

22 January 2021

Zoning and Planning Committee
Newton City Council

re: Proposed Garage Ordinance

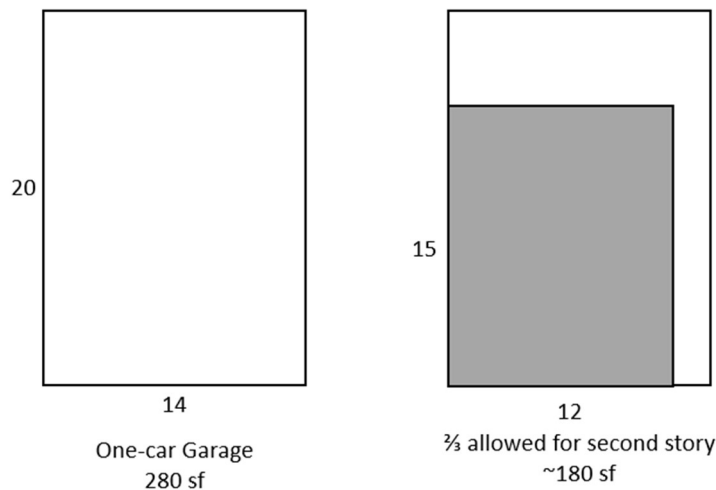
by email

Dear Councilors,

The new garage ordinance has many good attributes. However, it unnecessarily encourages larger garages in the case of accessory units. In this letter, I will describe the problem and propose a simple change that would provide better incentives for homeowners and developers.

As proposed, a detached carriage house is limited to $1\frac{1}{2}$ stories and 22' in height. Why is this a problem?

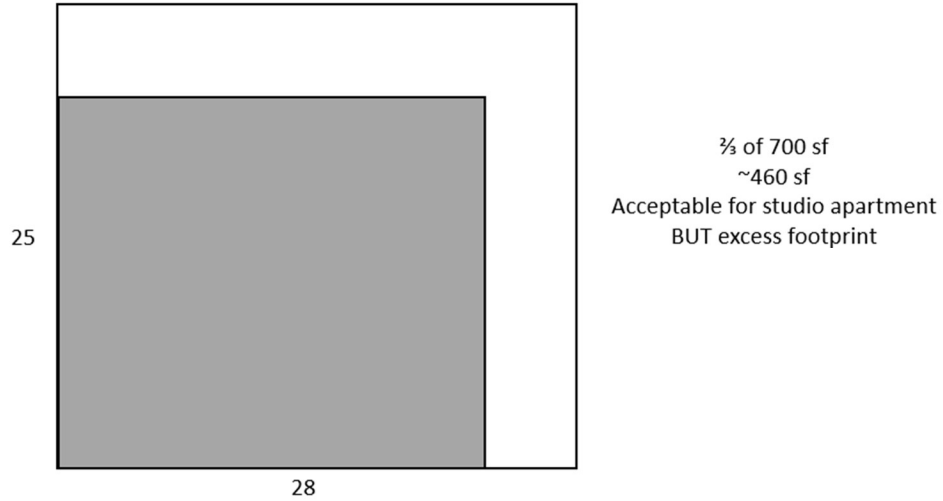
In Newton, the $1\frac{1}{2}$ story limit means that any area above the first floor of a garage, with a height above 7', is limited to $\frac{2}{3}$ of the first-floor footprint of the garage.



The City is trying to reduce the number of cars while at the same time trying to promote accessory units. The garage ordinance as drafted conflicts with these goals.

If a homeowner only has space or budget or need for a one-car garage, the structure could typically have a trim footprint of about 300 square feet. A small footprint is desirable from an environmental point of view as it limits the amount of lot coverage, reducing storm-water runoff, among other benefits.

However, with the garage ordinance as proposed, the amount of square footage above the garage is limited to $\frac{2}{3}$ of 300 square feet, or about 200 square feet. This does not meet the minimum requirement for an accessory unit, which is 250 square feet. This is an example of how the current zoning code discriminates against homeowners in neighborhoods with historically small lot sizes, such as Newton Upper Falls.



For a studio-type apartment, a more realistic minimum is 450 square feet. However, to achieve this, the first-floor footprint of the garage would have to be approximately 700 square feet. Thus, the ordinance forces the homeowner to build the largest possible footprint allowed under the ordinance, with more lot coverage, higher cost, two garage bays instead of one, and more storm-water and other environmental impacts. Homeowners on smaller lots or homeowners with constrained budgets are prevented from having a reasonable accessory unit at all.



Under Newton's zoning code, an accessory unit similar to this is not allowed (even with a conforming roof height)

The City should think carefully before essentially banning accessory units over one-car garages. The carriage house building type is a contextual feature found throughout Newton, so this ordinance is also contrary to a transition to context-based zoning.

To allow for this building type, and to encourage smaller garages, I suggest changing the ordinance to allow 2 stories if the building footprint is 500 square feet or less, but keep the limit of 1½ stories if the footprint is in excess of 500 square feet.

Thank you for your consideration.

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