

# August Newsletter

From City Councilor Marc Laredo



Dear Friends,

I hope that everyone has had a good summer! Here are three significant topics that the City Council will be focusing on this fall:

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## Tree Preservation

Trees play an important role in helping to fight climate change and making us “The Garden City.” Here in Newton, we have many people working to preserve our trees, including the forestry division in our Parks and Recreation Department and organizations such as the Newton Tree Conservancy, Newton Conservators, and Green Newton.

In the spirit of doing a better job of preserving and enhancing our tree canopy, the City Council has two proposals before it to strengthen our tree ordinance, one by a group of City Councilors and the other by the Mayor. Both would be significant improvements. The City Councilors’ proposal calls for better protection and replacement for all mature trees, while the Mayor’s proposal would provide those protections for trees that are greater than a certain diameter.

I support enacting a very strong ordinance to preserve our trees, especially mature ones, while not unduly hindering homeowners who may need to remove a tree for things such as constructing an addition to a house or creating more useable yard space. I look forward to working with my colleagues and the Mayor to continue to preserve an important part of what makes Newton such a desirable place to live.

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# Rewriting the Zoning Code for our Village Centers

The City Council’s Zoning and Planning Committee continues to craft new zoning rules for our village centers. We are still at the stage of analyzing concepts and in the coming months we will be working on drafting the actual language (often the hardest task). I am pleased that we have turned our attention to the village centers and think we are heading in the right direction regarding:

- ***Allowing the tallest development in the center of the villages.*** The proposed changes being discussed would allow for the tallest buildings to be in the heart of the villages, with their maximum height decreasing as one moves further away from the village centers.
- ***Promoting mixed-use development.*** The proposed change calls for retail, restaurant, or business use on the first floors of multi-story buildings and residential or office space on higher floors.
- ***Eliminating overly restrictive requirements for smaller businesses.*** One example is that we have stringent requirements regarding the amount of parking that businesses and restaurants must provide for employees and customers, without any consideration of the existing supply of public parking. These requirements are routinely waived or reduced during our special permit process. Such unnecessary barriers to business growth for small businesses should be removed.

**However, there are some significant issues still to be addressed, including:**

***When should a developer be required to seek a special permit?***

Most construction projects in Newton can be built “by right,” meaning that a project that can be built without any further city approval other than routine inspections to ensure that the

electrical, plumbing, and other construction work is done properly. Under this process, you (or your contractor) go to city hall, get a building permit, and the city inspectors review the work and sign off that it is properly done. A small number of residential projects and some commercial projects require what is called a special permit – meaning that the project must be approved by a reviewing body – in Newton, the City Council.

No one is suggesting that every project, no matter how small, should require a special permit. But, the most difficult issue to resolve is at what point should the requirement for a special permit be triggered?

Our current ordinance requires a special permit for any project over 20,000 square feet. The proposal before the Committee is to raise the threshold to three-quarters of an acre. I think that threshold is far too high. Most of the lots in our village centers are smaller than three-quarters of an acre. While we want to encourage appropriate development in our community, my experience is that the special permit process leads to far better projects that benefit the community. I do not think it is an undue burden to require large developers to obtain City Council approval for their projects.

***Should we substitute a site plan review process for special permits?***

Site plan review is the process whereby a developer submits its proposal to the Planning Department, the Urban Design Commission, and/or the Planning Board for review and comment. This is a good process that allows for constructive comments by knowledgeable members of our city staff and community members. However, it is not a substitute for the special permit process because a developer can disregard the suggestions. On the other hand, the special permit process empowers the City Council, an elected body directly accountable to the voters, to make the decision, not the developer.

For these same reasons, I oppose efforts to vest special permit granting authority in an appointed body, such as the Planning Board, or city staff members. As someone who has supported most of the development projects that have required a vote of the City Council, the issue for me is not whether to have development, but who should be making decisions about development for the city. I believe that an elected body—the City Council—should make the most important development decisions, which is why I want this responsibility to continue to reside with the Council.

### ***What parking requirements should we have?***

Some argue that we should have no parking requirements at all. Others say that we should have parking maximums to discourage automobile use and promote alternative forms of transportation in our village centers. I take a middle approach. While I agree that we should not impose parking requirements for small projects, I am not comfortable with having no parking requirements at all, especially in village centers with limited public parking available. Furthermore, I do not think we should arbitrarily limit the number of parking spaces a developer might choose to provide.

The Planning Department is seeking community feedback on these proposed changes. A summary of where we are in the process, along with ways to learn more about this work, can be found at: <https://www.newtonma.gov/government/planning/plans-policies-strategies/zoning-redesign>.

Questions or comments can be submitted directly to [zoningredesign@newtonma.gov](mailto:zoningredesign@newtonma.gov) and the City Council at

## Major Development Projects

The Washington Street corridor continues to be redeveloped at a rapid pace, with two more projects currently before the City Council's Land Use Committee: an elder housing project on Crafts Street next to the Whole Foods in Newtonville and an apartment building with a restaurant on the first floor at the Santander Bank building in West Newton Square. Both projects are being proposed by Mark Development (on the Crafts Street project it is partnering with SRG Senior Living). Three other major projects between Newtonville and West Newton are underway: Dunstan East in West Newton (a 40B apartment complex with 300 units along with some first floor retail space); an apartment complex at the site of the old Oakley Spa; and an affordable housing project at the West Newton Armory.

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### Two final notes:

- I was pleased to vote for the construction of NewCAL, our new senior center which will be located at the site of the current senior center in the heart of Newtonville. This new building will be a tremendous addition to our city.
- The Charles River Regional Chamber (our local chamber of commerce) has [released 33a video](#) and created a [website to remind us](#) about the great destinations and businesses located in Newton. Please help support our local businesses!

As always, I welcome your thoughts, questions, comments, and criticisms!

Thanks,

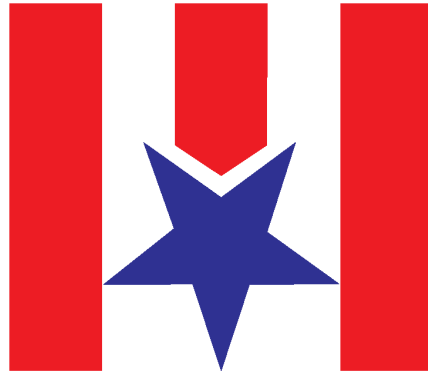
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