



CITY OF NEWTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Urban Design Commission

MEETING MINUTES

A meeting of the City of Newton Urban Design Commission (UDC) was held virtually on Wednesday, **November 9, 2022** at 7:00 p.m. via Zoom
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/85410897963>

Ruthanne Fuller,
Mayor

The Chair, Michael Kaufman, called the meeting to order at 7:02 P.M.

Barney Heath,
Director
Planning & Development

I. Roll Call

Those present were Michael Kaufman (Chair), Jim Doolin, John Downie, Visda Saeyan, and Bill Winkler. Shubee Sikka, Urban Designer, was also present.

Shubee Sikka,
Urban Designer
Planning & Development

II. Regular Agenda

Sign Permits

Mr. Kaufman asked if the Commission felt there were any applications they could approve without discussion. The Commission agreed to approve the following signs without discussion:

Members
Michael Kaufman, Chair
Jim Doolin, Vice Chair
John Downie
William Winkler
Visda Saeyan

Sign Permits

5. 1134-1136 Beacon Street – Avenue Deli

Proposed Signs:

- Reface of one free-standing principal sign, non-illuminated, with approximately 14 sq. ft. of sign area perpendicular to Beacon Street.
- Reface of one awning mounted secondary sign, non-illuminated, with approximately 20 sq. ft. of sign area on the eastern façade facing Beacon Street.

1000 Commonwealth Ave.
Newton, MA 02459
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MOTION: Mr. Kaufman made a motion to approve the signs at 1134-1136 Beacon Street – Avenue Deli. Mr. Winkler seconded the motion, and none opposed. All the members present voted, with a 5-0 vote, Michael Kaufman, Jim Doolin, John Downie, Visda Saeyan, and William Winkler in favor and none opposed.

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1. 242-244 Commonwealth Avenue – Elizabeth Home

• Proposed Sign:

- Reface of one wall mounted perpendicular principal sign, non-illuminated, with approximately 47 sq. ft. of sign area on the northern building façade facing Commonwealth Avenue.

MOTION: Mr. Winkler made a motion to approve the sign at 242-244 Commonwealth Avenue – Elizabeth Home. Ms. Saeyan seconded the motion, and none opposed. All the members present voted, with a 5-0 vote, Michael Kaufman, Jim Doolin, John Downie, Visda Saeyan, and William Winkler in favor and none opposed.

2. 400 Centre Street – Sonesta Global Headquarters

Applicant/Representative: John Peterson

Proposed Signs:

- One wall mounted principal sign, internally illuminated, with approximately 100 sq. ft. of sign area on the northern building façade facing Centre Street.

Presentation and Discussion:

- Staff gave an update to the Commission about the proposed sign by email. Staff miscalculated the sign area in the staff memo. Proposed principal sign is 100 sq. ft. (257.2”x 55.5”) and staff recommends it for approval. Regarding an existing special permit, there was a special permit application for a sign package for this property, but it was later withdrawn.
- Mr. Kaufman asked if Sonesta is taking the entire building and the applicant confirmed that Sonesta is taking the entire building.
- Mr. Doolin asked the Chair if the Commission wants to discuss whether this sign is appropriate. There are a few issues with this sign:
 - The sign is at the top of the building.
 - It’s an office use, it’s not a retail establishment.
 - The sign is primarily for branding. The Commission has had many discussions about this approach in the past with several denials.
- Mr. Kaufman commented that Newton Corner has some history regarding signs on top of the building. “Connors” had a sign on top of the building. 2 Centre Street had a sign on top of the building. Do we want to treat this differently from other buildings? Sonesta occupies the entire building. Also, where is an appropriate place to put up a sign that is 100 sq. ft.? The applicant could choose to put it at retail level.
- Mr. Doolin commented that there are two points:
 - Nobody is going to use this sign for direction, this is an office use.
 - The projects that Mr. Kaufman referred to are address signs at the top of the building. Mr. Kaufman responded that they have address signs now but when the building was first occupied, it was occupied by a single tenant, and they were reviewed differently.
- Mr. Downie commented that he prefers signs are not at the top of buildings but Four Points Hotel across the street has a sign at the top of the building.
- Ms. Saeyan asked where else can the applicant put the sign? The signs on top of the building usually catches the people in the car driving by but what about pedestrians, is there any space for a sign that is lower? Where is the entrance to the building?
- Mr. Kaufman commented that there’s a plaza that you can get to from the front and the back and then there are doors off the plaza to enter the building. There’s a sloped porch entrance from Center Street to enter the plaza. A sign band could be next to the canopy, but the trees would block the sign in that location. Considering that Sonesta has the entire building, a sign on top won’t be a big problem. UDC has recommended

signs for approval at Riverside and other places so if a tenant takes over an entire building, they are somehow entitling into putting their name on it.

