

FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) for the First Phase of Engagement for Newton's Village Center Zoning District Updates (Zoning Redesign)

Last updated [12.02.21]

Introduction

The first phase of engagement for village center zoning district updates lasted for about four months and included a wide range of engagement channels. Staff's main takeaways from the community input were presented on November 15th, followed by a community Q+A - you can watch that recording here (<https://tinyurl.com/InfoSessionRecorded>) and read the slides here (<https://www.newtonma.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/77571/637725933895730000>).

This engagement focused on hearing community members' experiences of and hopes and concerns for Newton's village centers. The 'takeaways' are derived directly from what community members said and submitted throughout this phase of engagement. You can review [all of the 'raw' qualitative data](#) in [the synthesis of community members' statements](#) via Vision Kit submissions and focus group meeting minutes and in [the report of the online interactive forum](#).

[Please sign up for the Zoning Redesign monthly newsletter](#) to see the tentative agendas for upcoming ZAP meetings, learn what happened in previous ZAP meetings related to Zoning Redesign, and stay tuned in to future community engagement efforts.

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How did you arrive at these takeaways?

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 was 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](#).

How many people participated in the community engagement channels?

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. Per engagement channel:

- Vision Kits: 290 participants, with 102 Vision Kits submitted
- Online interactive forum (Polis): 1,249 participants
- Equitable focus groups: 139 participants with 18 community facilitators
- Economic development engagement: 41 participants
- In addition: history presentation on village centers (webinar event had 88 attendees and the video has been viewed >165 times), staff and four high school interns engaged over 500 community members through on-the-spot surveying (meaning, asking individuals in places like the library, YMCA, etc., to engage with the online interactive forum)

How are decisions being made based on this community engagement?

Staff and their consultant Utile are proposing prioritizations for research and will draft technical/policy updates to the current Zoning Ordinance based on the key takeaways (the areas of consensus as well as the areas of a spectrum of opinion or opinions in tension with one another) from the community input. Staff are also designing engagement processes for 2022. We plan to bring drafted updates back to community spaces and ask the community, to what extent do these drafted updates align with what was shared in the first phase of engagement.

While staff are committed to a strong community engagement process, ultimately, the City Council, through the Zoning and Planning Committee (ZAP) and with a formal recommendation from the Planning Board, will make the final decisions on updates to the current Zoning Ordinance. Staff will consistently highlight what they hear through community engagement processes (or how their work is based on community input) for ZAP and the Planning Board to consider in their own deliberations.

What did you hear from the 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.

How can I learn more about what zoning means in the context of Newton's village centers?

There are many resources available on the City of Newton's website where you can learn more about zoning and village centers. [This Zoning Redesign booklet](#) was created in partnership with NextGen Voices, a group of high schoolers from Newton North High School's Center for Civic Engagement, and serves as an introduction to zoning generally and the Zoning Redesign project. In addition, Planning staff partnered with Historic Newton and other community members to create a panel discussion about the historical development patterns of Newton's village centers. Here are the links to the [recorded webinar and Q&A](#) with the panel, the [recorded presentation](#) and [presentation slides](#) with [speaker notes](#).

How is the planning department defining village centers?

Through the Vision Kit we allowed, and encouraged, participants to define their village centers spatially (i.e. boundaries/physical characteristics) and programmatically (i.e types of uses). To kick things off, we shared a working definition of what makes a village center:

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.

When it comes to defining the boundaries, as a starting point we began with the [2018 Pattern Book](#) boundaries (see pages 93-97). These boundaries were created at a particular point in time and determining exactly where to map targeted zoning proposals will require additional analysis. But, these boundaries are a good start and have helped to ground the work thus far.

Will village centers be treated the same?

No. From the beginning there has been an acknowledgement that not all village centers are the same. Details of this can be found in the 2007 [Comprehensive Plan](#) (Pg. 53-54) and the 2018 [Pattern Book](#) (Pg. 92-97). This thinking was also heard from participants during this recent round of engagement and from our consultant, Utile, from their quantitative analysis. Planning

staff have not yet put forward specific proposals for any village center. These proposals will be researched and developed beginning in early 2022.

