

February 4, 2021

Hon. Ruthanne Fuller  
Office of the Mayor  
Newton City Hall

Re: A “NewVision” for Zoning Redesign

Dear Mayor Fuller:

As a candidate for mayor in 2017, you advanced excellent ideas for creating a popular, democratic planning process for Newton. Then, you promised to model Newton’s planning and zoning process on Somerville’s. (See: [https://youtu.be/TDDv\\_apT0H4](https://youtu.be/TDDv_apT0H4) from April 30, 2017 Neighbors for a Better Newtonville’s candidates’ forum.) Holding up a copy of “SomervilleVision,” Somerville’s 20-year plan for emphasis, you explained that its 3-year process was **“produced by the community, for the community... directed by a steering committee of 60 Somerville residents, advocates, elected officials, and business-people.... It was not led by the Planning Department ....”** [Emphasis added.] You also noted that, in contrast to the citizen-led Somerville public process, “neither the Austin Street nor the Orr Block planning efforts reached sufficient members of the public, or offered genuine, in-depth input and dialogue.”

Unfortunately, the current Zoning Redesign process appears to be following a very different path. Rather than being citizen-led, it has been largely driven by members of the Zoning and Planning Committee and by the Planning and Development Department. And, it has fallen far short of engaging as much of the public as the Washington Street visioning process did, even though that process focused on a single commercial corridor. For instance, the Principle Group and Newtonville Area Council surveys for envisioning Washington Street attracted ~ 900 and 2,529 respondents, respectively. On the other hand, only ~ 500 people participated in the December 2020 community engagement events -- or just six-tenths of one percent of the City’s population, whereas as a candidate you had promised that “as Mayor, genuine citizen involvement would be a top priority.”

Moreover, in the December 2020 public engagement sessions, Newton residents voiced intense criticism over several key aspects of the ZAP/Planning Department proposals, especially:

- The prospect that Zoning Redesign produce a new code that would allow multi-family housing to be built “by right” anywhere in Newton;
- The assumption that Newton needs to revolutionize its zoning, rather than modifying specific aspects of the current zoning code;
- The difficulty of focusing on Zoning Redesign amid the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially with the uncertainties the pandemic is creating for the future;
- Concerns that the Zoning Redesign process has not provided before-and-after comparisons and examples of how similar proposals have worked in cities like Newton, thus failing to reassure residents that those proposals would be better than our current zoning code, or an incrementally improved version of it.

Hon. Ruthanne Fuller  
Office of the Mayor  
Re: A "NewVision" for Zoning Redesign  
[INSERT DATE]  
Page 2

Confronting such division and lack of consensus, ZAP and the Planning Department appear to have made a strategic, albeit temporary, retreat, shelving Zoning Redesign's most controversial and divisive proposals and its aggressive timeline, at least until the City Council's next term.

Since the City's Zoning Redesign planning process will set the course for the City's long-term future, it should not move forward before the City has established a new, official, long-term plan which Zoning Redesign can then help implement. Seemingly, the Comprehensive Plan had set that course a dozen years ago. However, in "updating" that process, more sweeping goals, (especially regarding environmental sustainability and the creation of more affordable and attainable housing) have been incorporated into it, but without involving the public in a debate over whether this sort of radical re-zoning is essential to attaining these goals. Nor has ZAP or the City Council openly debated whether it might be preferable to pursue those goals by other means, while incrementally reforming our current zoning. Allowing ZAP and Planning to propose replacing the City's zoning code before there is a consensus document on the means and ends to be pursued is a classic case of "putting the horse before the cart."

For these reasons, we urge you to keep faith with and fulfill the far-sighted and excellent 2017 campaign promise you made to voters by:

- Pausing the current ZAP/Planning Department Zoning Redesign effort;
- Organizing a committee with a broad cross-section of residents, advocates, elected officials, and business-people from all neighborhoods; and
- Charging that committee to lead a process to obtain extensive community input and develop a consensus-based "NewVision" -- a twenty-year plan for Newton, which would amend the Comprehensive Plan, with agreed-upon, specific goals and objectives that Zoning Redesign can then implement.

Respectfully submitted,

Newtonville Area Council