

Dear Friends,

Over the past several months, our community has been grappling with a number of critical issues, including the health and financial crises caused by COVID-19, how best to provide public safety, and difficult but necessary conversations and actions to address racism. At the same time, but with much less visibility, the City Council also has been debating a potential overhaul of Newton's zoning code that will have far-reaching, long-term implications for every resident of our city.

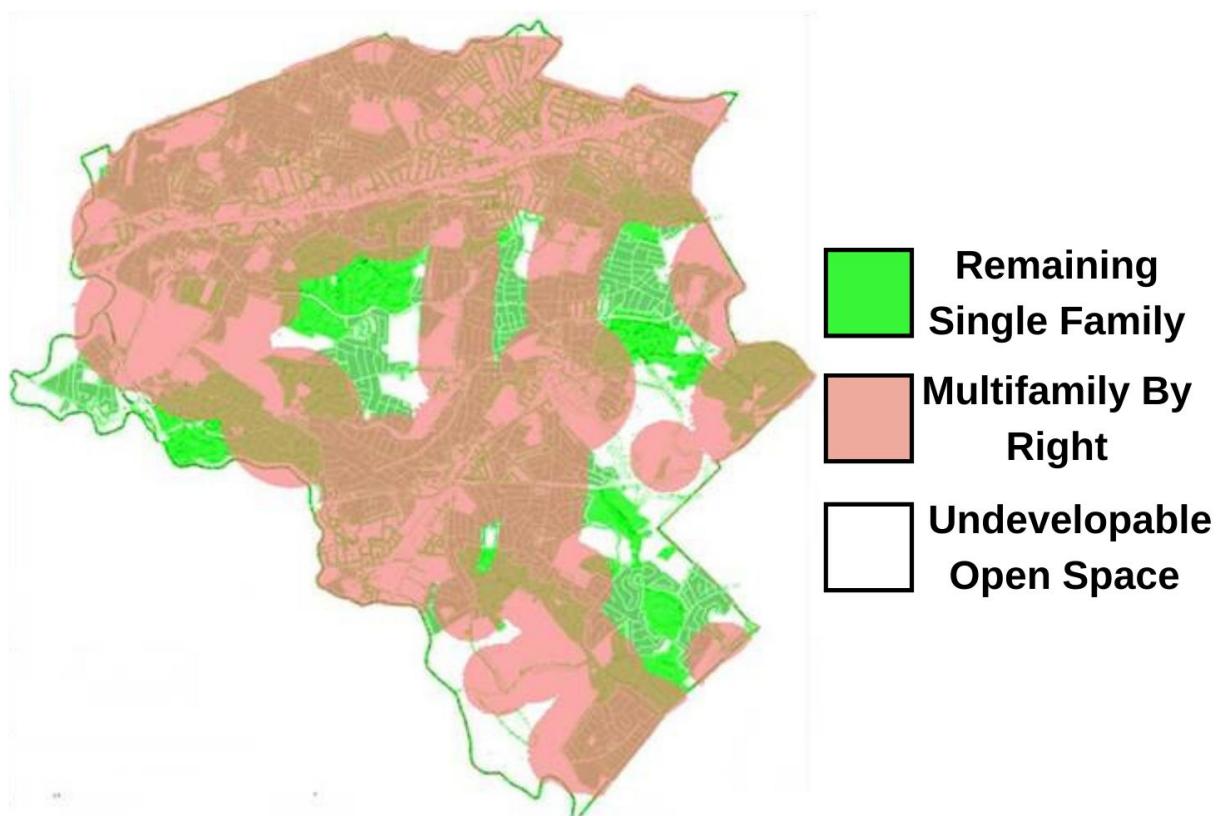
Recently, we began discussion of a new question – whether to allow multi-family housing “by right” in most, if not all, of the city.

“By right” means that a developer has the right to build something without any city approvals other than ordinary construction permits. If the zoning code is changed to allow multi-family housing “by right”, that means that neighborhoods and lots that are currently zoned “single family” can have multi-family dwellings built by right where today only single family dwellings are allowed by right. The City Council has not yet begun discussing whether multi-family units will be limited to two, three or four-family units or some other number, or whether no restrictions at all will be put in place. These discussions about whether to change to “by right” multi-family housing in the city and the limitations, if any, on what that allows, will be taking place over the next several months in the Zoning and Planning Committee of the City Council with a decision of the Committee expected this fall. The full City Council is not expected to vote on the full proposed Zoning Code, including this proposed change if it is adopted by the Zoning and Planning Committee, until the fall of 2021.

During our prior public presentations of zoning change, including the Washington Street vision plan and the initial draft of a proposed zoning code in 2018, Newton’s Planning Department’s stated objective was to increase density of housing in and near our village centers but otherwise preserve the current housing patterns in our city. However, the Planning Department has now raised the following question to the City Council: should Newton eliminate single-family zoning within 0.5 miles (it also asked about 0.25 miles) of a Green Line station, Commuter Rail station or an express bus stop (express buses pick up passengers in Newton and take the Massachusetts Turnpike into downtown Boston) and within 0.25 miles of a MBTA bus stop (there are a number of non-express MBTA bus routes that run through Newton)?

Today, over seventy percent (70%) of the residential lots in Newton are in single family only zones. Set forth below is a map of Newton, with the area colored pink to show the parts of Newton that would have multi-family housing allowable “by right”. Areas colored green are areas of the city that would be single family only housing under the proposed code. Areas in

white are non-housing areas outside of the “by right” multi-family housing zone such as parks, conservation land, golf courses, schools, and commercial areas (for ease of viewing, those areas are not delineated in the multi-family “by right” zone). You can see that most of the City - over eighty percent (80%) of our housing lots - would become multi-family “by right”, a very significant change from our current rules.



Advocates argue that it will provide greater diversity of our housing stock, make it easier to build in our city, and is climate-friendly because smaller homes use less energy, and living near transit makes it easier to travel or commute without a car. Opponents argue that it is designed to benefit developers, will encourage teardowns and gentrification, will not add to our affordable housing stock, and will result in negative changes to our neighborhoods.

While I have long-supported efforts to diversify our housing stock and add appropriate development in our village centers, I do not believe that we should make a major departure from our current zoning code and the previously stated goals of our zoning review efforts without considerable thought and analysis and significant input from our entire community. I am especially concerned that we are doing this work while our collective time and energy is focused elsewhere and we are unable to meet in person. Therefore, I need to hear from you – the people I work for – about what you think of this proposal.

I look forward to your thoughts, questions, comments and criticisms!

Thanks,

Marc