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Barney S. Heath
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MEMORANDUM

DATE: November 10, 2022

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

RE: **#38-22 Discussion and review relative to the draft Zoning Ordinance regarding village centers**
ZONING & PLANNING COMMITTEE requesting review, discussion and possible ordinance amendments relative to Chapter 30 zoning ordinances pertaining to Mixed Use, business districts and village districts relative to the draft Zoning Ordinance. (formerly #88-20)

MEETING: November 14, 2022

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

Introduction

The Department of Planning & Development began its efforts to solicit feedback on the proposed zoning framework in May 2022. It kicked off the Zoning Redesign Community Engagement Network, began developing the library exhibit and co-designing the feedback tool with the Stanford Crowdsourced Democracy Team, and installed the exhibit in August. Community input was publicly solicited from September 1st through October 17th on the proposed framework that ZAP endorsed in June.

The City received 1,078 submissions of the feedback tool, had ~28 participants in its equitable focus groups, and received additional emails from community members. The engagement results will be considered for both the draft zoning text and the draft zoning maps by staff, and, most importantly, are presented for the City Council to consider in their deliberations.

Methods

Feedback tool: The City codesigned an online, informative survey with the University of Stanford's Crowdsourced Democracy Team.

It is a major challenge to balance wanting to engage as many Newton community members as possible, regardless of their familiarity with zoning, with wanting to be transparent about, and not oversimplify the highly technical proposals. For this reason, staff were fortunate to receive pro-bono support from [the Stanford Crowdsourced Democracy Team](#), an academic group whose mission is “...to scale up collaboration and decision-making. We envision an era in which large communities can deliberate and brainstorm with one another on important issues with the aid of intelligently designed algorithms and digital communication platforms.”

Recognizing that it would probably be laborious and inaccessible to engage community members on each of the framework’s 12 proposals, City staff attempted to condense the information into three overarching questions:

1. **Scale:** Should there be different zoning districts for different village centers?
2. **Mapping:** Which heights do you think are appropriate for village centers?
3. **Parking:** Do you agree with the proposed reductions to parking requirements?

The feedback tool also meant to be a ‘one-stop-shop’, so as to limit the number of things a community member had to do or read in order to submit input. It included dropdowns for context, definitions, and overviews of ZAP deliberation from the June 2022 workshops. In addition, open-ended responses were optional for each of the multiple-choice questions. [A PDF of the feedback tool can be found here.](#)

The City did not require participants to provide identification in order to submit their feedback tool responses. Staff did this to reduce the barriers for participation and increase accessibility. This intentional decision was made because the pros of wide-reaching engagement outweigh the cons of possible accidental duplicate submissions or individuals trying to game the system.

The Stanford Crowdsourced Democracy Team analysis confirms that the feedback tool’s results are valid enough to be useful, or rather, that valid responses significantly outweigh invalid or duplicate responses.

Library exhibit: While the feedback tool focused on the core parts of the proposed zoning framework, the library exhibit explained in accessible terminology all 12 framework aspects of the overall proposals. City staff found it important to make these technical proposals as accessible as possible (especially for those who are not zoning experts) and to highlight Councilor opinions through a ‘ZAP common arguments for and against’ section for each proposal given City Council is the ultimate decision maker on any zoning change. Additionally, the library exhibit was something that community members and elected officials could use themselves to guide conversations and hopefully to ultimately submit input through the feedback tool.

The exhibit was set up at the Newton Free Library for in-person visits. City staff and Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) staff, through a grant that the City received, acted as docents in the library for ~20 hours total. Various community groups also requested City guidance for some of their visits. For example, City and MAPC staff guided the Youth Commission and four Newton North High School classes in the last week, engaging over 100 high school students on the topics.

The City also made a PDF version of the library exhibit for community members to be able to access online, use for Zoom meetings, or print out for use outside of the Newton Free Library exhibit. [That PDF can be found here.](#)

Focus groups: City staff hosted three focus groups to pay more attention to Newton communities that are underrepresented in the zoning conversations. Working with community members as facilitators and utilizing resources of MAPC through a TAP (Technical Assistance Program) grant, the City hosted these sessions for renters, younger adults, and the disability community. These groups were chosen given they are typically underrepresented in community engagement. [MAPC's synthesis of the focus groups and the original meeting minutes can be found here.](#)

Zoning Redesign Community Engagement Network: The Community Engagement Network is a group of community members who committed to help bolster participation in this village center engagement phase with the City. Over 80 community members applied for, and joined, the Network representing a wide range of community spaces.

