



# Zoning Redesign: Village Centers

The City of Newton's project to update the zoning code

## June Recap & Looking Toward July

- **ZAP Reaches Consensus on Village Center Zoning Framework During June Workshops**
- **Recording Available for Newton's Zoning Redesign Engagement** - Highlighted by The Boston Foundation
- **Updates on the 'Community Engagement Network'**
- **Tentative Agenda** for the July ZAP Meeting

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## ZAP Reaches Consensus on Village Center Zoning Framework During June Workshops

ZAP Chair Deborah Crossley facilitated three workshops in June in the Zoning & Planning committee, focusing discussion on the recommended zoning framework and policy changes in three zoning districts designed for Village Centers. The three districts are tiered according to allowed intensity of use, with the intention to apply one or more of the districts according to the nature of a village center.

Planning staff and consultants from Utile outlined the key elements comprising the proposed framework in their May 27 [Planning memo](#) to ZAP and were on hand to answer any questions. The committee discussed how well each element, as well as the framework as a whole, has the potential to both facilitate the shared community visions gathered in 2021, align with City policy objectives, and allows for desirable development that is financially feasible. These workshops led to Committee consensus on each of the key elements of the proposed zoning framework, understanding that the next step is to apply this zoning to our village centers, further analyze and illustrate potential impacts, and begin the mapping process.

This summer Planning staff and the Utile consulting team will begin drafting village center zoning from the consensus achieved, and bring this work to the Newton community between mid-August and early October through a variety of engagement platforms, including an interactive library exhibit, a citywide network of citizen volunteers and public meetings.

This ongoing community engagement will inform the drafting of the recommended policy language and the mapping. Draft zoning language and maps will then be brought back into the Zoning and Planning committee for further deliberation.

In addition, ZAP received many official letters of support, formal votes of approval, and constructive comments from groups who have been closely following this work. Groups include City Commissions such as the Newton Housing Partnership, Planning Board and Economic Development Commission, as well as several community organizations, such as the Newton Zoning reform Coalition, Building Professionals Working Group and Engine 6. These letters will be available on [the ZAP page of the City website](#).

**Below summarizes the proposals shared at ZAP, Committee takeaways, and the final straw votes for each element of the zoning framework.** For full meeting summaries please visit the [ZAP website](#).

# #1

## Reduced parking requirements in village centers

**Proposal**

	Residential	Office	Ground floor commercial	Other commercial
<b>Existing</b>	2 per unit	1 per 250 sf	Retail: 1 per 300 sf + 1 per 3 employees  Restaurant: 1 per 3 seats + 1 per 3 employees	Retail: 1 per 300 sf + 1 per 3 employees  Restaurant: 1 per 3 seats + 1 per 3 employees
<b>Proposed</b>	1 per unit	1 per 700 sf	Exempt	TBD

**Committee Takeaways**

- There was overwhelming support for lowering parking minimums in village centers, with unanimous support for looking at the most current usage data to consider lowering requirements further for residential buildings.
- Members who voted against or abstained on 1:1 residential parking voiced support for eliminating all parking minimums in favor of letting the market decide how much parking is needed.
- Some members were not in favor of entirely exempting ground floor retail uses from parking minimums.

**Straw Vote**

ZAP members voted by a nonbinding straw vote, breaking the proposal into two parts:

- 1:1 for residential uses / Upper floor commercial requirements
  - 5 - Yes
  - 1 - No
  - 2 - Abstain
- Elimination of parking requirements for ground floor commercial
  - 6 - Yes
  - 2 - No
  - 0 - Abstain

## #2

### Increase floor-to-floor heights for office and ground floor retail uses, and reduce for residential uses to match industry standards

**Proposal**

Floor heights (max)	Residential	Office	Ground floor retail
<b>Existing</b>	12'	12'	12'
<b>Proposed</b>	11'	13'	18'

**Committee Takeaways**

- There was general support among committee members for the recommendation to allow story heights to be increased to accommodate the physical requirements of desirable commercial uses. Several Councilors proposed an amendment to keep the allowed

residential floor-to-floor height at 12' maximum.

- Utile explained that these recommendations are maximums, and that the additional cost for building higher floors is significant, making it in the developer's best interest to only build as high as necessary to accommodate the use.

