



Zoning & Planning Committee Report

City of Newton In City Council

Monday, October 25, 2021

Present: Councilors Crossley (Chair), Danberg, Albright, Leary, Ryan, Wright, Krintzman and Baker

Also Present: Councilors Bowman, Lipof, Downs, Norton, Malakie, Humphrey, Oliver, Lucas, Kalis and Greenberg

City Staff: Deputy Director of Planning and Development Jen Caira, Director of Planning and Development Barney Heath, Assistant City Solicitor Andrew Lee, Director of Housing and Community Development Amanda Berman, Chief of Long Range Planning Zachery LeMel, Planning Associate Cat Kemmett, Community Planner Engagement Specialist Nevena Pilipovic-Wengler and ADA Coordinator, Jini Fairley

Utile Consultants: Timothy Love and Lisa Hollywood

Planning and Development Board: Chair Peter Doeringer, Barney Heath, Kelley Brown, Sudha Maheshwari, Chris Steele, Kevin McCormick and Jennifer Molinsky

Others Present: NewTV

#88-20 Discussion and review relative to the draft Zoning Ordinance

DIRECTOR OF PLANNING requesting review, discussion, and direction relative to the draft Zoning Ordinance.

Zoning & Planning Held on 01/27/20, 02/10/20, 02/24/20, 03/09/20, 03/23/20, 04/13/20, 04/27/20, 05/19/20, 06/01/20, 06/15/20, 06/29/20, 07/09/20, 07/16/20, 08/13/20, 09/14/20, 10/01/20, 10/15/20, 11/05/20, 11/09/20, 12/14/20, 02/22/21, 03/08/21, 05/24/21, 07/08/21, 09/13/21

ACTION: Zoning & Planning Held 8-0

NOTE: Director of Planning and Development Barney Heath, Chief of Long Range Planning Zachery LeMel, Community Planner Engagement Specialist Nevena Pilipovic-Wengler, Planning and Development Deputy Director Jen Caira and Utile Consultant Timothy Love joined the Committee.

Mr. Heath stated that we're pleased to be here this evening to report back on our village center community engagement efforts. Any engagement effort that is designed to be true, diverse, equitable, inclusive and representative of all segments of the community - needs to be intentional and tireless. I for one had my doubts about our ability to pull folks into this conversation, especially ones

not usually invited or interested. Our team, led by our engagement specialist Nevena Pilipovic-Wengler, designed multiple, easy and fun individual and communal ways to engage about the future of our village centers. Ms. Pilipovic-Wengler, Ms. Kemmett and Mr. LeMel were able to get word on the street to individuals whose voices are often not represented. Opportunities to engage were created at the Farmers Market, Village Day festivals, via community led vision kits, on-line interactive surveys and vision kits allowing individual submissions, random interviews with people on the street and our Newton high school summer interns. Many people provided statements on the Polis forum, as well as pictures and images and in some cases, full plans. Individuals took the time and effort to send in what they thought about, and we should consider when future planning for village centers. Thanks to our team, you can comb through everyone's submissions firsthand by visiting our village center zoning redesign webpage at <https://www.newtonma.gov/government/planning/village-centers> and see where folks organized their own vision kit, village center tours, and/or sent in pictures and sketches that they thought told a story. I'm especially proud of the lengths to which Ms. Pilipovic-Wengler, Ms. Kemmett, and Mr. LeMel went to meet people. The team put in many hours including nights and weekends to reach folks in the community and invite them to participate and share their thoughts. I'm also grateful to various community members who helped facilitate these discussions. Although tonight represents the end of this phase of engagement and will help in guiding the committee's future thoughts with respect to zoning policy for our village centers in the coming months, we are committed to a continuous engagement feedback loop as ZAP continues its work around village center zoning.