The network was an experiment in engagement and its impacts were diverse. It test-drove the feedback tool and provided input that directly changed it. It facilitated a thoughtful & important conversation about civic discrimination against renters in the second meeting, during which several network members who are renters gave testimony. It brought many new faces into the zoning conversation - at the last network meeting, multiple community members highlighted how much they learned through this process, even those who had some professional experience with zoning. And most interestingly, it brought together people of varying political positions on zoning with the shared goal of increasing civic engagement.

Lastly, network members successfully spread word and hosted engagement sessions with their respective spaces. In the last network meeting, the majority of about 35 attendees said that they engaged somewhere between 5 and 10 community members! Network members who participated throughout the engagement phase were from Safe Routes to School, Bike Newton, parents of a children's softball league team, ELPAC (English Learning Parents Advisory Council), Right Size Newton, a couple area councils, faith-based institutions, Engine 6, neighborhood blocks and more. It should be noted that the majority of the last network meeting's attendees hope for the City to facilitate a 'network' structure again for future large city projects.

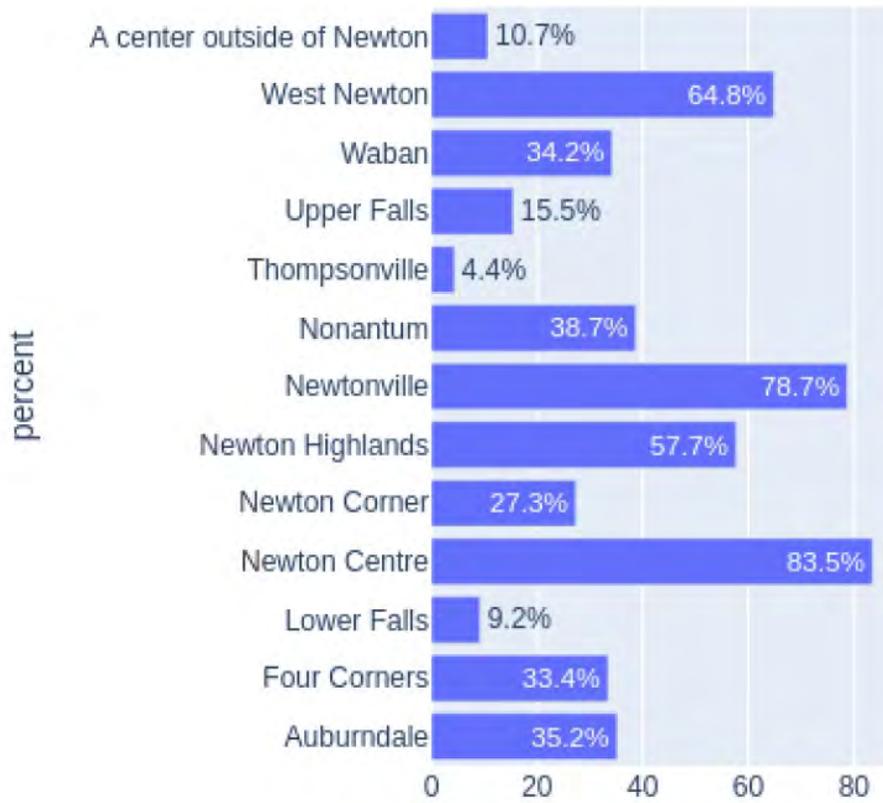
Participation Results

The feedback tool received over 1,000 submissions. Because every question was optional, the number of answers submitted varies for each question:

- Scale question: 1,078
- Mapping question: 919
- Parking question: 966
- Demographics: 975

There was a wide variety of which village centers people said they related to. That said, one can see a trend of some village centers being more frequented ones than others:

