

# OPINIONS

## Newton architects concerned over rezoning effort

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Guest columnists

As architects, builders, and residents of Newton, we are committed to maintaining the quality of life in our city.

After spending considerable effort examining the current rezoning effort, we have found serious problems in the zoning code proposal offered by the Planning Department in conjunction with the Zoning and Planning Committee.

Some of us, as part of an architects' focus group, provided feedback to the Planning Department on the proposed code. We found that many recent projects would not work with the proposed metrics. We understand that some parts of the proposal have been "tabled," but that does not mean they have been abandoned and will not resurface after the election.

We therefore urge Newton residents to become informed about this crucial issue and how it may affect all of us. Here are some of our findings:

### Flawed thinking

- It is ill-advised and inappropriate to enact dramatic changes while we are still grappling with the impact of COVID-19. We don't know what long-range effects the pandemic will have on us. Will the current trends — working from home, reduced use of public transport, leaving high-density living for more space, etc. — continue or shift?

- No comprehensive study has been presented to the public evaluating the impact of the proposed code's significant changes to land use. Any proposals and possible impacts need to be presented in a form understandable to residents.

### Density matters

- The proposed zoning could lead to an alarming increase in density. Allowing conversions of existing residences to create up to six residential units on a lot could totally transform Newton's much cherished status as the "Garden City." So would the Planning Department's proposal to transform all single-family zones into two-family zones, according to an Aug. 7, 2020 planning memo.

- Allowing multi-family conversions "by right" throughout Newton could also change the character of our neighborhoods. The proposed zoning code would not even provide abutters the ability to raise objections to multi-family conversions, since no special permit process is included in the proposal according to an Aug. 7, 2020 Newton Planning memo.

- Allowing such increase in density could create crippling new infrastructure demands on schools, city services, and streets. In addition, the permitted housing boom could mean a lot more cars and a lot more pavement and would certainly reduce our green space.

- More multi-unit housing does not automatically make the cost of housing more affordable. It does, however, encourage more development. And when has new construction ever cost less than the equivalent existing properties?

### Size matters

- The proposed code sets a maximum allowed footprint area for houses, measured in square feet, according to an Aug. 7, 2020 Newton Planning memo. This footprint restriction will limit livable space on the ground floor, making aging in place or caring for older loved ones more challenging.

- The removal of minimum lot size and lot frontage in the proposed zoning would also lead to narrower homes. Parcels could also be reconfigured to create more housing lots, leading to homes more crowded together. These changes would give developers the incentive to tear down one or more existing homes, reconfigure the lots, and put up more houses on the resulting smaller lots.

### Conclusion

- The current code is not perfect, but we believe incremental modifications to the existing zoning code are a more effective way to improve housing in Newton. This approach can preserve the unique nature of our neighborhoods and allow for reasonable and controlled growth. Our recommendations include:

- Allow remodeling of spaces in existing structures such as attics and basements without a complex and lengthy special permit process. This approach is especially important when more and more residents want home offices or space for sharing their home with elders.

- Allow for reasonable additions to existing homes to help homeowners remain in their homes and accommodate needs such as extended-family living and working from home.

# Rezoning

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- Add a provision, as needed, to allow existing non-conforming lots to be easier to build on.

Now is the time to speak up! In the upcoming election, we need city councilors who want to maintain the character, charm, and livability of our villages, not “upzone” them for large, multi-story developments. We hope all Newton residents will support candidates who pledge to work with our existing code and not risk the unintended consequences of a radical, untested, unproven new zoning code.

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All 21 signers of this opinion piece can be found at:

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