

# December Newsletter

From City Councilor Marc Laredo



Dear Friends,

This month, I want to update you on the zoning work in our village centers, which is the most important matter—and the one with the most long-term implications for our entire city-- before the City Council this term.

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## Thank You to Our City and School Employees

First, I want to offer a special “thank you” during this Thanksgiving season to our city and school employees who work hard daily on our behalf. These dedicated firefighters, police officers, teachers, DPW workers, and many others make our city run smoothly. They do their jobs well – responding to emergencies, keeping our community safe, educating our children, and removing snow from our streets and sidewalks – and we often take this work for granted. So, as we end the calendar year, let’s collectively thank them for their efforts.

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## Rezoning Our Village Centers

After many months of discussion, the Planning Department and its consultant have produced the first drafts of two critical documents connected to the effort to rezone our village centers:

- a proposed zoning code for our village centers and surrounding residential areas; and
- maps of the proposed zones.

## **Click the buttons bellow to see the draft code and proposed maps.**

**DRAFT CODE**

**PROPOSED MAPS**

*\*Start on page 13 for the proposed maps*

I am in favor of changing the zoning code for our village centers to make them more vibrant and economically healthier. Our zoning code should be easier to understand and navigate; eliminate unnecessary restrictions on property and business owners; and ensure that the village centers retain their “village” feel and are attractive gathering spaces for residents and visitors.

The first draft has elements that are good for our community. For example, it appropriately creates multiple tiers of permitted density in our village centers; encourages mixed-use development in the heart of the villages; and includes rules such as screening mechanical structures on rooftops and requiring parking behind buildings that will make future development more attractive.

But to make sure that we are actually enhancing our village centers and improving our community, we need to examine the draft code and proposed maps with a critical eye as we focus on the details of what is being proposed. It is the *actual language* of the proposed code that will govern what gets built and who oversees the process, and where the lines are drawn on the maps will dictate where that redevelopment takes place.

**A few points worth noting as you review these materials:**

### ***How tall should buildings be?***

- The proposed ordinance allows for three different building heights by right (and I have included an example of each one): Village Center 3 - five stories (on both sides of Walnut

Street in Newtonville); Village Center 2 – four stories (both sides of Watertown Street in Nonantum); and Village Center 1 - three stories (the residential area across from the Angier School in Waban). The top story in each instance must either be set back from the story below it or have a pitched roof. In some cases, an extra story could be added by special permit or, perhaps, by right if additional numbers of affordable units were included (this will be a topic of further discussion).

- There are areas of the city where five or six-story buildings are appropriate and a good way of providing more housing and better commercial space, especially if done through our special permit process (and I have voted in favor of them). But I am concerned about the ability to build, *by right*, projects that I view as less desirable, such as ones that together could create two rows of five-story buildings along both sides of Walnut Street in Newtonville or the transformation of established residential neighborhoods in Waban and Newton Corner into targeted areas of redevelopment.

### ***When will changes be implemented?***

- While it is unlikely to be a matter of months or even a few years before considerable redevelopment takes place, developers are sophisticated business people and know how to assemble multiple parcels of land in a village center to create a development. There is no reason to believe that change will not happen relatively quickly or that parcels will not be built out to the maximum extent possible when the work can be done as a matter of right (indeed, the entire purpose of this process is to encourage such development). So, as we consider the proposed changes, we must envision many of them taking place over the course of years, not decades.

***Guidelines are not rules.***

- The current draft contains construction guidelines that developers are encouraged to follow. While laudable, those guidelines should not affect our decisions regarding the zoning code, which is a set of rules that developers are required to follow. Saying that a developer *should* do something or is *encouraged* to follow certain standards is not sufficient – the developer is free to ignore the suggestions with no consequences for doing so. Simply stated, the guidelines do not indicate what will actually be built.

***When should special permits be required, and who should have oversight over larger projects?***

- Our zoning code requires that developers obtain special permits for many commercial or mixed-use projects and gives the special permitting authority to an elected body – the City Council. The current proposal raises that threshold significantly, with only projects on more than 30,000 square feet of land (nearly three-quarters of an acre) requiring a special permit. A new tier requiring much less review – entitled site plan review – is created for projects on 20,000-30,000 square feet of land, and the current draft transfers that authority to the Planning Board, a group appointed by the Mayor.
- These changes would be a mistake. While I am comfortable with some increased ability to build by-right projects, the current proposal goes too far. In deciding on a special permit application, the reviewing body needs to consider and balance the needs and desires of the developer with the concerns of those most immediately impacted by the project (the neighbors) and the interests of the city as a whole. The

City Council – as an elected body – is in a unique position to do that and has done so successfully, leading to projects that are much better than the original proposals. The site plan review process by an appointed body is not an adequate substitute for the needed review and scrutiny.

***Examine the maps carefully.***

- The proposed maps significantly expand what can be built not only in the center of our villages but in the residential areas surrounding them. Whether those areas are the right ones for further development, go too far, or do not go far enough will have to be reviewed on a street-by-street basis. These new maps will affect a significant number of residents throughout our city (both those who live in the rezoned areas and those who abut them) and deserve close attention. I will be listening carefully as we hear from our residents and business as to where the lines should be drawn.

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The rezoning of our village centers must be done carefully and thoughtfully in order to get the best possible result. We will live with the consequences—both positive and negative—indefinitely, so we must get this right. It is critical that our residents get involved in this process and weigh in on these proposals!

Thank you, and, as always, I welcome your thoughts, questions, comments, and criticisms!!

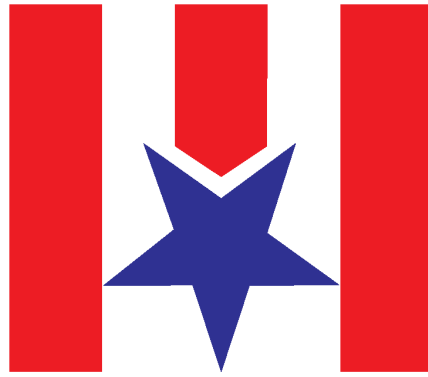
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