Community Planner Engagement Specialist Nevena Pilipovic-Wengler, Planning and Development Deputy Director Jen Caira and Utile Consultant Timothy Love presented a detailed summary of the engagement process and effort, who and how many participated, tools used to sort the data, the key takeaways, examples of zoning considerations based on these key takeaways, and next steps through December. (PowerPoint attached)

Ms. Pilipovic-Wengler stated that the team just wrapped up four months of community engagement that included qualitative research, quantitative data analysis in partnership with our consultant Utile.

Seven themes that emerged from the community engagement efforts:

- Focusing on the environment
- Public space
- Transportation
- Accessibility
- Process
- Housing
- Businesses

We heard almost from 2000 voices during this community engagement effort. More specifically in terms of the information we tagged and synthesized that was about 1720 voices. One big goal in the beginning of this community engagement was to more equitable to engage our community members

and have a more diverse representation of the people we heard from. The data we had to directly compare it are the people we heard from during the 2020 survey and December 2020 to the online interactive forum, also known as Polis. It was exciting to see that we were able to jump from our respondents being 0.6%, 4% of younger people ages 15 to 24 to 13% of our respondents being that age. In addition, we jumped from 4.62% of our respondents being renters to 13%. We were happy to see that we were able to match almost an on the point representation of the homeowners in the city and the online interactive forum as well.

The engagement was very similar including creating, handing and getting out the vision kit, which was a self-guided tour of the village center of one's choice. We also had the online interactive forum, also known as Polis. We had our equitable focus groups, broken down into eight categories, and we had community members be able to facilitate the breakout rooms of each focus group that they identified with. In addition, we had economic development engagement and close partnership with the Economic Development Commission which involved both focus groups, as well as a survey that business owners could complete. Mr. LeMel created a history presentation on what village centers meant historically for Newton. In partnership with Historic Newton, we held a panel after this presentation of community members, and with a questions and answers for the attendees. Lastly, we did do on the spot surveys, which meant bringing the online interactive forum as well as awareness about this engagement phase to multiple events and busy places, with our fabulous high school interns. The Vision kit submissions were fantastic, we got an incredible array of photos and observations, many of these were in direct response to the prompts we listed in our vision kit. What was exciting about the vision kits is that we heard from multiple community members that these prompts and this exercise helps them have a different lens of how they approach their village center, and kind of take a pause and take a breath and reflect on what currently exists in one's village centers was as well as what doesn't. We heard that it was a great exercise to pull in more community members, as well as people who possibly had different opinions from. In addition, we got a wide array of the types of vision kits submissions, and this included maps.

The high school interns engaged hundreds of people who had never heard of zoning redesign. But that doesn't mean their expertise and village centers is not relevant, and the direct experiences of those places. The interns went to the YMCA, the fest and completed their own vision kits. Halfway through the summer, we realized that we were able to engage more people by going to more populated areas such as the library and the farmers markets. We also had site observations at three village centers, new entities that we reached out to throughout the four months. We also marked which of all the people we individually reached out to either co-hosted a focus group, submitted a vision kit, or also worked with staff to engage community members either through allowing us to table at their events, or helping us engage their own workers.

In terms of what we heard about each village center, it was about 50/50, hearing about specific village centers, and hearing about just a city wide reflection. We did ask staff to make a significant effort to make sure we were getting specific examples of village centers and reflections of specific village centers as often as we could. This is both through asking people to do vision kits and a specific village center, as well as in the focus groups that weren't village center specific, asking people for

examples of the different sentiments and values, hopes and concerns that they raised in those meetings.

Overall, more than 1,700 community members contributed to at least one of the community engagement channels offered (focus groups, Vision Kits, online interactive forum, on-the-spot surveying, etc.). There was a clear emphasis on engaging those who are disproportionately under-represented. Ms. Pilipovic-Wengler presented on how this phase of engagement tripled the number of renters and people aged 15-24 as compared to previous engagement efforts.