- Mr. Doolin commented that if he was supporting this proposal, then he would stipulate that there are no other signs.
- Mr. Downie asked if Sonesta occupies the entire building now but five years later, another tenant occupies a part of the building, will we allow another sign at the top? Mr. Kaufman commented that we should stipulate that this will be the only sign that would be allowed on this building regardless of whether there are other tenants or not. Ms. Saeyan asked if the other (future) tenants will be allowed to have a directory sign? Mr. Kaufman responded that they could have a directory sign at the door under the canopy.
- Mr. Kaufman commented that this sign will not be a distraction or an eyesore for the area and it's nice to have a global headquarter in Newton.

MOTION: Mr. Kaufman made a motion to approve the sign as submitted at 400 Centre Street – Sonesta Global Headquarters with a condition. Ms. Saeyan seconded the motion, and none opposed. All the members present voted, with a 5-0 vote, Michael Kaufman, Jim Doolin, John Downie, Visda Saeyan, and William Winkler in favor and none opposed. The Commission recommended the sign for approval on the **condition** that this would be the only signage allowed on the building regardless of any further tenancy.

3. 416 Watertown Street – Dion's

Applicant/Representative: Jeff Sarra

Proposed Signs:

- One wall mounted principal sign, externally illuminated, with approximately 26 sq. ft. of sign area on the northern building façade facing Watertown Street.

Presentation and Discussion:

- Mr. Winkler asked if you pull in directly into the parking spaces from the street, are they lined up just in front of the liquor store? Mr. Doolin that he can confirm that's the case. Mr. Winkler suggested that the parking space in the middle is striped, so nobody drives in the front door.
- Mr. Kaufman commented that we should note that they have had their temporary sign up for about 3 years which is allowed for about a month. There was no enforcement but it's good that the sign is finally applying for a sign permit.

MOTION: Mr. Kaufman made a motion to approve the sign as submitted at 416 Watertown Street – Dion's with a recommendation. Mr. Winkler seconded the motion, and none opposed. All the members present voted, with a 5-0 vote, Michael Kaufman, Jim Doolin, John Downie, Visda Saeyan, and William Winkler in favor and none opposed. The Commission recommended that there is some area left in the parking to allow for pedestrian access.

4. 1296-1298 Centre Street – Learning Express

Applicant/Representative: Brandon

Proposed Signs:

- Reface of one wall mounted principal sign, externally illuminated, with approximately 43 sq. ft. of sign area on the western façade facing Cypress Street.

- *Reface* of one wall mounted secondary sign, non-illuminated, with approximately 16 sq. ft. of sign area on the eastern façade facing the rear parking lot.
- *Reface* of one awning sign, non-illuminated, with approximately 2 sq. ft. of sign area on the eastern façade facing the rear parking lot.

Presentation and Discussion:

- Staff informed the Commission by email that the applicant sent the correct dimensions for the secondary sign and the sign area is approximately 16 sq. ft. and staff recommend the secondary sign also for approval.
- Mr. Kaufman commented that it looks like the applicant is looking to change the single-color sign to multicolor new sign which looks cool. Mr. Kaufman asked if the secondary sign is new? The applicant responded that it is an existing sign that they are proposing to reface with the logo. Mr. Kaufman asked if the white portion of the secondary sign will shine through at night? The applicant responded that the sign is illuminated externally, there is no internal illumination.
- The applicant commented that they are proposing to reface all three existing signs.
- Mr. Winkler commented that from an aesthetic point of view, the white is a little strong on this building and it may help if it was toned down a little, it would make it more elegant or appropriate. The proposed secondary sign appears to be loud for a secondary sign.

