online interactive forum

The online platform (known as Polis) has been active since May of this year, and has hosted a rich discussion about Newton’s village centers. The results show much consensus, and also reveal opinion groups, or groups of participants who vote similarly to one another. The largest opinion group, representing 78% of respondents, is defined as Group A. This group, in general, would like to see village centers grow and strongly supports sentiments that zoning revisions should make it easier to build multi-unit housing in and near village centers. Participants of this opinion group voice their support for

more housing because they believe that it will support local businesses, improve walkability, reduce car reliance, and fight climate change. However, there was not complete agreement within Group A on what the appropriate amount of density is. A significantly smaller Group B, which represents 22% of respondents, generally disagreed with the statements of Group A. Group B, in general, opposes major changes to village centers and does not want to see increased density or additional housing in or near village centers.

Though the groups are defined by their divergent responses, there are still many topics that they agree on. Both groups would like to see more small local businesses and less banks in village centers. There was broad support for outdoor dining as well as improvements and expansions to public open space. Pedestrian safety in village centers is also important to both groups. Overall, there was agreement that village centers should be walkable and sociable with small boutique shops, restaurants, arts organizations, and a beautiful leafy public realm with places to gather.

What We Learned

Communal & Public Space: More + Activated

More than anything else, across all engagement channels, community members spoke of the need and desire for more space to gather in village centers. This is no surprise given the ongoing pandemic that is preventing us from gathering, as well as the historic role village centers played as the nucleus of the neighborhood. The desire for these spaces transcends public vs. private, indoor vs. outdoor, permanent vs. temporary, free vs. paid. People wanted all of these and more of them.

Through the Vision Kit, people shared examples of places that are working, like Hyde Park and the diverse programming they offer throughout the year. Also, the various public art programs, like the Newton OutDoors program, were called out for enlivening already great spaces. And the recent Bram Way public plaza was praised for providing much needed free spaces for high schoolers to gather after school, as well as seniors to sit outside before/after a visit to the senior center down the street. There was also an acknowledgment of places that are lacking and need improvement. Jack Ryan Park in West Newton was called out numerous times as a missed opportunity. Some younger participants felt that school grounds could be better used at off hours for community benefit and the loss of the branch libraries came up many times as well.

Finally, when speaking about these gathering spaces, the desire for inclusion and diversity was loud and consistent. One participant in the renters focus group said, “because I live in a building, with limited space for storage and other extra needs, and on a fixed income, I want my village center to help fill/provide my needs, and other general community needs that could be met through the public realm.” Similarly, a recent homeowner in the age 25-35 focus group explained they would love to have rentable space in village centers where they can host large family gatherings. What both these participants are getting at aligns with the historic nature of village centers as being the primary gathering space of the neighborhood. In many ways we can look back to look forward, albeit in new ways to meet the needs of today and tomorrow.

Climate resiliency through built structures and green spaces

In general people are looking for more/better green space and for climate change to be incorporated into plans for new development and infrastructure. This overlaps with the previous takeaway and the

desire to connect with each other while also connecting to sustainability goals. There is also a strong desire that these spaces be better maintained, with improvements that increase climate resiliency through natural systems. Many of the Vision Kit submissions focused on expanded green spaces and tree canopy, with lots of creative ideas about how to incorporate things like community gardens, pollinator gardens, and rain gardens.

Many other comments focused on climate change and what we can do to live more sustainably by focusing on climate resilience in new development and the built environment. We saw many requests for more extensive EV charging infrastructure, for solar panels on both public and private buildings and parking lots, for incorporating green infrastructure into the public way, and for locating housing in village centers to reduce vehicle miles traveled. Climate change requires us to think holistically about the ways we live and move around and likewise the comments received crossed multiple themes, such as housing, economic development, and transportation.

These sentiments were echoed throughout Polis with strong agreement around a desire to be less car dependent and to increase plantings and green spaces, and slightly less agreement when it came to statements such as support for housing in the village centers.