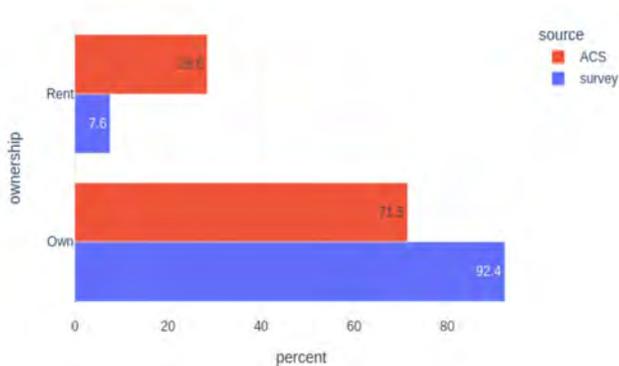
Figure 1: Percentage of 1160 respondents that mark which village centers they spend time in:



Participant Demographics

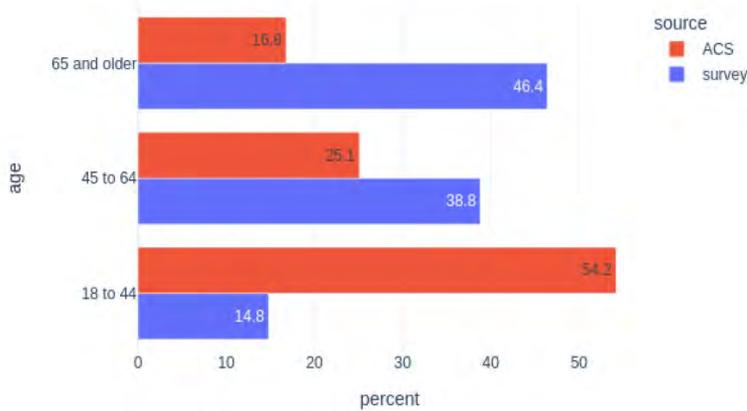
975 participants completed this section. Homeowners, white people, and people aged 45 and older disproportionately submitted input through the feedback tool, as the graphs below show comparisons between the feedback tool demographics responses and Newton’s overall demographics from [the American Community Survey of 2021](#).

Home ownership: Percentage of demographics response



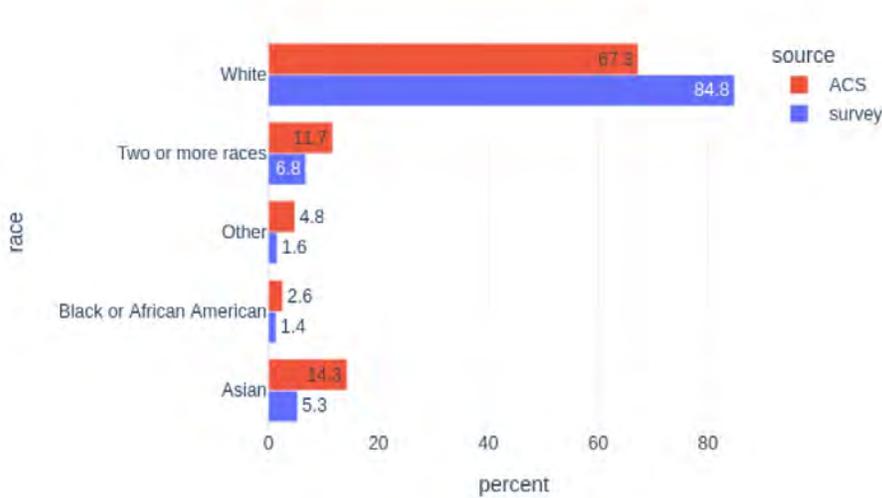
	Feedback tool %	ACS 2021 %
Owns home	92.4	71.5
Rents home	7.6	28.5

