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Barney S. Heath
Director

MEMORANDUM

DATE: April 19, 2017

TO: Councilor Ted Hess-Mahan, Chairman
Members of the Zoning and Planning Committee

FROM: Barney Heath, Director, Department of Planning and Development
James Freas, Deputy Director

RE: Zoning Redesign

CC: City Council
Planning and Development Board
Donnalyn Kahn, City Solicitor
John Lojek, ISD Commissioner

As the Zoning ReDesign project moves from the data gathering and analysis phase of the Pattern Book to developing zoning ordinance language, it is essential that our zoning development team have a clear picture of the direction the community wishes to take the development of the City. That sense of direction for this project will come from two primary sources: first, adopted plans and policies, especially the 2007 Comprehensive Plan and second, direct input from community members, City Councilors, and other community leaders. Ultimately, the City Council, as the elected representatives of the community, will have the final say in the zoning ordinance that is adopted. Input will be collected in two waves; early on, before significant ordinance drafting and later, when draft language is available and people respond to what is proposed.

Topic Specific Tracks

As was shown during Sasaki's presentation at the last ZAP meeting, we are conceptually breaking the zoning ordinance up into three tracks; Track 1 are the zoning districts and the associated dimensional and use regulations, Track 2 includes the development standards such as parking requirements and stormwater management, and Track 3 are the development

review procedures. For each of these tracks staff will be providing documentation of the proposed approach for comment and review before we begin drafting the ordinance.

Newton Comprehensive Plan (2007)

The 2007 Newton Comprehensive Plan remains the primary guiding policy document for planning work in the City. This document was the product of well researched data and analysis as well as careful consideration of the City's past, present, and future. While there have certainly been changes in the City and our overall regional context in the time since this work was done, much of the fundamentals of this work remain true.

The vision the plan presented is relatively modest. The plan, in short, recognizes that much is good about the City as it exists today, and the challenge for the City will be in addressing various issues as they are presented without disturbing those positive attributes of the City. The plan surfaces issues such as rising inequality across the region and lack of affordability in Newton housing leading to declining economic diversity; an issue that has only been exacerbated over the last ten years. The plan notes that addressing traffic congestion, a perennial issue in all successful cities, can only be addressed through increasing mobility options, including through directing new development to transit oriented locations; again this issue remains true today.

An important theme of the Comprehensive Plan is the idea of maintaining a quality sense of place and the value of the City as a residential city, a place to live above all else. The prescription then is for moderate, context sensitive growth. The proposed context-based zoning ordinance is well suited to this objective.

Community Engagement Program

As in any planning project, the Planning Department relies on many different sources of data and ideas as a new plan, policy, or regulation is developed. Data collection and analysis plays a significant role, as does an understanding of best practices and current research in the field. The Department uses a robust community engagement process as another primary source for data, ideas, and insights. Community input adds qualitative depth to quantitative data, to identify community based ideas for solutions, and to gain insights into how best practices and research derived from other places and academic sources will apply in the unique environment of Newton's community and public processes. Different approaches to community engagement are used by staff so that we can more readily reach a broad cross section of the community and engage with people in ways that are comfortable for them. For example, events are held in various locations across the community, scheduled at different times of the day and week, and mobile engagement strategies are used to help reach more people, instead of requesting community members to conform to the City's schedule. No single community engagement method should be considered dominant; each one contributes to the overall picture.

Public Meeting Schedule

Public meetings are a traditional, and essential, part of our community engagement program. So far there have been two public meetings in support of the Pattern Book work. A third meeting is scheduled for May 11 to mark the transition to the ordinance drafting side of this project. Subsequent public meetings will be held in the summer and fall of 2017.

ZAP & Planning Board Meetings

The Zoning and Planning Committee and Planning Board are both tasked with providing a recommendation to the City Council relative to the adoption of the new Zoning Ordinance. The Planning Department will continue to provide regular updates and discussions with these two committees, preferably in joint meetings when possible.

Zoning ReDesign Office Hours

Beginning May 3rd the Planning Department will host Zoning ReDesign Office Hours on the same night the “3Ps” City Council Committees meet – the Wednesdays following the 1st and 3rd Mondays of the month from 5 to 7 PM. This meeting time is targeted to City Councilors as well as the public and all are encouraged to drop in and engage with staff on particular zoning related topics they might be interested in discussing. The first Zoning ReDesign Office Hours would be May 3 in the new conference room right off the rotunda at the front door of City Hall.

Ideas and Insights Meetings

Previously referred to as “focus groups”, project staff plan to re-engage with groups who are specialists in some aspect or issue that touches on zoning/land use regulation in the City. Staff will re-engage with these groups to discuss “Ideas and Insights” for improving Newton’s zoning ordinance and later, to review the draft ordinance and understand the potential advantages and disadvantages of what is proposed. These meetings will effectively test proposed rules and potential ways they may be applied so that we can make changes as necessary. To date, staff has convened groups representing a range of issues such as environmental and green design, economic development, housing, building design, and the arts.

Online Input

The online engagement program is an important part of our effort to diversify how we engage people in this project and reach out to people where they are. This component will continue to evolve as the project proceeds, but can always be found at www.courbanize.com/newtonzoning

Draft Zoning Ordinance Road Show

Newton’s consultant team is tasked with delivering a draft ordinance by October 2017. That draft represents the beginning of an intense review process by both the public and the City Council. The draft will not be formally submitted to the City Council until 2018. During the fall and winter, staff will conduct a Draft Zoning Ordinance “Road Show” bringing the document to community meetings across the City to discuss and receive feedback on the proposed rules. Staff anticipates significant changes may be made to the draft during this time period as the community tests the ideas presented.