Increase accessibility to buildings and infrastructure within village centers

Ensuring accessibility within village centers came up in a variety of ways focused on multiple aspects, both public and private. Community members highlighted how important having clear and navigable sidewalks and curb cuts are for people with physical disabilities and for young families with strollers, particularly in winter. People also identified challenges in accessing MBTA stops and certain retail/commercial establishments due to unsafe steps and/or a lack of ramps or elevators.

Pictures submitted through several Vision Kits highlighted how updates to current infrastructure and new requirements in future development will lead to greater accessibility and inclusivity. People sent in examples of accessible features they saw that worked well, including the expanded sidewalks in West Newton, and outdoor furniture (picnic tables and benches) that are accessible to wheelchair users in Newtonville and Newton Highlands.

Some people specifically mentioned Universal Design, pushing any new or renovated spaces and amenities to require it. Several community members, particularly in the older adults focus group, raised interest in seeing more new developments with elevator access. Due to the high cost of elevator installation and maintenance, this feature is often missing in smaller buildings. In addition, zoning and design guidelines can encourage multi-family development where each apartment is one floor instead of townhouses side by side.

Increase the ability for small businesses to begin, stay, and thrive

Over time, all village centers/downtowns experience changes that affect the industries, technologies, and land use patterns that originally shaped them and formed the foundation of their local economies. To be resilient, our village centers must be able to adapt to these changing conditions and even reinvent themselves if necessary. Our village centers have experienced these changes beginning with the advent of the shopping mall, continuing with the rise of e-commerce, and most recently with the pandemic. What remains constant though, according to community input, is the desire for village centers to remain places for small, local, and independent businesses to begin, stay, and thrive. People want village center

businesses to cater to everyday needs (cafes, cleaners, groceries, pharmacy, etc.) as well as offer specialty or destination options that provide a certain sense of place.

To get a better sense of the economic climate in village centers, we spoke directly with those who are working in it day in and day out. The economic development stakeholders spoke to the tremendous purchasing power Newton has, which both makes it an attractive site for businesses, but also leads to premium rents that prevent many others. To combat this, property and business owners spoke of removing bureaucratic red tape, which is discussed in more detail below. Brokers and consultants mentioned pop-up or incubator space to both lower the costs for tenants and quickly “test out” possible new trends in retail without making large up-front investments.

People echoed these sentiments in their Vision Kit submissions requesting zoning to prevent or limit certain uses, like banks and gas stations. Community members spoke to the availability of older small spaces as the reason for the diversity of stores in places like West Newton and Nonantum. At the same time, brokers and consultants spoke to the modern needs of retail and how many potential tenants cannot work with existing spaces. In short, there cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach and a strong business environment should be thought of as an ecosystem where each use supports one another.

More diverse housing options and encourage mixed-use projects

We began the village center engagement with the charge from ZAP that village centers, particularly those with access to public transit, are the appropriate places to explore strategic housing development. Most of the feedback we received aligned with this thought, though there were differing opinions on to what extent and what scale this housing could be created. In addition, there was a small minority of voices who did not want to see any housing development.

Breaking down the comments received, there was a strong emphasis on allowing housing above retail in village centers as a way to provide more support to local businesses, make people less reliant on their cars, and add to the overall vibrancy with 24/7 users. How many floors above retail had divided responses. There was also a clear desire for a wider variety of housing options: smaller units for younger individuals or downsizing seniors, accessible units for families with young kids and people with disabilities, and ownership and rental options affordable to all incomes. Regardless of the type and size of the desired housing projects people wanted to see high-quality, and sustainable, designs that strategically fit within the different village centers across Newton. For housing, as well as other village center development, many suggested village center design guidelines.

