

September Newsletter

From City Councilor Marc Laredo



Happy fall and, for those of you with school-age children, I hope that the school year is off to a good start (this is the first year since 1995 that we do not have a child in the Newton Public Schools, and I miss the fall activities and back to school nights!).

I want to update you on the City Council’s rezoning work – the most significant issue before us. (In a separate newsletter later this month I will provide my recommendations for contested City Council races in November).

How We Got Here

For years, the City Council has been trying to re-write our entire zoning code. After the initial effort to rezone the city’s residential neighborhoods was “paused” in the face of residents’ concerns about the direction it was taking, the Planning Department and the leadership of the Zoning and Planning Committee turned to the current effort to rezone our village centers by creating “Village Center Overlay Districts” in and around our village centers, with the rest of the city to be rezoned thereafter.

While the village center rezoning effort was underway, the state passed the MBTA Communities Act, which requires Newton to rezone portions of the city to allow for the construction of at least 8,330 housing units by right (this does not mean that 8,330 units will be constructed or that it will happen immediately, but does mean that the city needs to change its zoning laws to allow that to happen).

The Planning Department and the leadership of the Zoning and Planning Committee then combined the required MBTA Communities Act zones into the proposed Village Center Overlay Districts plan, with the City Council scheduled to vote on this entire package later this year.

What Is Being Proposed

The current proposal for the Village Center Overlay Districts allows for the construction of over 9,000 units in the MBTA Communities Act zones and another approximately 6,000 units elsewhere in the Village Center Overlay Districts, **meaning that the required capacity of up to 8,330 units under the MBTA Communities Act will be nearly doubled to around 15,000 units.** To be clear – this is not necessarily how many additional units will be built. But assuming that only half of the potential units get built over the next twenty years, this still means another 7,500 new units in the Village Center Overlay Districts in addition to the 3,000 new units already approved or in the pipeline elsewhere in the city in places like Northland and Riverside (and not including other major projects that will likely be approved and built during this period). In a city of 33,000 housing units, that is a significant amount of additional development.

Given this significant proposed expansion – nearly double the potential capacity required under state law - we should be answering some basic questions before we vote on this proposal:

- What is the ideal population size for our city in the coming years? At the very least, what is the ideal range of population that we should target?

- How many additional housing units do we need to build to accommodate the population growth we are ideally targeting?
- What are our plans for providing additional classrooms and/or schools, parking facilities, and other infrastructure or city services for the significant population increases (so we avoid situations like having two middle schools (Oak Hill and Brown) directly across the street from one another)? It is critical that we seriously plan for the additional services needed and not simply “pretend” that the impact will be minimal. We have the capacity to plan for growth, but we must honestly assess the additional services that need to be provided.
- What percentage of these additional units should be affordable for low-income individuals and families?
- How many housing units will likely be built in the MBTA Communities zones?
- How many housing units will likely be built in the other portions of the Village Center Overlay Districts?
- How many additional housing units will likely be built outside of the Village Center Overlay Districts (especially along corridors such as Washington Street and California Street which are the next areas we intend to rezone)?

Unfortunately, despite repeated requests to the Planning Department, we have not received answers to any of these questions other than statements like

- We do not have any ideal population size;
- We do not know how many housing units we want to build;
- We cannot estimate how many units will be built in the Village Center Overlay Districts that are not included within the MBTA Communities Act zones (while claiming that using the state’s MBTA Communities Act methodology is not helpful because it is not accurate);
- We cannot estimate what will be built elsewhere in the city;
- Any changes will be gradual and over many years; and

- We will have plenty of time in the future to deal with infrastructure and city services issues.

What Should We Do

We should – and must – create our MBTA Communities Act zones, which, in turn, is likely to result in the construction of a considerable amount of additional housing in Newton. The proposed rules and maps for the MBTA Communities Act zones are reasonable drafts and I expect the final version will have broad support from members of the City Council and our residents. But until we get answers to the basic questions that many of us have been asking, we should not combine the MBTA Communities Act zones with the Village Center Overlay Districts.

We still have time to compromise by taking measures that will unite our community rather than create the deep divisions that this current proposal has generated: approve the MBTA Communities zones; get serious answers to the fundamental questions about future growth in our city; actively listen to our residents in all of our neighborhoods and address their concerns rather than trying to “educate” them; and only then make **data-driven decisions** as to how to proceed with our other rezoning efforts.

I support growth in our city, and have voted to approve nearly all of the development projects and zoning changes—large and small—that have come before the City Council. But we should not be moving forward in a manner that can significantly enlarge our city’s population without a thoughtful conversation driven by answers to the questions above. I remain ready and willing to approve additional zoning changes beyond what is required by state law, but we must do this the right way.

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

Marc

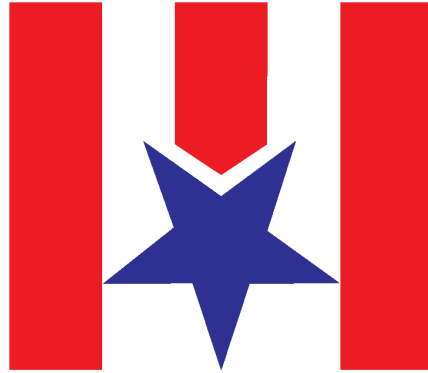
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