Ms. Caira then presented on how through this engagement staff received everything from big ideas and dreams for village centers, to specific requests for maintenance or improvement, to mini master plans for areas of the city. Every statement was reviewed and logged and through this these seven takeaways emerged, focusing on the environment, public space, transportation, accessibility, process, housing, and businesses. These takeaways are:

- Creating and activating more community gathering & open public space
- Increasing accessibility to buildings and infrastructure within Village Centers
- Incorporating climate resiliency through built structures and green spaces
- Helping small businesses to begin, stay and thrive in Village Centers
- Making permitting process easier, clearer, and multi-tiered
- Adding more diverse housing options and encouraging mixed-use projects although there were many opinions about how to do this
- Prioritizing safe and accessible routes to and through village centers, especially walking and biking

Ms. Caira went through each of these takeaways using examples of different community input received to highlight different points. Following this, Mr. Love gave a brief preview of how these takeaways may translate into various zoning recommendations that will be presented at upcoming ZAP meetings for the committee to consider.

Committee member's comments, questions and answers:

The survey was conducted over the months when the weather was relatively good – how would poor weather have changed the results? When we begin to discuss these findings and their implications, I think it's very important to try and separate, if possible, from the means that are public and those that are private.

Regarding access and transportation, because there are times when vehicles are really the only easy way to get places - If you keep expanding the public space, and diminishing the travel space, are you getting people to the village centers?

You reached 2000 community members, your interns went out and contacted 500 people, are these good numbers? Mr. Love answered that people have to choose to do an online survey and many people started out doing it and didn't get to the seven questions to become part of the

statistical model that was done. If you want to look closely at the questions, because participants could ask the questions, you'll see that the questions represent a wide range of opinions and the answers to the questions that sort out the group A and group B. I would invite people to look at the data of the survey, to understand the kind of the granularity of the feedback to see that. We think that a wide range of people in Newton with a wide range of opinions did participate in the questions that were posted, was probably the best evidence of it.

The survey shows that 32% of the population or respondents wanted easy parking. It would be interesting to know the number of seniors (who participated)? What does the minority population need in the village centers? Are the answers broken down into populations that responded to it all? Mr. Love answered: No, there wasn't extensive data collected about each person in front of the questions. Ms. Caira answered: Just because it was 32%, doesn't mean parking isn't necessary. We included statements from focus groups, Vision kits, and submissions that discussed the need for parking, and the need to think about how we provide parking and where was really important. To be very clear, we're not disregarding any of these statements, or using that 30% to say there's no need for parking. Ms. Pilipovic-Wengler answered: For example, the older adults focus group would be a fantastic place to dig into the kinds of comments we got regarding parking and transportation. To your question earlier on the statistical relevance of the data, like I had presented on some months ago, I did consult MAPC, the regional planning agency, as well as Professor Ann Forsyth at the Harvard Graduate School of Design who focuses on qualitative data. Those entities confirmed that it is actually less about the numbers and more about the range of voices that you are consulting. When we got to about 100 people who'd completed the online interactive forum, we actually found the percentages and the ways people were grouped and answering certain questions, remained fairly consistent with every 100 additional persons. Professor Ann Forsyth, MAPC and I discussed as well that you often can see, as certain number, a pattern emerging that is confirmed by the additional hundreds of people you add on. I do feel confident that this information does represent a fair amount of patterns held by other community members. I do feel confident that this information indicates a representative sample of community opinions.

What does the term "strategically fit" in village centers mean? Mr. LeMel answered he thinks it ranges from looking renovations and rehabilitation of existing structures, if possible, to thinking about possibly smaller, mixed-use developments that could be more surgically inserted into village centers. "Fitting" had to do with what people think is contextual. Sometimes this was about using specific materials. In Nonantum there was a specific call for masonry and brickwork, for example, in the Visioning sessions. So, it really ranged depending on the source.

Regarding the addresses on the spot survey - Was that pulled out separately? Mr. LeMel answered that this was getting people to engage particularly with the Polis survey. For the most part, the people who engaged in on the spot survey were directed to Polis and they are grouped within Polis.