Age: Percentage of demographics response



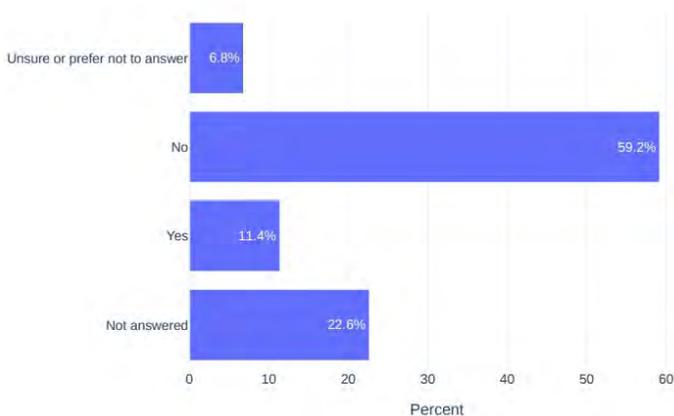
Age	Feedback tool %	ACS 2021 %
18 to 44	14.8	54.2
45 to 64	38.8	25.1
65 and older	46.4	16.8

Race: Percentage of demographics response



Race	Feedback tool %	ACS 2021 %
White	84.8	67.3
Black or African American	1.4	2.6
Asian	5.3	14.3
Two or more races	6.8	11.7
Other	1.6	4.8

Disability: Percentage of demographics response



Response	Feedback tool %	ACS 2021 %*
Unsure or prefer not to answer	6.8	
Yes	11.4	
No	59.2	
Not answered	22.6	

**Staff are still trying to discern the total #'s for Newton based on the 2021 Census data.*

Main Takeaways

The following shares the results of feedback tool submissions for the zoning proposal questions. One can find [the feedback tool's raw data and open-ended responses here](#) (note that identity-sensitive sections like demographics have been removed) and [the focus group synthesis here](#).

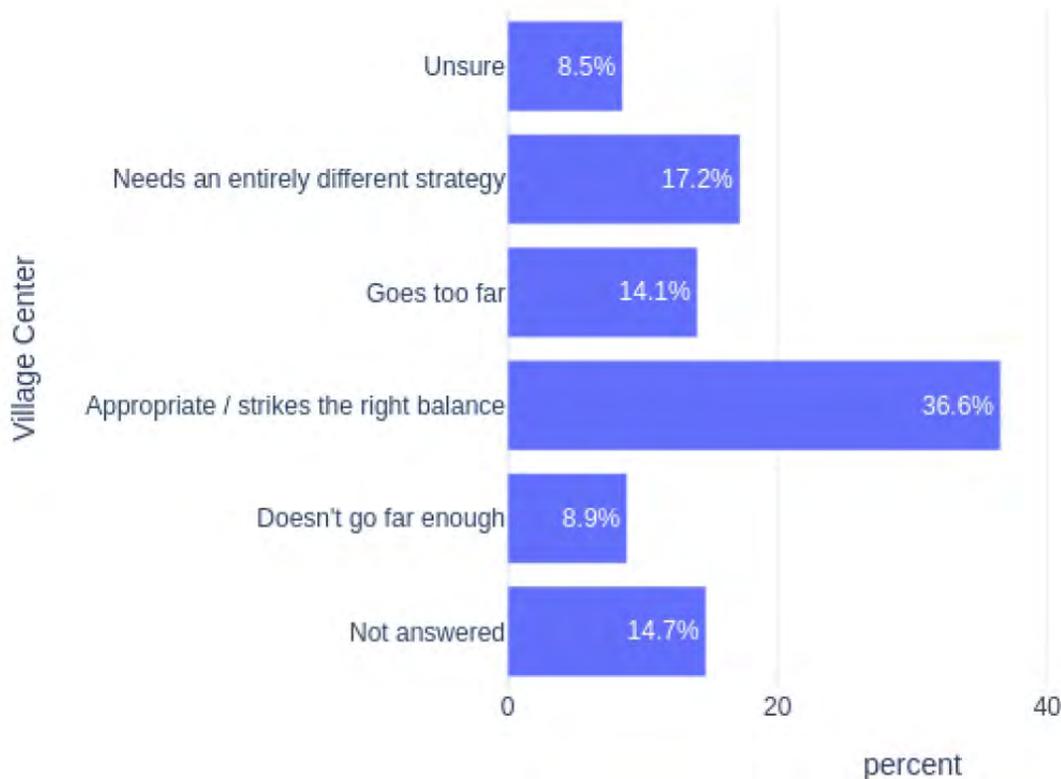
The Stanford Crowdsourcing Democracy Lab is still cleaning up their report that will be shared with the public. Staff intend for this to be available on [the village center zoning website](#) as soon as possible, with hopes for it [to be posted online here](#) on Friday, November 11. That said, the information listed below pulls directly from their draft report and the raw data linked above.