MOTION: Mr. Kaufman made a motion to recommend the signs as submitted for approval at 1296-1298 Centre Street – Learning Express with a condition. Ms. Saeyan seconded the motion, and none opposed. All the members present voted, with a 5-0 vote, Michael Kaufman, Jim Doolin, John Downie, Visda Saeyan and William Winkler in favor and none opposed. The Commission approved the secondary sign on the **condition** that the secondary sign remains non-illuminated.

Design Review

1. 1 Jackson Street Design Review

Applicant/Representative:

Anthony Rossi, Owner
Paul Lessard, Architect
Franklin Schwarzer, Attorney

Documents Presented: Site view, existing conditions, site plan, floor plans, and elevations.

Project Summary: The subject property consists of a 12,512 square foot lot in the Business 1 (BU-1) zone in Thompsonville. The property is improved with a two-level parking garage built in 1973 which provides parking for the abutting office building at 345 Boylston Street. The applicant proposes to keep the existing parking structure and construct a six-unit, multifamily dwelling over it. To construct the proposed multi-family dwelling, the petitioner requires the following special permits: allowing a three-story structure with 36 feet in height, allowing a floor area ratio of 1.48, a waiver of up to eight parking stalls, a dimensional waiver to extend the nonconforming front setback, and allowing assigned parking stalls.

Presentation & Discussion: The applicant's representative provided a summary of the project (see above). The applicant had initially submitted drawings with 4 units and presented revised

drawings with 6 units. The Urban Design Commission had the following comments and recommendations:

- Mr. Winkler commented that on the former elevation, it looked like the windows were tripartite, had three pieces to them so they could be vent windows, whereas the revised elevation shows that windows would all have to be sliders. The applicant responded that they could be either sliders or casements, it will be determined by the owner.
- Ms. Saeyan asked why is the window spacing different in the revised elevation? The applicant responded that the spacing is different because there are more units now, it increased from 4 to 6 units. The applicant commented that the window design has changed because in the original design, the configuration of apartments was the same on the second and third floor but with the request of more apartments, there are two units on the third floor and four units on the second floor, so they tried to organize it, so the windows were aligned however there are more windows on the second floor.
- Mr. Kaufman asked how wide is the window opening on each of these windows? The applicant responded that it is about 7 feet. Mr. Kaufman commented that each of those panels would then be 3 ½ foot each, which is a very big window. Mr. Kaufman asked if the applicant has looked at doing a three-part window, maybe have encasement on two ends and a fixed panel in the middle? It will help to break up the scale of the windows. The proposed proportions are a little clunky and it will help if they are divided into three. It will also have a more residential scale to it. It will also give some vertical lines. Also, recommended to make the windows taller. Ms. Saeyan recommended the same.
- Ms. Saeyan commented that if there are additional units on the second floor then there's a way to make the spacing work better. The applicant responded that it's tough because you are trying to make it work so its logical from the inside. There's quite a difference between have two large units on the third floor and four small units on the second floor. The applicant commented that they meticulously worked on this and tried to make it coordinate as much as possible and to get a symmetrical rhythm.
- Mr. Doolin commented that the early elevations are significantly preferable to the new elevations. The applicant responded that it's driven by the desire of the committee to have a variety of apartments and if you have equal apartments on second and third floor, you will have equal windows, and everything will feel more classically organized.
- Mr. Doolin commented that the windows on the left are not equally spaced compared to the windows on the right. The applicant responded that there are two different apartment configurations on the left and the right and if you see the floor plan, it will be clear what generates it. Mr. Kaufman commented that looking at the floor plan, it appears that the windows on the left could move more to the left, it looks like there is some flexibility to move the windows.
- The owner commented that he is happy to make the changes that the Commission recommends, and he would prefer taller and narrower windows. These windows are supposed to be casement windows and not sliders and they can make them taller if it warms up the building.
- Mr. Kaufman recommended the windows should be taller and the openings should be divided into three instead of 2.

