Newton’s Advantage: Zoning and Economic Development

October 19th, 2017 6:30 - 8:00 p.m.
Newton Free Library, 330 Homer Street

Zoning has a significant influence on the success of businesses in Newton.

Through Newton’s Zoning, the City regulates what businesses are allowed where, regulates their size, and presents a range of regulations from parking requirements to sign rules that have ongoing effects on business operations and expenses. All of these issues will be addressed over the course of the Zoning Redesign event series. We will start this discussion focusing on four issues for the new zoning ordinance:

**Commercial Uses:** A core aspect of zoning is the identification and regulation of uses, for example: banks, restaurants, offices, and retail stores. These uses are defined by zoning and are allowed or not in different areas of the City. The uses listed for Newton’s commercial districts need to be updated, simplified, and made more flexible. We need to include new uses like co-working spaces, identify categories of similar uses to simplify application of the ordinance, and enable stores and businesses to respond to increasing pressure from online competition.

**Manufacturing District:** Newton’s Manufacturing Zoning District is an example of commercial uses that need to be updated. The district reflects a 1950s era of manufacturing with rules governing big industry uses like boatbuilding, textiles, and medical equipment. The result is that manufacturing districts in many parts of Newton have become parking lots, storage facilities, or auto repair shops - these spaces are underutilized manufacturing potential. These districts need to be re-imagined for the current innovation economy, promoting small-scale “makerspace” for emerging tech companies and a flexible array of uses that will support these companies.

**Home Businesses:** Newton is home-base for an incredible amount of talent. For example, Newton residents produce patents at one of the highest rates in the country. This talent means there is a great potential for successful home-based businesses in a range of innovation industry fields. Currently, Newton’s zoning can unreasonably limit the success of home-based businesses, hence Zoning needs to be updated to support the ability of Newton residents to easily start a business from home while still protecting the residential character of the City’s neighborhoods.

**Signs** are an essential part of Newton’s businesses yet Newton’s rules can be confusing and hard to understand or enforce. New zoning rules should strike a balance between good signage and clutter.