

Tuesday, Nov. 14, 2023

Mayor's Newton Update



The Newton City Council's Zoning and Planning Committee and the City's Planning staff have worked over the last three years, with long nights of deliberation and extensive community input, on a plan to update our zoning in 13 of our village centers / MBTA station areas and a portion of some of the residential areas immediately surrounding them. This work is called the **Village Center Overlay District zoning**.

This work on zoning became even more relevant when Gov. Baker signed the **MBTA Communities Act** in October 2021. That law requires Newton and another 176 communities to adopt zoning to allow for a prescribed amount of housing "capacity" near public transit, in our case with a deadline of December 31, 2023.

The MBTA Communities law has a lot of specific requirements. For example, by law the City of Newton must allow for *multi-family* housing zoning "capacity" near public transit. Furthermore, the zoning must be "*as of right*," rather than by special permit. The zoning must allow a *capacity of 8,330* multi-family housing units in Newton.

The City Council's Zoning and Planning Committee completed its work on all 13 areas, using 6 of them to satisfy the specific requirements of the State's MBTA Communities Act.

The six village centers / MBTA stations in Newton's Village Center Overlay District Zoning that meet the requirements for the MBTA Communities Act include:

Newton Centre	Waban
Newton Highlands	West Newton
Newton Highlands Eliot T Stop	Newtonville

The other seven village centers that are part of the general Village Center Overlay District Zoning are:

Newton Upper Falls	Nonantum
Newton Lower Falls	Newton Corner
Four Corners	Thompsonville
Auburndale	

A week ago today, we had an election for City Councilors. Much of the debate leading up to the vote was on the perceived pros and cons of the proposed zoning.

My takeaway is that we have general consensus that Newton needs to comply with the MBTA Communities Act and the proposed zoning (perhaps with a few more edits) for the six village centers / public transit nodes should be approved.

In contrast, going ahead with zoning for all 13 village centers / MBTA station areas right now clearly makes a lot of Newtonians uncomfortable.

While zoning is wholly a decision of the City Council, **I think the City Council voting “Yes” on those six village center / MBTA station areas that meet the MBTA Communities Act zoning requirements is a good approach right now.**

Passing the MBTA Communities Act portion provides for zoning that may lead over time to housing at a variety of price points near public transit. That’s good for young adults looking to settle here, for older residents looking to downsize, and for people shut out of Newton because of our high housing costs. A “Yes” vote now leads to economic vitality for businesses and restaurants by generating foot traffic. As housing near public transit doesn’t automatically lead to more cars on the road, it’s better for traffic congestion and the environment. The zoning is unique for each area, demonstrating sensitivity to the special qualities of each. The scale is appropriate, with building heights of 3.5 to 4.5 stories on main commercial streets and 2.5 stories in some of the immediately adjacent residential neighborhoods. Importantly, Newton will comply with State law - and a “Yes” vote makes us eligible to participate as one of the ten communities in the fossil free/electrification State pilot program for new construction.

A “Yes” vote on the areas in the MBTA Communities zoning is in our best interest right now. So, let’s begin with those.

I do encourage the City Council to consider adding one more village center to the zoning—**Auburndale**.

Why add Auburndale?

We have three commuter rail stations in Newton—Auburndale, West Newton, and Newtonville. All three are accessible only for the able bodied (50 plus steps to get to the tracks) and all three only have platforms on one side. (These are the only three single platform stations in the entire Massachusetts commuter rail network.) What is the result of having only one platform? Unlike our neighbors in Wellesley and other communities along the same route, Newton essentially has service going into Boston only in the morning and service back to Newton only in the afternoon. In other words, Newton has infrequent and insufficient service.

Congressman Jake Auchincloss, Senator Cindy Creem, Representative Kay Khan and I have been working hard to have all three commuter rail stations

rebuilt with elevators and two platforms. This would be a permanent, positive game changer for people who live and work on the north side of Newton.

We got the funding for the full design. Now we're working hard to secure the construction funding (\$200 million + for the three stations).

If Auburndale is not included in our updated zoning, we will run a high risk of not getting the funding support we need from the Healey-Driscoll Administration to rebuild the stations. Their top priority is addressing the shortage of housing in the Commonwealth.

All of us care deeply about the long-term quality of life in Newton. I expect the updated zoning will *help* village centers be great places to live, to work, to raise a family, and to retire. The changes that we will see in the first 6 or 7 villages / MBTA station areas and the rate of change will be, I think, gradual, comfortable and appealing to Newtonians. Thus, I hope that future City Councilors will consider updated zoning for Newton Upper Falls, Newton Lower Falls, Nonantum, Thompsonville, Four Corners, and Newton Corner.

Right now, let's begin with a "Yes" vote on the updated zoning for six / seven of our village centers / MBTA station areas that meet the requirements of the MBTA Communities Act.

I will join many Newtonians and closely watch the City Council deliberations tomorrow night, Wednesday, Nov. 15, at 7:00 p.m. (Watch in person at the Council Chambers on the second floor of City Hall, or virtually on Zoom, (click [here](#) for the Zoom link), or on NewTV's Government Channel (Comcast 9, RCN 13, 614 HD, Verizon33) or NewTV's Youtube channel [here](#)).

Warmly,

Ruthanne