- Mr. Downie commented that you will enter this building from the back and the elevator is inside that very large opening that allows the cars to go through. Is that legal? The applicant commented that at first, a chairlift was proposed which would only go to the second floor but then Councilor Bowman requested for an elevator so third floor was also accessible. So, the applicant is proposing an elevator shaft to get to the top floor instead of the chairlift. Mr. Kaufman commented that this is a small elevator with limited use and access.
- Mr. Winkler asked if the lower level of parking used by the building next door? The applicant responded there is some history to these projects. Both the projects were permitted in 1973 and there was a requirement for 30 parking stalls for the office next door, the garage itself contains 24 parking stalls and there are additional 10 parking stalls on surface behind the office building, so it meets the requirement of 30 parking stalls which leaves 4 parking spaces. So, the lower level would be used entirely by the office and in the level above, 4 stalls will be used for residential uses and the applicant is seeking a waiver for the additional eight stalls. Mr. Downie asked if there are four parking spaces for six units. The applicant responded that initially they had four spaces for 4 units but on the request of the Committee, the number of units have increased from 4 to 6 so they will be seeking a parking waiver based on the location, close to Route 9 and access to transit and because these will be micro units, there is a feeling the higher parking waiver would be justified.
- Mr. Kaufman asked how will a visitor coming by a bus find an entrance into this building? It looks like you can find the entrance if you are in a car, where is the front door? The applicant responded that is not true, there's access along the side of the building (along the driveway) towards the back and go thorough the main entrance in the back. Mr. Kaufman commented that its still not clear where the front door is. The applicant responded that it is inside the parking garage. The applicant also commented that a resident will need to let the visitor know that the entrance is at the back.
- Mr. Doolin asked what happens on the front of the building? The applicant responded that the only access is to the lower level of the parking garage and that is based on the site and the topography.
- Mr. Kaufman asked where's the mail delivered? The applicant responded that it will be delivered in the vestibule area in the garage area. Mr. Kaufman commented that the vestibule needs to be designed. Mr. Kaufman asked if the furniture fit into the elevator and recommended that there is enough landing space to be able to move furniture.
- Mr. Kaufman asked if there will be an intercom with a buzzer? The applicant responded that there will be an intercom with a buzzer. Mr. Kaufman asked if there is a place that is clear of cars because someone might be waiting in the pedestrian area, trying to press the intercom button. The applicant responded that there is a going to be a white and yellow striped area in front of the door where the cars can't go and it will be recessed in four feet, so someone would come in and press the intercom to get buzzed in from that recessed area. Mr. Kaufman recommended to have a second door so a visitor can walk into the vestibule and then press the intercom button so there is no car exhaust slipping into the stairwell and the mail room could also be there. The applicant responded that they could do that so one door is unlocked, and the other door is locked.

- Staff asked if the vestibule can be moved to another corner of the building. The applicant responded that they have looked at that and it wasn't possible because of the way the existing garage is built and constructed due to structural issues. The applicant also commented that they are looking at possibly putting a walkway on the left of the building. There are currently some steps and some old trees there, the applicant will redo those steps and landscape up in the future so there is a walkway from Jackson Street to the back on the left side as well. There is very little space in the back corner so it won't be ADA accessible, but it will be another to get to the back which is not along the driveway.
- Staff asked if it was possible to move the entrance to the front right side of the building. The applicant responded that it's not possible because of structural reasons and because of the unique zoning situation they must maintain the existing garage with all the spaces. It will be a much bigger zoning request and process.
- Mr. Doolin appreciates the addition of housing but commented that this whole thing seems backward, to walk up a driveway to go to a residential building. There is no site plan that shows dimensions of the safe path for pedestrians on the driveway side. How will the pedestrians be protected? He doesn't find it acceptable that additional process is the reason for this to be not what it could be.
- Mr. Kaufman commented that the applicant will need a special permit for this project which will require detailed drawings. Currently, there are a lot of details missing from the drawings before they can be approved. UDC would like to take another look at this project. There's a lot of work to be done here for example: window details, access to the building, pedestrian access, letting people know how you get to that door that can only be put in the back in that corner. How will people find that door? How do they know who's supposed to go there? How do they get there safely? How do they feel like they can get into the apartment building without getting hit by a car that's coming to the office, garage, etc? There are a lot of questions that need to be answered. The applicant responded that they would work on addressing these issues.
- Mr. Winkler asked how much space is available on the left of the building? The applicant responded it is probably 5-6 feet. Mr. Winkler asked if the pedestrian entrance could be moved to the left back corner of the building. The applicant responded that they have looked at it but due to the steps, it won't be ADA accessible. There is not enough space to do a ramp and stairs in that area.
- The applicant commented everybody that comes into that building, 95% of the people come from the back of the building, then they all walk through that driveway, they walk the same way they drove, and they enter the adjacent building from the back. So, there's no real difference for this residential entrance.
- Mr. Winkler commented that looking at the site plan, it appears there is about 15-16 feet between the edge of the building and the property line. He commented that's enough space to do something to get into the building and have a lobby and a stairwell and maybe a Lulu, so the residents are entering from the side rather than the back. The applicant responded that the code requires the main entrance to be ADA accessible and due to grade issues, there's not enough space to put a ramp on the left of the building.

