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**Barney Heath**  
Director

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## MEMORANDUM

**DATE:** January 27, 2016

**TO:** Councilor Ted Hess-Mahan, Chairman  
Members of the Zoning and Planning Committee

**FROM:** Barney Heath, Director, Department of Planning and Development  
James Freas, Deputy Director  
Lily Canan Reynolds, Community Engagement Manager

**RE:** Zoning Redesign

**CC:** City Council  
Planning and Development Board  
Donnalyn Kahn, City Solicitor  
John Lojek, ISD Commissioner



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This month Sasaki Associates published a report on the Pattern Book Open House that took place on December 3 – 4, 2016. The summary document gives an overview of the development of the pattern book, which was presented to the public in several interactive stations. This two-day event really provided the community with an opportunity to see in-depth how the project team is gathering data on Newton's diverse neighborhoods. Participants were prompted to ask questions, give feedback and interact with Sasaki's early findings. The document lists the key takeaways from each station and how participants are guiding the Zoning Redesign process. A 'Lessons Learned' section provides information about what worked best and what could be improved for future public events.

The summary document has been published on the project website (<http://courbanize.com/projects/newtonzoning/updates>) and is attached here for members of the Zoning and Planning Committee. The website interactive map continues to draw participation from the Newton community. In February the team will be launching a sign/text campaign that allows people to answer project questions they see in the community by texting in answers. More details will be provided to the Committee about this campaign in the next bi-weekly update.

**NEWTON ZONING REDESIGN****Pattern Book Open House Summary**

Today's Newton is a celebrated place to live and work. Recognizing the passion and deep appreciation for the city's historic character that is felt by most residents, it is fitting that a redesigned zoning code reflect those aspects of the city that best exemplify it. Phase 5 of the Comprehensive Zoning Reform – Phase 2 project consists of developing a pattern book that will serve as the foundation of a context-based zoning ordinance, as well as a guide for local property owners to help them understand the development/redevelopment opportunities appropriate for Newton's diverse neighborhoods and village centers.

The development of the pattern book will involve several conferences with local officials and stakeholders, community tours, research, documentation, evaluation of properties and building forms, and extensive dialogue with residents about Newton's character and aspirations. The first of these public outreach efforts—the Pattern Book Open House—was hosted by Sasaki and the Newton Department of Planning and Development over the course of two days (Saturday, December 3<sup>rd</sup> and Sunday, December 4<sup>th</sup>) at the Newton Innovation Center in Newton Corner. The objective of the pattern book open house was threefold: 1) to introduce community members to the Zoning Redesign Initiative; 2) to explain the purpose and composition of the pattern book; 3) to elicit and collect the perspectives and preferences of the Newton community as they pertain to the city's existing and future development patterns.

**OPEN HOUSE FORMAT & SUMMARY**

The Pattern Book Open House was scheduled and designed to be maximally accommodating of the diverse availability and levels of interest held by members of the Newton community. The event was held over the course of two weekend days (four hours each day) and attendees were invited to come and go as they wished, allowing participants the opportunity to stop in quickly to learn about the process and speak briefly with members of the team, or to spend more time immersing themselves in the details of the process and engaging in in-depth conversation with members of the Sasaki team or the City's planning staff. Overall, the event was well attended, with approximately 100 members of the Newton community visiting consistently over the course of the workshop's eight hours. While conversation over the course of the two days ranged from the conceptual (the aspirations of Newton and the value of zoning in helping the community achieve such aspirations) to the technical (particular issues with the existing zoning ordinance and potential methodologies for a new policy), the focus of the open house was the Newton pattern book. As such, the open house was organized around six stations—each of which explained and sought input about a particular component of this effort. The six stations are outlined here.

## **Zoning Redesign & the Pattern Book**

This station served to welcome community members to the open house and introduce them to the Zoning Redesign initiative and the pattern book effort. The station offered visitors the opportunity to ask questions of a member of Newton's planning department staff, learn about the Zoning Redesign project goals and calendar, and sign up for an account on coUrbanize—the project's online engagement platform.