Scaled Zoning Districts

The question was: Currently Newton essentially has the same zoning districts for all of its village centers. Do you think there should be a variety of zoning districts for the variety of village centers?

This question received 1,078 responses, and the results show slightly favor the idea of applying nuanced zones to the village centers.

Percentage distribution of proposed zone mix scale in the feedback tool - Graph



Percentage distribution of proposed zone mix scale in the feedback tool - Table

Option	Results
Doesn't go far enough	8.9%
Appropriate/ strikes the right balance	36.6%
Goes too far	14.1%
Needs an entirely different strategy	17.2%
Unsure	8.5%

While looking at the graph of results, it is worth better defining what the different options mean. Within the feedback tool, the options were listed as such:

- Doesn't go far enough - there should be more variety of scales
- Appropriate/ strikes the right balance
- Goes too far - there should be fewer variety of scales
- Needs an entirely different strategy
- Unsure

The open-ended responses show that people chose 'Doesn't go far enough' or 'Goes too far' for slightly different reasons than wanting more, or less, scale variety for village centers. Generally, people chose 'goes too far' to mark disagreement with increased density. And similarly, people chose 'Doesn't go far enough' to highlight a want for higher density proposals.

Within the focus groups, there was general support for having more than one type of zoning district in the variety of village centers.