Wonderful presentation, great information and strong data, It was more inclusive and included a greater slice of Newton voices. The information here is information that I feel innately during this

time where we're facing both a housing crisis and a climate crisis. We are absolutely on the right track.

Newton residents who understand the importance of both offering opportunities for more housing and village centers and that connection between living closer to amenities and not being so car dependent. We're building thoughtful developments with green spaces, and a lot of significant sustainable benefits.

It's important to understand the concept of complete streets. We've been building around the car for a century. Now it's time for us to also remember there are other important types of ways people are getting around, which are important to us to meet our climate action goals. If we can get even 10% of people out of their cars and onto other options, we're really helping those people that do need to drive and in terms of reducing traffic congestion. Remember that some of the some of the goals we have for our climate action plan are very difficult. The reason we have to do these things is because we're facing an existential crisis, both for our planet and our community, but also for the Newton that we want. The change will greatly benefit Newton residents, local businesses and our environment.

I continue to worry about the 70% versus the 30% (referring to the 78%-22% of respondents who favor change v. no change) that are reflected. Sarah Ronan, Chair of the National Historic Advisory Committee by President Biden, has helped change the enabling legislation for the State of Connecticut with an organization called Desegregate Connecticut. Her expertise bridges a gap that I see reflected in the 70% versus the 30%. Let's say keep everything the way it is now, no, let's change everything. Could we invite her if she is willing to come and talk to us in Newton it just might be one way for us to look for the commonalities and what we're all trying to achieve here.

Happy to hear that we were able to reach out to 500 people on the street, because this goes a long way toward getting a representative sample of everyone's voices.

I would like to see a meeting of the minds of the 70 (78%) and the 30% (22%). There was mention of the number of commonalities that everyone wanted including outdoor dining, walking, ease of walking within the villages, the need for many amenities and being able to have amenities rather than just banks and nail salons in our villages. Newton needs a good mix of shops and stores. Especially if we are able to bring back housing, which I think will go a long way toward revitalizing our villages and bringing them back to the vitality and usefulness that they had in the 19th century when there was more density in the villages. We have to look at the perfect ratio of building height.

Chair Crossley stated that a sample of over 1700 individual contributions is quite a significant number of people. Can you discuss the statistical validity of these numbers? The community outreach undertaken is more than any effort in the city has ever achieved. I've never seen an attempt to be this inclusive, and this broad. I'm actually extremely impressed with the number and mix of folks that responded to this survey and participated in the vision kits.

Councilor comments, questions and answers:**What is the implication that part of investing in village centers or identifying what we would like about village centers would be eliminating special permits for any developments?**

Mr. LeMel answered that statement was from one particular person. The results were public the entire time, and I think that might have been a direct response to some comments pushing for making more multifamily mixed use development by right. I think this this particular comment was wanting to just make sure that that the special permit process was preserved, and they particularly called out larger projects. Mr. Love answered that there's another context for that, from one of the EDC organized sessions that we held that there might be projects below a certain density or size threshold that don't require a special permit. So that the special permit process is reserved for projects above a certain size (to be determined) to encourage more missing middle and smaller scale development to happen without the cost burdens of a special permit. A special permit process can be subsidized for a larger project but make smaller development a bit more difficult to make financially feasible. That was also part of the discussions that came up through the three sessions we had with the EDC.

Please clarify the slide to reflect the one person or the EDC.

Chair Crossley stated that we probably also need to wrap that conversation into the state mandate, and we are not sure how we're going to meet that in Newton. We are supposed to be identifying an area in the city where certain minimum level of density will be allowed by right in order to meet the requirements of the Housing Choice Bill.

It is important that our villages be vibrant. Happy to hear so many great comments of people who were thinking differently about how our village centers work. Seven out of ten residents I spoke with want to move to a village center. 30% want to stay right in their home. I think that aligns with that 70% of people are thinking we should be doing something a little bit differently. We have a lot of opportunity. We're not just doing because we think it might be a great idea. This is what we need to do to support a growing senior population and to address climate change and so many other items.

