

City of
Newton



**Demolition Review
&
Post World War II Housing
Study**

-Final Report -

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Executive Summary

This report concludes a six-month study of Newton's demolition delay ordinance and its post-WWII housing stock, which was supported with a grant from the Massachusetts Historical Commission. Three main conclusions have been drawn from this investigation:

- The demolition delay ordinance is a tool that needs to be strengthened and supported by complementary regulations to be fully effective.
- There are neighborhoods made up of post-WWII housing, as well as other, earlier, 20th - century housing that are not receiving the protection of which they are worthy.
- Greater resources need to be made available for administration of the demolition delay ordinance in particular and historic preservation in general if the community is to benefit.

If there was any concern about the increasing number of dwelling units coming in for demolition review due to the post-WWII housing boom, it should be noted that all evidence points to the current housing market and boom economy (at least through the end of 2000) being responsible for the increase in permit applications. Indeed, demolition review records indicate that demolition of garages and carriage houses are responsible for about half of the demolition review activity by the Newton Historical Commission (NHC). Thus no change from the current 50-year threshold is warranted; rather, the focus needs to shift to how to ensure that the demolition delay ordinance can be made more effective in service of the community's welfare.

Waivers of the one-year delay greatly outweigh the number of buildings found "Preferable Preserved." To some extent this is due to requests for partial demolitions, that often have the effect of improving properties. Nonetheless, the NHC has not sent a clear and consistent message that demolition of historic structures will not be approved, and this may be responsible in some measure for the flood of demolition applications. On the other hand, the NHC is hamstrung by its lack of power to conduct meaningful design review of infill buildings without using the waiver as an enticement to property owners and developers to modify their plans. Even more importantly, the lack of financial incentives to encourage alternatives to demolition is another reason the delay is less effective than in neighboring communities.

Several strategies are therefore suggested to address the above concerns:

1. Initiate new survey efforts that will identify all individual and *groups* of buildings meeting the national, state and local criteria for designation.
2. Designate more individual structures and districts.
3. Amend the demolition delay ordinance to limit the conditions under which a waiver is granted, and provide mitigation for the impacts of demolition.
4. Draft new regulatory tools that will provide the NHC with the means of dealing with harmonious infill development without regard to the one-year time limit on demolitions.
5. Review all land use and housing policies and regulations to increase their reinforcement of each other, with a particular focus on *neighborhood* preservation.

6. Conduct a public education and awareness campaign that will highlight acceptable alternatives to demolition, especially as applies to mid-20th century houses.
7. Increase the efficacy of the Newton Historical Commission so it can better fulfill its role as protector of the city's historic resources.
8. Develop financial incentives to offer to property owners to retain and rehabilitate their properties rather than demolish them.

A number of specific actions are recommended for each of these strategies in Chapter IV.