## **Community Analysis**

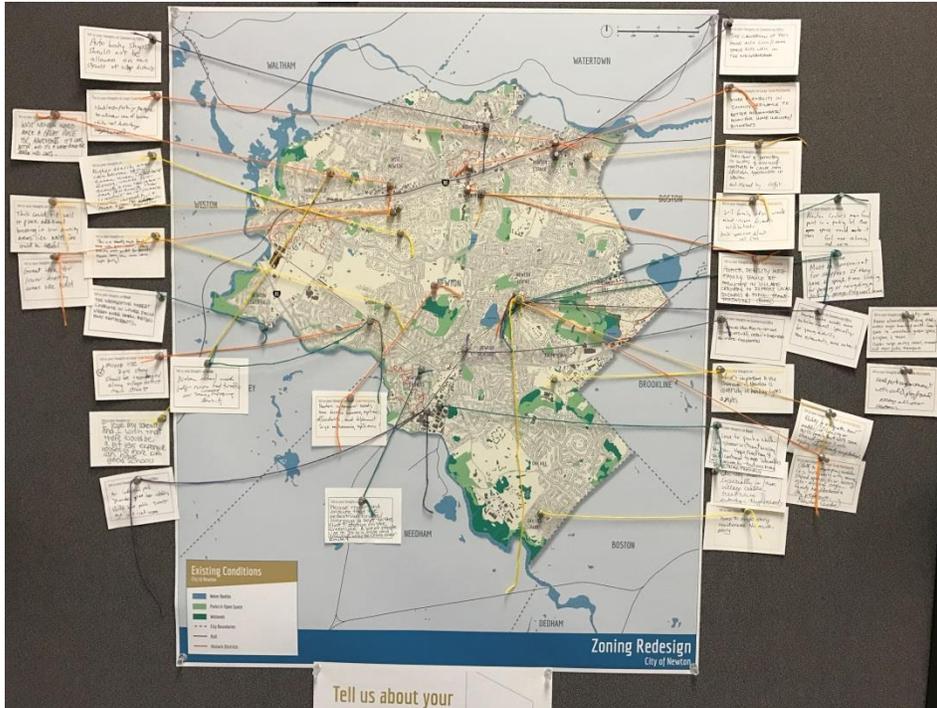
This station was designed to give participants an inside look at the planning team's research and analysis work leading up to the production of the pattern book. Here, community members were invited to explore the documentation of Sasaki's extensive city tours; ask questions about the analysis methodology; view the compiled comments submitted to the planning team by Newton's city councilors outlining the streets, blocks, and neighborhoods they understood to best exemplify Newton's character; and learn about the Zoning Redesign photo submission campaign, which is designed to encourage community members to contribute their own observations to the process.

### *Key Takeaways*

- As one of the first stations visited, participants initially used the Community Analysis station to seek information on the Zoning Redesign process
- Participants were primarily interested in hearing about/exploring Sasaki's tour/analysis material pertaining to their own neighborhood. Similarly, participants were interested in reading comments the project team had received from city councilors about the neighborhoods within their respective wards. These comments were displayed on a map of Newton.
- Most participants expressed satisfaction with the built character of Newton's residential neighborhoods and were supportive of a zoning ordinance for these areas that is built on the existing context.

## **Understanding Typologies**

At the Understanding Typologies station, visitors were introduced to the organizing elements of the pattern book. This station explained that the city's various streets, parcels, and building types are organized into categories—or typologies—that define the key attributes which make them distinct and contribute to a neighborhood's overall character. Community members also learned how the typologies will be organized and described in the pattern book and will serve as the foundation for the rules and guidelines established in the revised zoning ordinance. Participants were encouraged to contribute their own thoughts and experiences as they pertain to Newton's typologies and character areas with an exercise that involved pinning comment cards to a map of the city.



The complete “Understanding Typologies” comment map.

*Key Takeaways*

- Participants visiting this station had many questions about what defines a typology and how typologies will be used in the pattern book and then subsequently, a reformed zoning ordinance.
- Most participants expressed support for the methodology underlying a context-based ordinance.
- Many participants were curious about how patterns would be determined in neighborhoods where there is greater variety in the types of buildings developed over time. The planning team explained at the point where this data is used to inform the zoning ordinance, patterns would be identified, and in some cases, decisions will have to be made—in consultation with elected representatives, City planning staff, and the larger community—about what would be allowable/conforming development within these contexts.
- At this station, participants were encouraged to leave notes corresponding to typology categories on a map of the city. While this memorandum will not summarize every note, some of the observed trends are mentioned here.