**Straw Vote**

ZAP members voted by a nonbinding straw vote on the modified proposal:

- 4 - Yes
- 2 - No
- 1 - Abstain

# #3

## Create design requirements for half stories

**Proposal**

	Residential	Commercial	Mixed Use
<b>Existing</b>	none	none	MU4: 1:1 stepback plane above 40'

<b>Proposed</b> (for all 3 - residential, commercial, & mixed use)	10' setback along perimeter of building or pitched roof with 14:12 max slope		
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**Committee Takeaways**

- The Committee supported the design standards for half stories, which would apply to projects looking to build to the maximum number of stories allowed.
- Some members felt that the step back on the top floor could be reduced from the proposed 10' setback, with Utile recommending 6' or 7' as a good dimension for a usable balcony.
- With the Committee's support, Utile will further refine the proposed standards so as to facilitate and incentivize a variety of rooflines.

**Straw Vote**

ZAP members voted by a nonbinding straw vote:

- 6- Yes
- 0- No
- 1 - Abstain

# #4

## Eliminate minimum lot area per unit

**Proposal**

	MU4*	BU Zones
<b>Existing*</b>	1,000 sf lot area/unit	1,200 sf lot area/unit
<b>Proposed</b>	none	none

\*Existing MU4 lot area per unit may be waived by Special Permit.

### Committee Takeaways

- The Committee supported eliminating this regulation to facilitate the creation of more, smaller units.
- Case studies previously shared with ZAP highlighted how the current regulation often leads to larger and more expensive units, because developers build to the maximum building size, while reducing the number of units to comply with the minimum lot area per unit.
- Utile explained how the proposed standards (overall height/stories and building footprint) act as better tools to regulate building size, but not to restrict the number of units within that envelope so as to allow for a variety of unit sizes to accommodate a diverse population (e.g. downsizing seniors and growing families).

### Straw Vote

ZAP members voted by a nonbinding straw vote:

- 5 - Yes
- 0 - No
- 2- Abstain

## #5

### Remove minimum lot size

#### Proposal

	MU4	BU1/BU2/BU3
Existing	10,000 sf	10,000 sf
Proposed	none	none

### Committee Takeaways

- The Committee was generally supportive of the elimination of minimum lot sizes, noting that the requirement is somewhat arbitrary and precludes development on typically smaller sized village center parcels.
- One Councilor was supportive of a lower minimum lot size over an overall elimination.

### Straw Vote

ZAP members voted by a nonbinding straw vote:

- 8 - Yes
- 0 - No
- 0 - Abstain

## #6, 10, 11, 12

### Revise MU4, BU3, BU2 dimensional standards

#### Proposal

The following table outlines the proposed changes ZAP considered for these three districts, which would be applied to different village centers according to its scale:

	Revised MU4	Revised BU3	Revised BU2
By-Right (max)	Existing / <b>Proposed</b>	Existing / <b>Proposed</b>	Existing / <b>Proposed</b>

# of Stories	3.0 / 4.5	3.0 / 3.5	2.0 / 2.5
Building Footprint	--/ 15,000 sf	-- / 10,000 sf	-- / 5,000 sf
FAR	1.5 / 2.5	1.5 / 2.0	1.5 / 1.75

### **Committee Takeaways**

- Councilors were overall supportive of the tiered framework, with the understanding the revised MU4 would only be applied to Newton’s larger village centers and the two other proposed districts could be used to step down in scale toward the surrounding neighborhoods.
- Many Committee members expressed support for this tiered framework given that it will help Newton come into compliance with the MBTA Communities multi-family housing requirements.
- Some Councilors expressed support in that allowing more projects by-right would allow a larger variety of, particularly smaller, developers to create smaller in-fill projects.