Make permitting process easier, clearer, and multi-tiered

On its face, this takeaway is more technical than the others. It is not theme specific and is underpinned by a wide range of comments. From what participants said, making the permitting process easier, clearer, and multi-tiered means removing regulatory hurdles that prevent desired projects at all scales. In other cases it means providing incentives to ensure the feasibility of projects that align with the City contemporary values like sustainability, affordable housing, and historic preservation.

For the affordable housing developer, who explained they don't even bother looking at the zoning code, it could be a streamlined pathway that saves time and money. A change like this could mean the difference between a feasible project and one that can't compete with a market rate competitor. For the environmentalist, it could be additional carrots or sticks to ensure sustainable design. For the

conservationist, it could be density bonuses or greater flexibility in renovating the interior when the exterior is preserved. And for the property owner looking for new tenants, it could be reducing or eliminating parking requirements. Property owners in the economic development focus groups explained losing tenants, particularly smaller independent ones, who could not wait through the Special Permit process.

Increase ease to get to Village Centers, especially through alternatives to driving

We also heard a lot about how important it is to make the experience of getting to, from, and between village centers easy and pleasant. There was strong agreement that people want to be able to visit village centers safely through a number of different travel modes. However, tension arose about what, if any, modes should be prioritized. People want to see alternatives to driving, but we also heard car access and ease of parking is an important component of the village center experience. Overall there was a lot of support for the MBTA as a mode of transport, but the lack of routes in certain parts of the city, and the service cuts in the wake of the pandemic prompted many to underscore the need for more routes and increased frequency for MBTA buses and rail service.

Unsurprisingly, people reported relying on the T for a lot of their everyday activities, including working, shopping, and socializing. Employers greatly value MBTA access as well - people in the economic development focus groups mentioned proximity to transit as a critical factor in attracting employees. While improving and expanding MBTA service and routes fall outside of the City's control, there are other areas where the City can act. For example, Vision Kit submissions shared photos of good and bad bus shelters and seating near transit stops.

People also value accessing village centers by car. Some said that ready access to parking, and to accessible parking stalls, is very important for village center access. This was especially true for seniors and to those visiting non-local village centers for a night out or to run errands. That said, drivers, alternative transportation advocates, and environmental advocates all want to rethink the need for centrally located parking, like the Newton Centre triangle. Some recommended removing that type of parking entirely, while others pushed for consolidating parking on the periphery, allowing public use of existing private parking, and placing parking behind commercial buildings.

Lastly, many expressed support for other alternatives to driving. People were interested in NewMo and other local shuttle services. There was a strong sentiment that safe walking and biking routes be expanded and improved. Specific to biking, participants shared a desire for more bike racks. We received a lot of great examples of recent positive changes to enable these alternatives across the city, highlighting the expanding Bluebikes network, newly paved bike lanes near Washington street, and newly widened sidewalks in West Newton. We also got some great suggestions for potential future improvements, like a shuttle going between village centers, and designated parking for recumbent bikes and e-scooters.

Looking Ahead

The purpose of this memo and meeting is first and foremost to simply present the community feedback. Staff would like to ensure all interested parties have sufficient time to assess the material for themselves in advance of developing draft priorities and eventual zoning proposals derived from the community feedback. To assist in this process, staff have begun thinking broadly about this incredible amount of

data realizing that zoning is only one tool to address community desires, and often not the most appropriate. Staff have cataloged this “non-zoning specific input” and are actively connecting with other City departments to share this information with them. Lastly, staff and Utile are working on a Zoning Impacts Matrix to help highlight how these takeaways may translate to various zoning recommendations going forward. For example, zoning amendments focused on development standards and allowable uses may be necessary in order to promote small businesses in village centers.

Next Steps

In addition to presenting at ZAP’s October 25 meeting, staff have scheduled a public info session, with the same content presented to ZAP, but followed by a Q+A for community members on November 15th at 6pm ([register here](#)). In advance of returning to ZAP on November 18 to present draft prioritization for the future of village center zoning based on the engagement and analysis, the Committee Chair has recommended holding a continued Committee discussion at the upcoming November 8 meeting.