

My name is Randall Block. I live at 45 Lafayette Road in Newton Lower Falls. Thank you for the opportunity to address the committee.

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When the Planning Dept. initiated its Community Engagement process, they produced a “Vision Kit” to help the public evaluate village centers. Prior to using the Vision Kit, I asked the Planning Dept. for their definition of a village center. I was told that they wanted everyone to develop their own definition. So I settled on the following:

*Villages are settlements of people clustered around a central point – often a church, market place or public park. The village center is a place for both commerce and social gathering. If there is no place for social gathering, then the village center is more accurately described as a commercial district. Without commercial activity, the village center is more accurately described as a park or perhaps a plaza.*

(DISPLAY SLIDE #1 – UTILE METRICS OF SUCCESS)

I found this slide from Utile Design’s analysis of village centers, very informative. This image summarizes data from 11 village centers regarding three “Metrics of Success”: 1) Having at least 3 housing units per acre within a 15 minute walk; 2) Having a mix of uses in which no single use exceeds 50%; and 3) Proximity to a train station.

**While our village centers all have the same purpose, the Utile analysis shows that they are very different from one another. We understand that Utile and the Planning Dept. will be proposing one strategy for “large” village centers and another for “small” village centers. This is a step in the right direction. However, it seems to me likely that we will need different strategies for each village center depending not just on its size but also on which metrics it has already achieved.**

**I believe that Utile’s analysis omitted a metric that is key to a village center’s success: a centrally located public gathering space. A public gathering space contributes to the vitality of a village center by encouraging people to socialize, bring children, and linger. Further, there is considerable research documenting the mental health benefits of green open spaces.**

The Oct. 22, 2021 memo from the Planning Dept. to this committee includes the following statement: “More than anything else, across all engagement channels, community members spoke of the need and desire for more space to gather in village centers.”

(DISPLAY SLIDE #2)

In the slide you are now looking at, I’ve expanded the Utile diagram to show which village centers have achieved this 4th metric of success.

In conclusion, I have a few suggestions for the Committee and the Planning Dept. to consider:

First, where we have public open spaces in our village centers, how are we using them? How can we increase their usage and bring more vitality? For example, would installing playgrounds in some of the village centers increase activity?

Second, can we create new open space in village centers that don’t have any or expand them where the space is too small? Creating new open space by the closing off a street like Bram Way in Newtonville is one strategy. In other village centers the city may need to acquire some properties and turn them into public gathering places.

The Community Engagement process identified open space as the highest priority – above housing, above bike paths, above everything else. Further, there is abundant evidence that open space is essential to village center vitality and economic viability. I urge the committee to develop an open space plan for each village center as part of your zoning redesign work.

Thank you.