How is the online interactive forum (Polis) 'scientific' or 'valid'?

The online interactive forum (also known as Polis) that staff used as one of the engagement channels is an open source technology for survey research that leverages data science. It is a real-time system for gathering, analyzing and understanding what large groups of people think in their own words, enabled by advanced statistics and machine learning.

Staff chose to use Polis on our consultant Utile's recommendation (based on prior positive experiences) as well as Utile staff's technical ability to use the Polis software and interpret Polis' statistical analysis. [Multiple examples](#) of other city governments using Polis exist. Staff were convinced that this was a worthy tool to pursue due to its accessibility (it can be opened up in whatever language one's browser is set to and was easy to ask community members to interact with on-the-spot), transparency (the 'results' of Polis were available the whole time it was open to the public), and ability to identify not just variance in opinion but consensus amongst Newton community members.

When community members ask if Polis is 'scientific,' it may be helpful to back up and reflect on the different meanings of 'scientific.' Polis is 'scientific' when considering the statistical methods and linear algebra being used to identify patterns in participants' responses and the extent of consensus or disagreement.

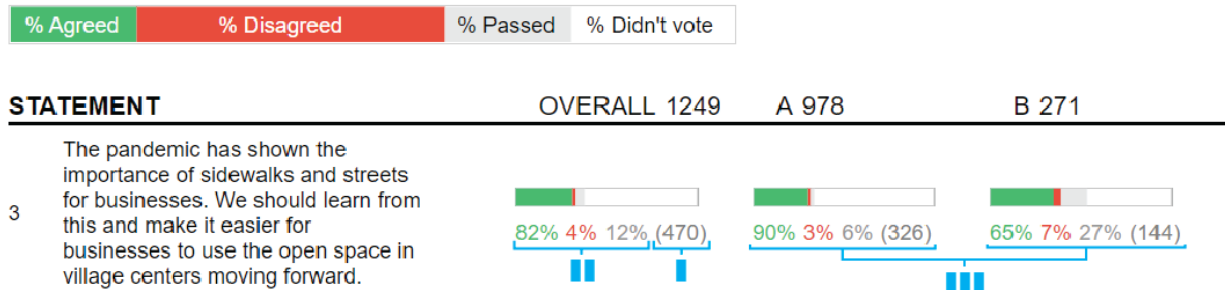
Another way that community members may be using the term 'scientific' is in terms of the sample size. A sample size refers to the number of participants or observations included in a study and can influence two statistical properties: the precision of estimates as well as the power of the study to draw conclusions. While staff engaged as many people as they had capacity to do so (and this involved over 1,500 community members), it is important to note that *this community engagement work is not a scientific study*. This community engagement work is an assessment of qualitative data - people's stories, experiences, observations, and more. As community engagement professionals have shared with staff, often what holds more importance is the range of voices solicited during community engagement efforts, rather than the number of voices. Staff believe the process was a success on this front by using multiple channels of engagement and having a focus on equity.

In other words, staff are confident in the scientific validity of Polis' statistical methods and recognize that this is not a scientific study, but rather a balanced effort to hear from as many community members as possible (especially with a focus to add people who had never heard of Zoning Redesign or do not come to ZAP meetings) and as diverse a set of voices as possible.

Lastly, some community members have expressed concern about Polis' validity due to a user's ability to interact with Polis from multiple devices (for example, someone could open it up on their phone and then open up a new IP address through their computer). The Polis software designers consciously took this risk, positing that the benefits of a more accessible tool

outweigh the costs of potential duplication in opinion and practicing 'good faith,' believing that few community members actively try to sabotage the process.