### **Straw Vote**

ZAP members voted by a nonbinding straw vote:

- 6 - Yes
- 0 - No
- 2- Abstain

## #7

### **Replace 20,000 sf of floor area Special Permit with Special Permit for development on parcels greater than 3/4 acre**

#### **Proposal**

	Special Permit Threshold
<b>Existing</b>	New construction or substantial renovation resulting in at least 20,000 sf of gross floor area
<b>Proposed</b>	New development on parcels greater than 3/4 of an acre (32,670 sq ft)

### **Committee Takeaways**

- There was general agreement on the Committee that not all projects that currently require a Special Permit should continue to require one.
- Most Councilors agreed that switching from an overall building square footage (i.e. size) Special Permit trigger to one based on lot size could allow for a simplified permitting process as long as it was paired with objective design standards and Site Plan Review under certain conditions.
- Two committee members expressed concern that the ¾ acre threshold is too large. They recommended exploring a tiered threshold for lot size similar to the building footprint size proposal (#6).

### **Straw Vote**

ZAP members voted by a nonbinding straw vote:

- 6 - Yes
- 0 - No
- 2- Abstain

# #8, 9

## Require Site Plan Review with Design Review for certain by-right projects (8) and Incorporate design standards (9)

### Proposal

	Site Plan Review
<b>Existing</b>	Site Plan Approval is required by the City Council for projects between 10,000 sf and 19,999 sf. Design review is encouraged but not required
<b>Proposed</b>	Require projects above a certain threshold undergo Site Plan Review by the Planning Board with Design Review by the Urban Design Commission

	Design Standards
<b>Existing</b>	Limited examples of design standards in existing zoning. MU4 has zoning requirements for transparency and entrances for commercial uses and for open space on parcels greater than one acre
<b>Proposed</b>	Create design standards that would apply at various development thresholds

### Committee Takeaways

- These two items were taken up together in Committee.
- Overall, Committee members were supportive of a robust Site Plan review and Design Review for certain sized by-right projects accompanied by required objective design standards for all projects.
- The Committee requested additional visuals and details regarding objective design standards to be incorporated directly into the Zoning Ordinance.
- Many Committee members expressed support because these two items assist Newton in complying with the MBTA Communities multi-family housing requirements.
- Some Councilors asked if additional incentives (ex. more height) could be incorporated into the design standards if certain conditions were met (ex. deeper affordability).

### Straw Vote

ZAP members voted by a nonbinding straw vote:

- 8 - Yes
- 0 - No
- 0 - Abstain

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**Recording Available - Newton Planning Department Speaks on Panel at The Boston Foundation's event "Representation in the Housing Process: Best Practices for Improving Racial Equity"**

On Wednesday, June 15, 10-11am, The Boston Foundation hosted a virtual event for the release

of “Representation in the Housing Process: Best Practices for Improving Racial Equity,” a report by Boston University prepared for the Massachusetts Coalition for Racial Equity in Housing. The report highlights the community engagement process carried out by Newton’s planning department for the Village Center zoning work in 2021 due to its focus on equity and inclusion. [Click here to watch the recording.](#)

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## Updates on the ‘Community Engagement Network’

On June 21st, the Network had its second meeting where Network members test-drove the parts of the ‘feedback tool’ that city staff had drafted thus far. The ‘feedback tool’ will collect community members’ opinions on proposed changes to the village centers’ zoning that the council is deliberating upon. It will be one part of the engagement efforts on the second phase of updating zoning for the village centers, taking place from late summer through early fall. [Click here](#) to find all of the meeting’s information, including slides and compilation of all of the input on the draft.

The next Network meeting will take place on Monday, August 1st, 6-7pm (focused on Network members, with Q+A for all attendees from 7:30-8pm), where Network members will review the finalized engagement material and tie up any loose ends of their own engagement plans. All interested are especially welcome to this meeting because it will be an opportunity to familiarize oneself with the second phase’s engagement opportunities! All zoom links for the Network’s meetings can be found here (click on the green bar that says ‘Network Meetings’): <https://newtonma.gov/zoningredesign/vc>

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## ZAP Meeting in July

Review June's meeting reports at [ZAP’s website](#). See the tentative agenda for the only meeting of July (these are not finalized and are subject to change):

*Monday, July 18th, 2022 at 7pm:*

- #192-22 - Request for review and amendments to Section 6.7.1 (continued discussion)
  - #38-22 - Discussion and review relative to the draft Zoning Ordinance regarding village centers
  - #379-22 - Reappointment of Eliza Datta to the Community Preservation Committee
  - #380-22 - Reappointment of Martin Smargiassi to the Community Preservation Committee
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