III. Old/New Business

1. Zoning Redesign – Village Center

The City of Newton's Zoning Redesign project is a multi-year effort to update and rewrite Newton's Zoning Ordinance. Zoning Redesign is currently focused on Village Center Zoning Updates. [Click here](#) to learn about the current phase.

Planning staff and consultant Utile presented version 1.0 of the village center zoning districts to Zoning and Planning Committee at their October 24 meeting. This initial mapping process ran in parallel to the recent engagement, mentioned above, and builds upon nearly two years of research, analysis, and City Council deliberation.

In short, the version 1.0 village center district maps propose three new village center zones that could be applied in twelve of our village center commercial areas. Unlike the current zoning, with its one-size-fits-all format, Utile and Planning staff customized these new zoning districts to each village center. This first draft is intentionally meant to be reviewed and updated. Working closely with the City Council, Planning staff have recommended an iterative process that will set up public hearings and a possible City Council vote in spring 2023.

Click on the links below to access the online exhibit and village center zoning map:

[Zoning Framework – Online Exhibit](#)

[Village Center District Zoning Map – Version 1.0](#)

Barney Heath and Zachery LaMel presented Village Center Zoning Redesign. UDC had the following comments and recommendations:

- Mr. Doolin commented that he had two observations, he's anticipating this to be political will more than anything so people will glom on to that outside of these zones, there's a rationale about transitions and so forth. These buildings are taller so someone may think that they will be able to transition more and get a special permit, so it may help to say that's not the intent. Secondly, there are requirements and guidelines, so who will be arbiters of those things going forward? Mr. Heath commented that the planning team will handle the review of standards. Mr. LaMel commented that right now, any project over 20,000 sq. ft. triggers a special permit. The recommendation is that that is not a good bellwether for whether a project has a serious impact or not. The recommendation is that a site plan review process be triggered for some parcels that are between a half-acre and three quarters of an acre and that would be under Planning Board's purview. The projects over three quarters on an acre would trigger the special permit and projects will get recommended to come to UDC in the same manner as it happens now.
- Mr. Kaufman asked in terms of land use, in VC 1, can someone do any combination of mixed use and residential, are there any restrictions? Mr. LaMel responded that the current thinking is that the VC1 is an edge condition where you're connecting to either already established, multifamily kind of fabric or there is recommendation to allow for that multifamily. The VC1 allows for two and a half stories and multi residents or residents districts allow for two and a half stories right now. The use would be predominantly residential. In the Use table in the proposed zoning, either commercial uses will not be allowed, or they would be allowed through special permit with certain conditions. Mr. Heath added that there will only be a set of commercial uses that would be allowed. Mr. LaMel also commented that VC2 and VC3 would be predominantly mixed-use commercial development given their locations.