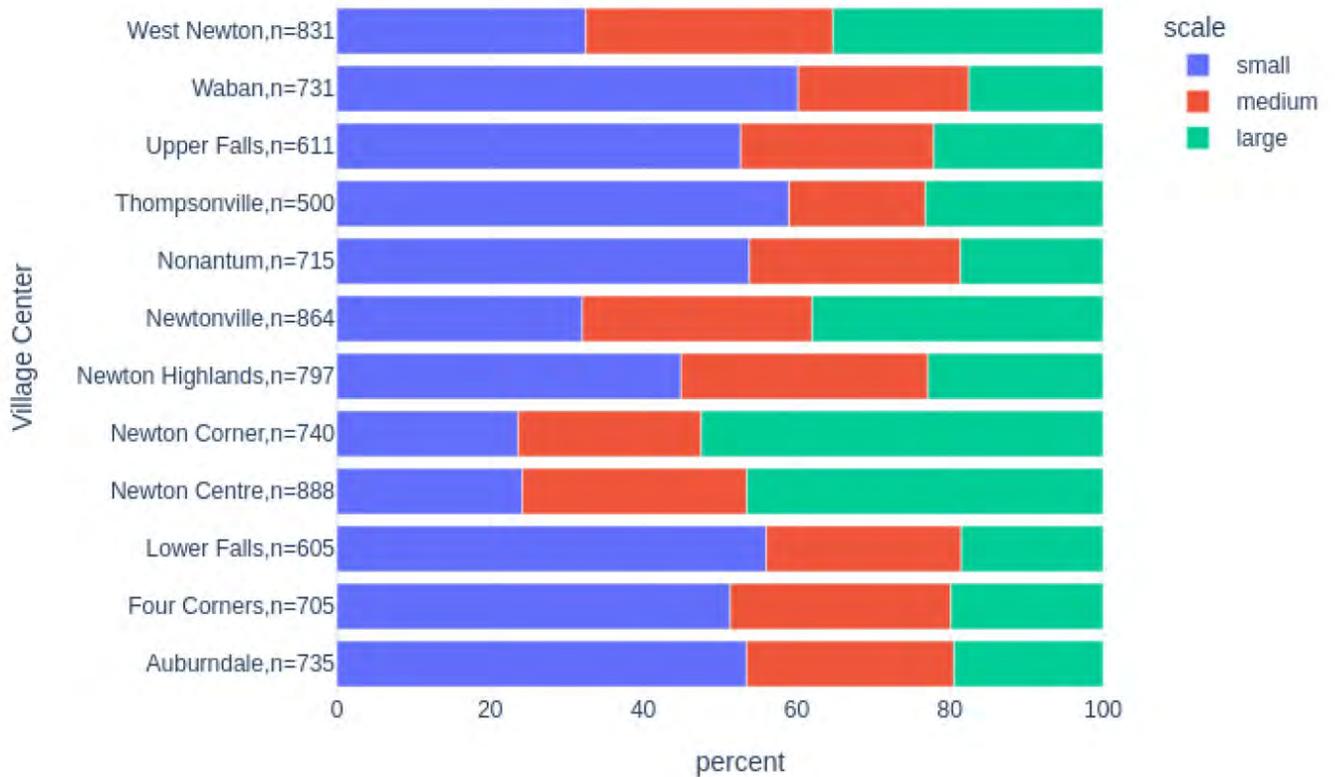
Mapping Zoning Districts

The question was: Which allowed heights, for new buildings, do you think are appropriate for village centers? Or also put as, Which kinds of density do you think are appropriate for each of the village centers?

A participant could answer this question for each of the 12 village centers under consideration for the updated village center zoning.

This question received 919 responses, with varying numbers of opinions expressed for each village center. The feedback tool results show an interesting mix of interest in all three scales of zoning districts for every village center. Responses reveal slightly more interest in having only small-scale districts in half of the village centers and having medium and/or large districts in the other half.

Percentage distribution of support per scale for each village center - Graph



Percentage distribution of support per scale for each village center - Table

Village center	# of responses	Should only have a small scale zoning district (%)	Should have small + medium scale zoning districts (%)	Should have small + medium + large scale zoning districts (%)
Auburndale	735	53	27	19
Four Corners	705	51	29	20
Lower Falls	605	56	25	19
Newton Centre	888	24	29	47
Newton Corner	740	24	24	52
Newton Highlands	797	45	32	23
Newtonville	864	32	30	38
Nonantum	715	54	28	19
Thompsonville	500	59	18	23

Upper Falls	611	53	25	22
Waban	731	60	22	18
West Newton	831	32	32	35

Within the focus groups, there was a mix of support of increasing density. Opinions ranged from overall support, believing that an increased number of residents will help businesses increase their customer base or that increased housing will encourage more walkable neighborhoods. To mixed support or low support, believing that while Newton needed some density (and height), this would need to be places where best suited and would have to pay attention to the overall accessibility of the City's current transportation options.

One of the main takeaways for staff was to move away from framing the proposed zoning districts (small, medium, and large scales) as correlations with 'small, medium and large village centers.' Staff initially used this framing to highlight that there are different village centers, in terms of density, use, geographic size, and more. 'Small, medium and large', conceptually offered the simplest way to note this. Staff now understand that these categories are too simple and miss the nuances of each village center - and thus, do not capture the varied ways in which each village center could support the differently proposed zoning districts.

That said, the feedback tool explicitly asked participants to mark which of the proposed heights are most appropriate for each of the village centers. This meant that it was up to the participant to decide whether 2.5, 3.5, or 4.5 floors by-right were appropriate - regardless of whether a village center currently fits a 'small, medium or large' category.

The open-ended responses show two main arguments for how people answered this question: (1) the zoning districts should 'match' what currently exists now or make the village centers less dense, or (2) regardless of the current village center's built structure, they should be slightly more dense.

This mix of justifications further confirms how categorizing the village centers as 'small, medium, and large' to draft the zoning district maps is not particularly useful. The village centers are more complex than that. Strictly following such categorization ignores the unique conditions of each village center and the many opinions that the village centers should reasonably increase in density.

Another staff takeaway was the strong interest expressed by community members to make public transportation, particularly the T, a main determinant of where medium and/or large-scale zoning districts should go.

