

Memorandum



To: Councilor Deborah Crossley, Chair, Zoning and Planning Committee
 From: Councilor Lisle Baker
 Subject: #88-20: Residential Design component of the proposed zoning ordinance
 Date: March 9, 2020
 Cc: City Council, (and those named on the Planning Department memo dated February 28, 2020)

I have read the February 28, 2020, Planning Department memorandum setting out a proposed framework for amending Newton’s zoning ordinances for residential districts. As I will be away on Monday the 9th, I thought I should provide some comments in advance of the discussion which I hope will be helpful.

First, as someone who was actively involved in zoning amendments over many years, this is one of the first memoranda I can recall seeing which references a new zoning amendment proposal, including modifications in it in red-line form, without explicit comparisons to the same provisions of our existing ordinance. While I understand that prior presentations may have made those comparisons, and some reference to changes are in the 2/28 memo, they are not clear in the attached proposed language. Until we are clear about what our current ordinance provides and how it compares to what is proposed, as I had requested in January, how can we responsibly choose to make a change?

For example, I recommend that the Planning Department provide to the Committee some simple tables like the one below using our existing zoning as a guide, based, for instance, on the tables found in of our current ordinances. The Council would benefit from similar tables for each of the zoning controls, both existing and proposed, recommended for revision. (Both can then be tested on specific sites.) Here is an example for just frontage and minimum lot size. It should be possible to see a spreadsheet with a more elaborate tabulation designed to highlight differences and their rationales.

Zoning District	Street Frontage required	Minimum Lot Size to build	LB Commentary
SR1 current	140 feet	25000	
R1 zone proposed	80 feet	None	How many unbuildable lots will now become buildable with these reduced limits? And what is rationale behind these proposed numbers?
SR2 current	100 feet	60 feet	Same
R2 proposed	60 feet	50 feet	Same
[Continue with other districts]			

Second, we have previously identified elements of our current residential zoning which are most problematic such as the encouragement of teardowns or garage front dominant dwellings. While possible solutions may be implicit in the amendments proposed, they are not highlighted in the proposed ordinance. (I understand teardowns will be discussed at the next meeting.) It would be helpful to understand how these issues might be helped by interim action, rather than wait.

Third, there are changes in the residential ordinance which are made without being explicitly highlighted which mark a major shift in our zoning policy, e.g., removing the Council from most special permits, or removing minimum parking requirements. For example, this latter change would make providing parking up to the property owner and essentially assumes that year-round on-street parking is available and wise. (Our current ordinance is designed to have each property absorb the parking on site that it may require, a better practice, in my view.) In any event, these are major changes which should be debated on their merits and obtain a full Council vote on their own, not just marbled into a larger proposed new draft.

I realize that this is challenging work, but I believe that such clarity will aid our discussions. Thank you.