- *Single Family*: Participants discussing Newton's single family typologies expressed a variety of sentiments regarding the city's future. Some expressed a desire to maintain the existing scale and density of these neighborhoods, while others expressed an interest in allowing more density and a greater diversity of housing types.
- *Small-scale Multifamily*: The small-scale multifamily typology received much praise and support in this exercise. All of those who discussed this type expressed an interest in the continued proliferation of this type where it exists or the introduction of it in neighborhoods where it is not common. Some participants saw this typology as an opportunity to introduce a greater diversity to Newton's housing stock and as a good transition between village centers and residential neighborhoods.
- *Large-Scale Multifamily*: This typology was popular among participants in this exercise within village centers and along commercial corridors. There were expressions of concern about parking, but also an interest in experimenting with models that infuse new uses and housing types (e.g. cohousing) into the city's denser neighborhoods and village centers.
- *Commercial/Office*: The participants who discussed commercial/office typologies and areas within Newton expressed a variety of preferences, including the preservation of certain commercial/office areas and the prevention of residential uses from mixing with them; the transitioning of certain less-desirable commercial/light industrial typologies from proliferating within village centers; and the enhancement of the type of commercial uses within village centers (e.g. the introduction of more lifestyle/entertainment uses such as restaurants and retail).
- *Retail*: Participants who discussed the retail typologies expressed a range of opinions about the future of retail in Newton. Among these preferences was the desire for more pedestrian-friendly retail that allowed visitors to park and walk around; the introduction of more small-scale restaurants and retail establishments in some village centers; and a concern that parking in some village centers can be a challenge for shoppers to access and patronize local businesses.

## **Historic Newton**

While a zoning ordinance is a forward-looking regulatory tool, the planning team understands that no conversation of Newton's character is complete without an exploration of the past and present built conditions of the city. This station presented community members with before-and-after photos of many of Newton's most changed neighborhoods and village centers to understand which elements of today and yesterday are most appropriate for Newton's future. Visitors of this station were asked to review these photos, engage in conversation around what has changed and what has stayed the same, and leave

behind comments describing their thoughts on how the community should think about the city's history as it guides development/redevelopment moving forward.

### *Key Takeaways*

- Community members visiting the historic Newton station expressed conflicting opinions about the former and existing character profiles of the city's village centers. On boards juxtaposing photos of bygone buildings with photos of present day Newton, some participants favored the modern-day lower density building forms, while others preferred the denser, multistory buildings of the past.
- Many participants expressed an interest in encouraging the development of an additional one or two stories above single-story retail in village centers.
- Many participants noted that the historic photos show much smaller vehicular rights of way, and stated a preference for a return to smaller roadways and more pedestrian-friendly streetscapes.
- Some participants noted a preference to return to building materials in village centers that appear in the historic photos, such as brick.
- A popular character element in the historic photos was the more finite pattern of buildings, as opposed to the largescale and wide modern buildings found in village centers, such as Newton Corner, today.

### **Newton's Context Areas**

At this station, community members were invited to think about what makes for a context area in Newton. Visitors viewed example pattern books—produced by other communities engaged in similar zoning reform processes. This exercise focused on the factors that may contribute to new zoning districts based on similar neighborhood characteristics, such as building form, density, development era, transportation systems, and predominant uses. Here, community members were invited to help the planning team consider which factors have contributed to Newton's discrete context areas over time.

### *Key Takeaways*

- The criteria employed to distinguish one neighborhood from another, and therefore, one context area from another, is often nebulous and subjective. One key takeaway for the Sasaki team from this station was learning how the Newton community understands the boundaries of the various neighborhoods and village centers. While there were a wide variety of factors mentioned by participants, the predominant factor community members expressed to determine their own neighborhood context was the nearest village center.
- In discussing the merits of a transition from a typical land use-based code to a context-based methodology, the Sasaki team discovered most community

members were confused by the complexity and calculations found in the existing zoning ordinance but could easily understand the concept and principles underlying the character/context-based methodology.

- The idea of established “transition zones” in the reformed zoning code was an appealing one to community members. Transition zones aim to carefully and intentionally negotiate the scale of development between village centers (typically denser and taller) and residential neighborhoods (typically less dense and shorter). Participants understood how this regulatory tool could prevent the kind of mismatch of scale between adjacent buildings that they considered undesirable.
- Community members often had questions pertaining to infill development within the city’s neighborhoods and village centers. Participants identified examples of recent infill development they considered desirable, and others they considered undesirable. They were also curious how the reformed zoning code could prevent the bad and permit the good without being overly prescriptive and complex. Participants were also curious about what regulatory/administrative tools and processes would be in place to support the reformed zoning ordinance to ensure that new development is achieving the community’s desired form for its respective context area.

### **Preserve. Enhance. Transform.**

At the final station at the Pattern Book Open House, community members were introduced to one of the core methodologies of the Zoning Redesign process: the idea that a reformed zoning ordinance will help the city identify and guide development and redevelopment within neighborhoods that will either preserve the existing character, enhance the character with strategic growth, or transform building forms that exist today into something new. Each of these concepts means something slightly different for each neighborhood under consideration, but collecting the community’s thoughts in this regard is a powerful contribution to the zoning reform process. At this station, visitors were encouraged to contribute their thoughts by placing colored stickers representing each of the three concepts on a citywide map.