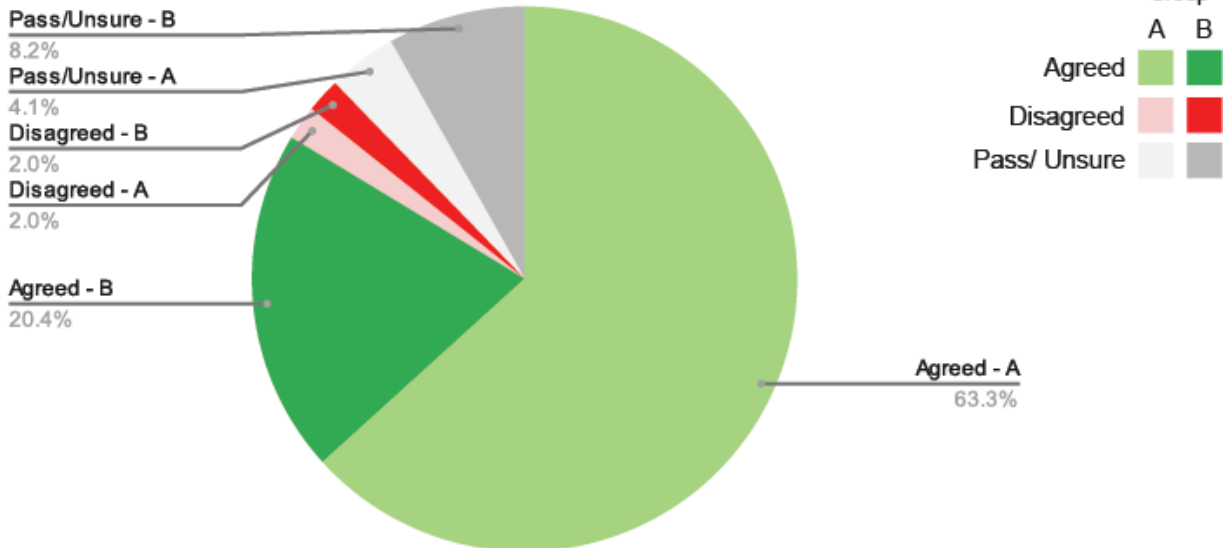
What do the different numbers on the online interactive forum (Polis) report mean?



In the online interactive forum (Polis) report, you will see all of the statements that were submitted by Newton community members as well as how community members 'voted' on that statement. Using the image above, the different numbers represent this:

- **I:** The number in the parentheses is the total number of individuals who 'voted' on the statement (as in, they either agreed with, disagreed with, or passed or were unsure about the statement.)
- **II:** The percentages represent the proportions of how people voted on the statement. In this example, 82% of the 470 individuals who 'voted' on this statement said they agreed with it, 4% of the 470 said they disagreed with it, and 12% of the 470 passed or were unsure about the statement.
- **III:** The far left column titled 'OVERALL' describes the results of how everyone who interacted with that statement voted, while the middle column titled 'A' and the far right column titled 'B' represent the Opinion Groups. As stated at the top of the Polis report, the 'Opinion Group' is made up of participants who voted similarly to each other, and differently from the other groups. Thus, the middle and far right columns represent how people categorized within either opinion group A or opinion group B (based on a holistic analysis of all of their votes) voted on a particular statement. In other words: In this example, 326 of the 470 of the individuals who voted on this statement were grouped into opinion group A, based on their overall votes. Of that 326, 90% (~294) people said they 'agreed' with this statement, 3% (~10) said they 'disagreed,' and 6% (~20) passed or were unsure. Here's another diagram to help one understand how this data breaks down and what the report is trying to communicate:

% for Statement 3



What happened to the online interactive forum (Polis) notifications system?

Polis is an open source technology for survey research that leverages data science. More specifically, Polis is a platform for a conversation, in which participants submit short text statements, or comments, (<140 characters) which are then sent out semi-randomly to other participants to vote on by clicking agree, disagree or pass. Originally participants who voted on all the statements were prompted to share their email address so they could receive notification when new statements were added. Then these notifications were going directly into peoples' spam folders. Because of this, the Polis creators disabled the notification system.

Where are Utile's presentations on their quantitative analysis?

Utile presented the quantitative analysis at the September 13, 2021 ZAP Meeting. Here are relevant links:

- ZAP Memo - <https://www.newtonma.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/74058/637668804968330000>
- Presentation - <https://www.newtonma.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/77583/637726624712900000>
- Audio Recording - <https://www.newtonma.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/74723/637674921130730000>
- ZAP Report - <https://www.newtonma.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/76259/637704278887530000>