Zoning is one of the most important tools the City has to ensure that the basic design principles that define Newton’s great villages and neighborhoods are maintained even as buildings change over time. In Newton’s villages the streets are lined with open shopfronts and frequent building entrances that make for a lively and interesting pedestrian environment. For many of Newton’s neighborhoods, there is a consistent context of building scale and setback that makes for a pleasing sense of community. In either of these environments, the architectural style and the building materials can vary, as long as these design principles are reinforced and maintained.

What are the design principles that make for a great village center or neighborhood?

On March 15th, we will explore how Newton’s Zoning Ordinance could:

- Maintain and enhance the great design found in many of the city’s villages and neighborhoods.
- Introduce these same design principles into other parts of the city so that we improve our commercial areas and provide greater contextual consistency in neighborhoods as they change.
- Provide options for addressing the issue of tear-downs / mansionization in residential neighborhoods.
- Guide appropriate building forms in areas that transition between village centers, commercial areas, and neighborhoods.
Zoning shapes our city. It ensures that buildings and uses of land promote positive outcomes for the community and are consistent with the neighborhood context.

Zoning is the regulation of our built environment: types of buildings, their locations, and their uses.

Central Elements of Zoning

- The Zoning Ordinance is the book of rules and regulations for how private property lots are divided, how buildings are constructed on those lots, and how those buildings are used.
- The Zoning Map divides the city into districts, each of which represents a different set of land uses and scales of building types.
- Dimensional Requirements control the dimensions of private property lots and the buildings constructed on them, including: width and depth of properties, height and overall scale or mass of buildings, as well as how far buildings are from the street and from neighboring property lines.
- Development and Use Standards sets rules and performance standards relating to specific aspects of land development, e.g. rules for signage and parking. Many land uses, like restaurants or health clubs, have their own specific rules as well.
- Decision Making Processes for applying the zoning rules are outlined in the ordinance as well.

What is Zoning Redesign?

The City is working to make a new zoning ordinance that is effective, responsive, predictable, and fair. Newton’s current zoning does not reflect the existing context - 95% of properties are inconsistent with current zoning. The new zoning will incorporate community input, data-driven analysis, and best practices in order to adequately protect neighborhoods and prepare the city for long-term growth.

With this project, the City will be rewriting the Zoning Ordinance to more closely respond to the Comprehensive Plan, to better respect the current built environment of the city, and to reflect the values of Newton’s residents and businesses.

The City Council’s zoning reform efforts began in 2011. Phase One was completed in 2015. It successfully reorganized the existing ordinance making it easier to understand, but Phase One did not alter the content.

Now in Phase Two, Zoning Redesign is a project to update the ordinance’s content with a “context-based” approach. The first step was to catalogue and analyze the patterns of Newton’s built environment in the “Pattern Book” and gather initial ideas. The next step is to engage the public in developing new and revised zoning content. After this, we will be developing a draft based on the Pattern Book and the community conversations from this event series.