- Mr. Doolin asked to explain more about incentives. Mr. LaMel responded that the city has been working with Utile on this. The maximum footprint is the regulating piece here, so you could have a larger lot that could support more development, but we want to see that broken up into two buildings. There's a maximum footprint and through architectural features, you could go beyond that maximum, or you could encroach into the setback potentially but still working on those details.
- Mr. Downie asked if anybody has investigated incentivizing more slope to a roof? For instance, a lot of cases you try to fit a two and a half story building or even a three-story building and then the height limitations drive you into a flat roof even though it's a lower height limit. but getting to a sloped roof. Those are so those are low enough to where it drives you to a very low slope, sloped roof. Four and 12 five and 12 six and 12 whereas if you wanted to incentivize some architecture of say a 12 and 12 or even a 14 and 12 sloped roof, you would have to give on the height limitations. So, it could be even something where it's some proportion of the footprint to the mid part of the roof, that sort of thing so that you could get some the architecture of a steeply sloped roof but the city would have to give up some idea of height limitations. Is there anything that anybody is talking about doing with that? Mr. LaMel responded that we hope we've accounted for that. So, we are setting maximum height so let's just take VC two for example, which allows for three and a half stories by right. The maximum height allowance takes into consideration one, the commercial ground floor heights and what they need. So we're writing in that a minimum of 15 foot floor to floors for that first floor are baked in. And then the overall maximum height for those three and a half stories is different if you are providing a pitched roof versus if you're providing a flat roof. A flat roof just in this scenario, based on the industry requirements for floor to floor. A mixed-use building would have a maximum height for three and a half stories of 56 feet and it would be 62 feet for a pitched roof. Mr. Downie responded that there just must be some reality check on that because what you're going to end up with is there's a lot of flat roofs if you don't allow somebody to go higher by having a steeper sloped roof.
- Mr. Doolin commented that this effort is tremendous, it's complicated and it's appreciated the skill, level of work and engagement that has been done. This is a great effort and couldn't be more Newton.
- Mr. Downie commented that there used to be a provision in the zoning that allowed you to ignore FAR, if you're demolishing less than half of the building in a residential zone. That provision has gone away now but that was that was an incentive for people to keep, to renovate and modify existing buildings, rather than tear it down and build new. The point is that it used to exist in zoning and it doesn't exist anymore and not sure what prompted that change so the effect is that things get scraped rather than modified. This would apply to residential zoning. Mr. Doolin made an observation about sloped roofs and solar arrays. We need to be careful about how that can be deployed or frustrated. The hope is there's some marriage of those two things.
- Mr. Kaufman asked about what is the major pushback? Mr. Heath responded it is the height allowance, but we will be getting more feedback in the coming weeks. Mr. LaMel commented that we've had a very difficult time to say what we're allowing by right in VC three is not Trio or Austin Street but that's what people imagine. Those are both huge sites with footprints that are well over the maximums that are provided.

1314 Washington, in West Newton is close to essentially the maximum that we would allow by right it's a little more.

- Mr. Downie commented that it may help to compare Trio to what would be allowed on that site by right, as an example. Like, for instance, if you were able to say, by right, they wouldn't have been able to build as big as they did but with this, it'd be a little shorter, it would be a little less footprint or a little bit greener, to be able to show that by right. This site would have looked much different than what it does now. Also do the same for Austin Street. It will help to compare and contrast visually.
- Mr. Kaufman asked if we get bonuses for additional residential development over commercial development, above the first floor in the village centers? Is there any kind of weight on any of that stuff? So, if we're providing more residential in the village centers, and maybe there would be an incentive for that. So, if you really want to do a commercial building, then maybe go out to 128, but if we want to do the village centers then we probably don't want to have a four-story office building. We probably want to have residential above that will vitalize the village center, much more than everybody going home at night. Mr. LaMel responded that we probably need both given the commercial tax base situation in the city and how low it is. In certain instances, all commercial buildings may not be a terrible thing. Mr. Kaufman responded that if the purpose is to revitalize the village centers then we should incentivize residential above commercial. Mr. Heath responded that we're looking at a disincentive for all residential in a village center. In VC3 zone, you can only to two and a half stories if it is only residential and if you have a mixed-use building with ground floor commercial then you get to go to four and a half.
- Mr. LaMel commented that Zoning and Planning Committee (ZAP) might be opening for public comment in the meetings from Boards and Commissions so they are speakers at those sessions, in January. It will be a logical next step to hear from UDC at that meeting.

2. Meeting minutes

The Commission reviewed the minutes of September meeting.

MOTION: Mr. Kaufman made a motion recommending approval of the regular meeting minutes for September as submitted. Mr. Downie seconded the motion. All the members present voted, with a 5-0 vote, Michael Kaufman, Jim Doolin, John Downie, Visda Saeyan and William Winkler in favor and none opposed. The decision is hereby incorporated as part of these minutes.

IV. ADJOURNMENT

Mr. Kaufman made a motion to adjourn the meeting and there was general agreement among the members.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:18 p.m.

Respectfully submitted by Shubee Sikka

Approved on February 8, 2023.