

Newton Zoning / Garage A78 Ordinance Macro Issues

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I have lived and practiced in the City of Newton for nearly 30 years now and I would like to share a handful of macro-level issues that I feel should shape the discussion of the Garage A78 Ordinance. These are:

- **The Ex-Urban or “Middle” Environment**
- **Evolving Historic Fabric – Parts A and B**
- **Finding Balance**
- **Future-Proofing the value of our Homes**

1) The Ex-Urban or “Middle” Environment:

Since incorporation in 1874, I believe the City of Newton could be properly characterized as an “Ex-Urban” environment. What this means to me is that there are clearly parts of our city that feel more urban and other parts that feel more suburban, yet the City is not fully one nor the other...we are, in effect, in the “middle”.

And for the last 150 years we have been experimenting with what it means to be in the middle. The good thing is that this “middle” environment has provide us the flexibility and opportunity to take appropriate risk with investing in our properties and creatively solve the demands of our ever-changing modern lives....leaving us with a community that enjoys high livability with high land values.

Nurturing both livability and high land value and not one at the expense of the other is critical in our evaluation of the Garage ordinance to maintain the strength and growing diversity of our community.

2) Our Evolving Historic Fabric- Part A: The emerging value of the Garage

The program of spaces that make up the Newton home have been evolving over the generations.

At one time, the carriage house, kitchen, and bathroom were detached or semi-detached from the Newton home because the functions were regarded as unsafe or unappealing. Over time, and with the embrace of technology, the kitchen and bath have become fully integrated and essential components of the Newton home today.

The garage, the post WW1 version of the carriage house, is on that same path of full integration. The garage is highly valued as the staging room for many of the important activities of each homeowners’ life outside the home...work or play.

And as it has become such an essential aspect of modern life, homeowners are motivated more than ever before to achieve an attached garage that provides easy and accessible use.

As aging in place becomes an important aspect of our community, we should also find ways to allow for accessible garages on smaller, narrower properties for down-sizing citizens who require year-round safe and function access to their bikes, motorcycles and autos.

3) Our Evolving Historic Fabric- Part B: The front versus back of the home

The way in which the interior rooms of the typical Newton home physically and experientially connect to their surrounding property has changed significantly since WW2.

In the 19th and early 20th century much of first floor daily life was experienced at the “**front**” of the home. That is, the important rooms were the porches, foyers, parlors, sunrooms, and living room where they gathered and socialize with family and friends. The front yard was important at that time as the transition between street and these important spaces of social interaction.

Today we live in the “**back**” of our homes. Newton homeowners now aspire to the open-concept kitchen/dining/family room connected to the back yard with good natural light and easy movement between inside and outside.

This enhanced importance of the rear yard, free of other competing structures is driving the trend to bringing attached garages to the side...or front of the house.

4) Finding Balance:

Architects and builders are on the front line of understanding, interpreting, and implementing the often conflicting and opposing design goals coming from homeowners. And yet, there are certain fundamental spaces and features that most homeowners wish to achieve on the first floor of their homes that transcend the diversity of the marketplace. Those spaces or features are a functional front and back door, an elegant kitchen, family room, mudroom, dining space, office, good natural light, a usable back yard...and a garage.

Our challenge of finding balance between all these essential components is magnified with the wide diversity of property size, shape and topography and the equally wide variety of architectural styles that occupy our ex-urban environment.

The zoning regulations need greater as-of-right flexibility to enable all of us to achieve balance between these desired components on each property in a fair, egalitarian and democratic way so that no homeowner feels denied the opportunity to achieve these same goals.

5) Future-proofing our Homes:

I think it is fair to share that ALL Newton homeowners see their home as both dwelling and investment...they are indeed the stewards of their properties.

And as stewards, we all aspire to maintain and invest in our homes in such a way that the value of our home rises, not falls. This is the concept of future-proofing...that the things we may do today to and in our homes will be valued by the next generation of home buyers.

The revisions to the garage ordinance should embrace this concept of future-proofing and allow for more homes to achieve garages attached to their homes.