



City of Newton

Department of Planning & Community Development

1000 Commonwealth Avenue, Newton, Massachusetts 02459

(617) 796-1120 | newtonma.gov/planning

Marc C. Laredo
Mayor

Katie Whewell
Acting Director

DATE: February 6, 2026

TO: Councilor R. Lisle Baker, Chair, Zoning & Planning Committee
Councilor Pamela Wright, Vice Chair, Zoning & Planning Committee

FROM: Katie Whewell, Acting Director, Department of Planning and Development
Nora (Masler) Colello, Chief of Long Range Planning

RE: **Planning Response to Façade Ratio Regulations**

CC: City Council

The Planning Department has recently been made aware of community concerns around the recently adopted Residential Façade Build Out Ratio found in Section 1.5.7 of the Newton Zoning Ordinance. The façade ratio amendment was adopted under docket items #28-25, #85-24, #41-24 to ensure that new residential redevelopment better fits the scale and visual character of existing neighborhoods. This regulation applies to all Single-Family, Detached and Two-Family, Detached building types and is effective March 1, 2026.

In 2024, the aforementioned docket items began to be raised by councilors in response to constituent concerns regarding the demolition of smaller single-family homes and their larger replacement homes that visually seemed out of scale with nearby dwellings. To support councilors in addressing these concerns, staff presented various tools for preserving existing structures and reducing the visual mass for residential redevelopment, including potential façade ratio regulations. Architects from the design and planning firm Utile, in partnership with Planning staff, conducted significant analysis of the proposed façade ratio regulation, documenting conditions of existing single- and two-family homes and testing potential ratios through modeling across varied lot contexts — including differing widths and configurations (such as odd shaped lots) — and accounting for a range of building heights and forms. Overall, support for the façade ratio provision arose from the regulation’s potential to limit the amount of building along a site’s frontage, reduce visual mass from the public way, and lessen the sense of encroachment on neighboring properties.

Over the course of several months of public hearings in 2025, the Zoning and Planning Committee deliberated the provision in consultation with Planning and Inspectional Services Departments. During the course of deliberation, staff highlighted the broad nature of façade ratios as a tool for reducing the visual mass of a home from the street. To mitigate this, staff proposed a series of exemptions to maintain design flexibility and allow smaller lots to develop. For example, smaller properties, with limited lot width, are particularly vulnerable to frontage-based restrictions. The City Council considered many options, approaches, and exemptions to this zoning ordinance change, with each presenting opportunities and challenges. The Council ultimately voted on an exemption of 50 feet or less.

As additional concerns have emerged from builders and property owners, staff believe this provision needs time to be tested and fully understood by the development community. Staff believe property owners can realize similar development potential as prior to the façade ratio regulation, though often in a modified configuration intended to address community concerns. There are positive urban design elements to this in terms of unit layout (still achieving side by side in a different configuration versus up down).

Outside of broader market or resource constraints, staff are confident housing demand will remain high in Newton as the market adjusts to this new provision, at the same time, staff note that future consideration could be given to refinements, including adjustments to the maximum façade build-out width, reconsideration of the residential exemption threshold between 50 and 60 feet of frontage, and other elements of the regulation. Staff are also open to exploring other ways to achieve the Council's objectives of reducing teardowns and incentivizing more contextual residential redevelopment.