### *Key Takeaways*

- Generally speaking, participants in this exercise expressed most interest in their own neighborhoods and village centers.
- Participants in this exercise fell into two broad camps: those focused primarily on preservation and expressing little interest in growth/transformation, and those who supported modest growth and transformation within village centers and major commercial areas, such as Needham Street.
- Most clustering of preservation stickers was seen in small-scale village centers and residential neighborhoods, such as Newton Upper Falls, Waban, Chestnut Hill, Newton Centre, and Oak Park.

- Some of the scattered preservation stickers were denoting specific houses and streets; often those lived in/on by individual participants.
- The larger village centers, such as Newton Corner, Newtonville, West Newton, and Needham Street, saw the most clustering of transformation and enhancement stickers.
- Newton Centre was the area showcasing most contention among participants. Here there are strong clusters of transformation and preservation stickers.



A participant places different-colored star stickers on a map of Newton, designating preferences for areas that should experience preservation, enhancement, and transformation.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Community outreach events, such as the Pattern Book Open House, are excellent opportunities for the planning team to engage directly with the larger Newton community to keep them apprised of the team's ongoing work and for the team to understand the community's questions, concerns, preferences, and aspirations for the future of Newton. Each of these opportunities provides the planning team with a better sense of the individual and collective experiences of Newtonians. These events also offer the planning team an opportunity to evaluate its community outreach strategy and to better determine if

alternative methods should be employed and if broader audiences should be reached. Listed here are some of our “lessons learned” following the Newton Pattern Book Open House.

- *Time & Location:* While the event timing and format were designed to best accommodate the availability of the majority of community members, the planning team did receive some complaints that the weekend schedule did not adequately accommodate the availability of some community members. Moving forward, this will continue to be a prime consideration when organizing and scheduling community outreach events. Maximizing the potential turnout for these events is the team’s top priority.

Hosting the event at the Newton Innovation Center (124 Vernon Street) is considered to have been successful. The venue offered flexibility of space and hours of occupation. There were no complaints registered regarding the ease of access or the ability of attendees to locate the venue.

- *Format:* The open house format of this event was designed to break down the complex materials associated with the pattern book exercise in a way that was easy to understand and digestible regardless of whether a participant could spend 10 minutes at the open house or an hour. The format is considered to have been a success, although upon reporting out at the conclusion of the two-day event, it was discovered that most of the six stations fielded more general questions about Zoning Redesign and the pattern book exercise than the more specific and curated topics of each station.
- *Interactivity:* The goal of the workshop was to allow participants the opportunity to engage directly with each of the stations and contribute their thoughts and feedback for further consideration by the planning team. While some stations offered very simple and easy-to-use activities, such as the “Preserve. Enhance. Transform” star sticker exercise, others yielded fewer meaningful contributions due to their greater complexity such as the “Newton’s Context Areas” string mapping exercise. Additionally, despite targeted instructions for the kind of contributions that were relevant to the planning team at each station, several of the activities lent themselves to broad interpretation and yielded contributions that were either not relevant or only marginally relevant to the Zoning Redesign project. Better stewardship of these stations and more explanation of an activity’s intent could have limited these occurrences.

## **NEXT STEPS**

Engaging with the Newton community is always an enlightening experience. No one knows Newton like those who live, work, learn, play, and create here on a daily basis, and it is vital that the diverse range of perspectives and preferences be included in a planning process as

impactful as Zoning Redesign. As the planning team moves forward to develop the Newton pattern book—and later, the new draft zoning ordinance—the conversations and comments we captured as part of this and other efforts (both in-person and online) will serve to inform our conversations and help us consider problems and opportunities from new angles. Each comment, preference, and contribution from open house participants will be thoughtfully considered as the project team drafts the pattern book and zoning ordinance.

This open house was designed as part of the pattern book kick-off, along with our community tours, conferences with local stakeholders, and data/regulatory analysis. For the next several weeks the planning team will work to assemble draft pattern book materials, including a map of Newton's context areas, a development typology catalog, and a menu of aspirational development typologies for consideration as we move forward. In late winter (currently targeted for February) the planning team will host a public workshop where members of the Newton community will be invited to review our work, ask questions, submit their comments, and help us make decisions about the patterns comprising Newton's many neighborhoods and village centers.

Following the production and finalization of the pattern book, the planning team will begin the work of drafting a new zoning code for Newton, complete with regulations, guidelines, and procedures for steering future development and redevelopment within Newton. There will be several opportunities for the community to engage with that phase of work beginning in the spring. In the meantime, please visit our Zoning Redesign website at <http://courbanize.com/newtonzoning> to contribute your thoughts and questions to our process.