

Cover Letter
Implications of Village Centers Zoning
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To: The City Council and the Planning Dept

I very much wish to see Zoning Redesign succeed but I have significant concerns with Village Centers Zoning as it is currently formulated.

I have written a careful document “Implications of Village Centers Zoning” which is attached. In this document, I explain the issues as I see them and then attempt to suggest pathways towards a better outcome.

Let me summarize the four key issues.

1. Rezoning of areas that are currently occupied by private homes

The Pattern Book states that the village centers constitute 2% of the land area. It is clear that you cannot make a big dent in the issues of either housing or business development if you have only 2% of the land to work with.

Beyond the village centers, most land consists of private homes or public uses (schools, other public buildings, parks, etc).

Therefore, what will be rezoned is the land that consists of private homes.

I suspect that at least 8-10 percent of city land with private homes will need to be rezoned.

At present, the rezoning appears to be focused solely on the areas surrounding village centers. This seems unwise.

I have presented at least one additional option, namely “ribbons of zoning” along “major through streets”. See page 11 of the document. This option can take some of the pressure off of the immediate areas around village centers.

2. Over-dependence on the concept of multi-use buildings

All three zoning options (MU4, BU3, BU2) in the current plan permit and even encourage multi-use buildings.

Since the development of specific parcels of rezoned land will happen randomly based on owner, purchaser, developer decisions, the current plan can lead to a patchwork of multi-use buildings at assorted locations sprinkled around a village center.

I cannot see how such a random sprinkled assortment can be pleasing to citizens or be viable for businesses.

I think it is essential that any new multi-use buildings be located close to the existing village centers and that any further development outwards be in purely residential mode.

In the document, I suggest a fourth purely residential zoning option that I name "MRX". MRX would allow density of up to 12 units in a way that a new structure will fit nicely into the existing residential neighborhood. I hope that this suggestion will be adopted in some form.

By the way, I have read serious articles by urban planners who point out that empty store fronts in multi-use buildings can become a significant blight on a city.

3. Building Height

The ZAP document of April 25 2022 suggests heights of (4.5, 3.5, 2.5) stories for the (MU4, BU3, BU2) zones.

These heights are already a stretch for neighborhoods.

The ZAP document of May 27 2022 undercuts this earlier commitment by stating that the number of stories may be increased by Special Permit.

This is a red flag.

Those who recall the controversies over the Washington St Vision, the Northland project, and the Riverside project must know that building height has been and is an enormous concern for the citizens in the affected neighborhoods.

There are a number of controversies swirling in Newton at this time.

I don't think we need yet another controversy about allowing special permits to increase the original stated building heights for Village Centers Zoning.

Please just don't go there.

4. What is the appropriate Tier (A, B, C) for each village?

This is important and subtle. I discuss this at length in the document and then conclude by using my own village, Newton Corner, as a case study.

I hope that the document "Implications of Village Centers Zoning" will be helpful.

I have posted the document on my own website:

https://web.northeastern.edu/rasala/zoning/Implications_Village_Centers_Zoning.pdf

I request that the document also be posted with the Community Testimonials on the Village Centers Zoning site:

<https://www.newtonma.gov/government/city-clerk/city-council/council-standing-committees/zoning-planning-committee/zoning-redesign-council-documents>

For your convenience, I have directly attached the document below.

Best, Richard Rasala