I participated in three vision kits. I found the visions kits to be fun and productive. I think the residents really appreciated making wishes and dreams of what they want to see in their villages. I think it was just such a positive way to get residents engaged in the whole process that could otherwise be very dry and technical.

We must be cautious to not project our own wishes onto the data, but to look at what we've gathered and really dig into it. It behooves us in crafting the zoning code to look very carefully at what people have told us and accept it, even if it doesn't comport with our own views.

It's all about car trips, people are not going to give up their cars completely. When we talk about getting out of our cars in our village centers, it's not 100%. Reducing these trips is good for the

environment. It creates these middle market units, creates middle market units, creates more truly affordable by program, affordable housing units. It brings vitality.

Some people are scared about removing the special permit process away and letting (too many) things go through by right. As Chair of the Land Use Committee, I will tell you that we have a lot of little things, porches, garages, things that take up a lot of our time that if we did give to another board, or to another lane, we could spend more time on the larger projects which is necessary. The special permit process should never go away. I think we do a great job. I think we come up with better projects. I would not see any multifamily greater than I won't even say the number of units, but it would not be many that would exceed what we would look at. I'm all for streamlining the process so that we can pay attention more to bigger projects.

What was the exact number of total respondents to the engagement process? Was 2000 the actual number? Ms. Pilipovic-Wengler answered the number of unique individuals who submitted vision kits combined with the number of people who attended the focus groups, including equitable and economic development focus groups, as well as the number of people who statistically contributed to the online interactive forum is 1720.

What quantitative data will the planning department and other consultants review when it comes to creating our new zoning code in village centers? What were the other sources of data? Ms. Caira answered that this is the beginning of determining where we need to focus on a zoning recommendation. We'll be collecting more data as we go, more engagement and feedback, as well as deeper analysis of demographics of businesses that exist, economics, how these things get built, what you need to build these things and market research, Mr. Love answered that the data that we've looked at and presented at previous meetings included looking at transit ridership to see if there was a correlation between transit ridership and particularly specific transit stops into village centers and the impact on business vitality. We looked at the mix of jobs and found interestingly that the more kind of daytime workers who were in village centers had a positive impact on the kinds of retail, food and beverage services there was a correlation there. A lot of our research had to do with unlocking thorough data driven spatial research. The ideal recipe is for mix of uses in a village center, so that retail is supported across the full spectrum of a day. So that's analysis that we've done in the rearview mirror. As we're starting to think about what tools we can use and zoning to affect some of those priorities that were presented tonight, other types of research questions will come up that might drive some additional research.

I urge people to go the Newtonville Area Council website and please read the survey analysis because I think it's a good one for village centers in terms of questions, data and responses.

Planning Board members comments:

The excel spreadsheet is an amazing summary resource for someone looking for pros and cons on the perspectives of Newton citizens on the village centers. Interpreting data is really more of an art than a science. I hope we won't get hung up on either the quality of the sample or the particular numbers as we search for some kind of common ground on the belief. I like the fact that some

attention has been paid in having multi language materials and interviews because I think that's a very important element of the Newton population that needs to be included in our in our work.

Ms. Berman provided the following links:

The registration link for the November 15 @ 6:00 pm 'public info session' on this presentation

https://us02web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_mEzgXDDTTtCkMzFbX6fvow

The excel document that has been referenced is linked right under the big, bolded letters saying,

'Engagement Results' on this website at <https://www.newtonma.gov/government/planning/village-centers>

Committee members thanked Ms. Berman, Planning Department, interns, for their positive, extensive and thorough process.

Without further discussion, Councilor Krintzman made a motion to hold this item. Council members agreed 8-0.

The Committee adjourned at 10:10 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Deborah J. Crossley, Chair