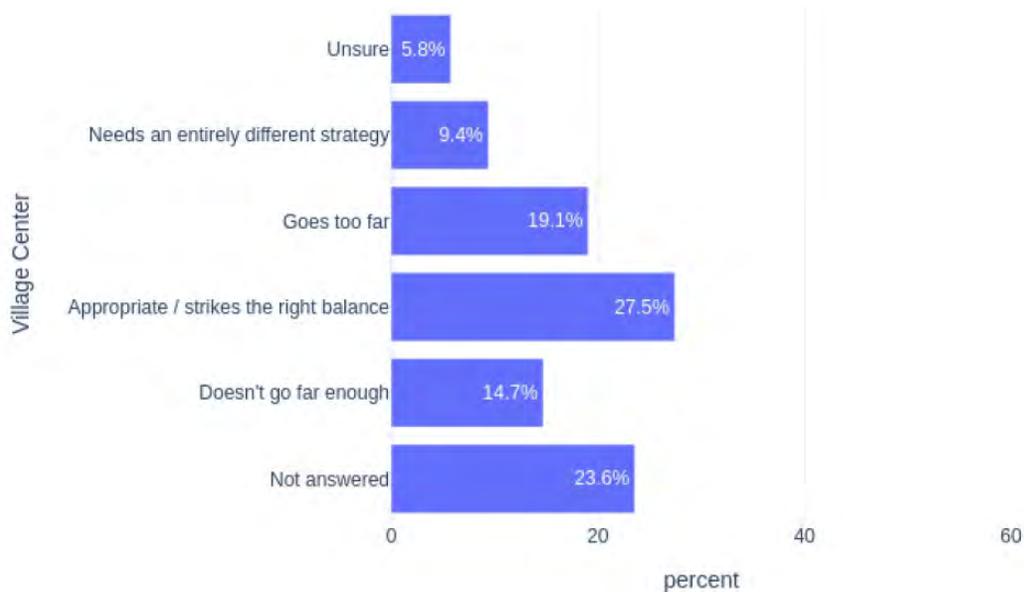
Parking

The question was: Do you agree with the proposal to reduce the parking requirements for new buildings in the village centers?

A participant could answer this question for three different types of use: residential, office, and retail.

This question received 966 responses, with varying numbers of opinions submitted for residential, office and retail. Feedback tool results show slightly more support for the proposal for all three uses. The number of responses decreased from residential to retail to office, possibly showing more investment or comfort to express opinion in residential and retail than office use or fatigue at the end of the survey.

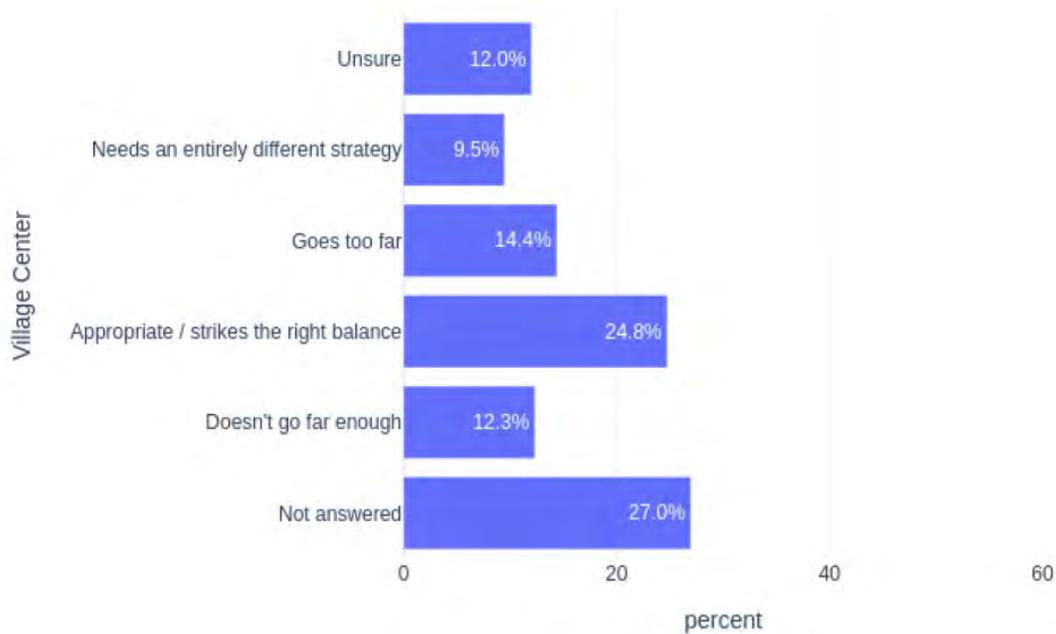
Residential use: Percentage distribution of support for parking proposal- Graph



Retail use: Percentage distribution of support for parking proposal- Graph



Office use: Percentage distribution of support for parking proposal- Graph



Percentage distribution of support for parking proposal per use - Table

Option	Residential (%)	Retail (%)	Office (%)
Not answered	23.6	25.8	27.0
Doesn't go far enough	14.7	11.9	12.3
Appropriate/ strikes the right balance	27.5	25.3	24.8
Goes too far	19.0	14.4	14.4
Needs an entirely different strategy	9.4	14.9	9.5
Unsure	5.8	7.7	12.0

While looking at the graph of results, it is worth better defining what the different options mean. Within the feedback tool, the options were listed as such:

- Doesn't go far enough - there should be lower parking requirements or eliminated entirely
- Appropriate/ strikes the right balance
- Goes too far - the current requirements work
- Wrong direction - there should be more new parking spots required
- Unsure

Within the focus groups, there was a mix of responses, ranging from general support to no support. The strongest sentiment of no support is due to concern about accessibility within the village centers, that reducing the parking requirements will disproportionately impact Newton residents with disabilities if the City maintains the same level of car usage.

The community responses to this proposal through the open-ended question, resulted in the most questions staff want to research for future iterations:

- Is there a way to determine new retail parking completely or partially for ADA?
- Should there be different parking requirements for the village centers with varied access to public transportation?
- Which area most addresses community members' opinions about parking: zoning regulations and/or parking management? (This extends to public parking, overnight parking, parking for people who work in village centers, etc.)
- Can electric car charging stations be required in zoning?

How will this be used for feedback?

The engagement results are being considered by staff for the draft zoning text to be presented at the November 28 ZAP meeting. They will also be considered for future drafts of the zoning district maps. Version 1.0 of the maps were presented on October 24th with the explicit intention to be iterative. Next versions will incorporate these engagement results, alongside input that is gathered over the next couple months through a city hall exhibit, info + input sessions, and an online form.

The engagement results are also presented for the City Council to consider in their deliberations. And most importantly, these are available for community members to reference and consider.

Engagement takeaways and Looking Ahead

There are many staff takeaways from this engagement phase. Here are the main ones that will help us develop and implement future successful community participation:

- Due to the increased difficulty of the material and the decreased window of time to collect input, staff had the goal to receive 500 feedback tool submissions yet ultimately received over 1,000 feedback tool submissions. This success may be attributed to Newton community members' overall investment in this topic, the Network, and/or building upon the civic relationships and interest developed during the first phase of engagement last summer (2021).
- The library exhibit was a majorly laborious project yet achieved the important task to make the zoning content, research, and arguments more accessible and transparent. Community members appreciated the 'ZAP councilors' common arguments for and against,' and highlighted for staff the importance to keep centering the decision-makers' conversations for the public to be aware of and reference.
- This extensive, second engagement phase proved important. The proposed zoning changes are significant and thus worthy of public-wide attention and understanding. To have concluded extensive engagement after last summer's push - which asked community members what they

envisioned for their village centers' - would have left many community members who were brand new to the zoning conversation in the dark regarding the technical interpretations of values-based input. In other words, this Phase II engagement invited many more Newton community members to understand what it means for 'rubber to hit the road' in zoning - and thus, have increased civic ability to contact their councilors, show up to public hearings, and keep their respective community spaces in the loop on a topic that will impact all of Newton.

- Being able to utilize the enormous technical expertise of the Stanford Crowdsourced Democracy Team helped us to create a user-friendly tool that served many purposes, and the city was deeply fortunate to receive their design and analysis assistance for free.
- The Network was an exciting civic experiment. There are multiple lessons learned (which will be published in the coming weeks), but at a high level, it is a promising structure that strengthens civic involvement and could cultivate more public ownership over engagement processes and increase equitable engagement efforts.
- The extent to which renters, ages younger than 45, and people of color are underrepresented in the feedback tool reveals that the City needs to seriously prioritize engaging these communities and significantly increase the resources needed to build these community relationships and incorporate their voices in civic processes. This would most likely require a City-wide prioritization, not just by the Department of Planning & Development.