



To: Zoning and Planning Committee
Planning Department

From: Engine 6 Zoning Redesign Group (K. Hobson, A. Ingerson, J. Jacobson, L. Monahan, K. Pillsbury, S. Roche, D.A. Sweet, J. Walter)

Date: April 7, 2020

Re: Review of Draft New Zoning Ordinance

We see Zoning Redesign as a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reshape Newton into a 21st-century city, capable of responding effectively to the human and natural challenges facing cities everywhere. The two biggest challenges we face right now are a [chronic and growing shortage of homes](#), and climate change.

Recent City policy efforts—the Housing Strategy, the Transportation Strategy, the “visions” for Needham Street and Washington Street, the Climate Action Plan—support this view. These twin challenges highlight major gaps and inequities in our current zoning map, and should be our explicit priorities for the new ordinance, inscribed in the code.

We’ve been following the 2020 ZAP discussions around Zoning Redesign, and have appreciated the thoughtfulness and attention to detail of both City Councilors and Planning staff. At the same time, we worry the City’s highest priorities are getting lost in deliberations over lesser concerns: cleaning up the non-conformities in our current ordinance, deterring speculative tear-downs, preserving neighborhood character.

We believe the overriding goals of Zoning Redesign should be:

1. Enabling the creation of many more multifamily and affordable homes, in a wide range of types and sizes—equitably, across the city
2. Ensuring that new development supports the City’s climate-action goal of carbon neutrality by 2050

We should be asking questions like these: Do the new zoning districts and building forms facilitate abundant production of the different kinds of homes we need? Does the new map help reduce dependence on driving?

If we keep our eyes on these higher-order goals, everything else should fall into place. We can increase conformity, decrease tear-downs, make the code simpler to follow, and encourage more “contextual” change—all in the service of increasing and diversifying our housing supply without further degrading the environment.

We urge Planning staff to reconnect their guidance to our two biggest challenges. We urge the Zoning and Planning Committee to refocus their review on these priorities. We believe this will clarify for everyone—the rest of the Council and greater Newton—why the ordinance needs to be redesigned, not just tweaked. Everyone will see that Zoning Redesign is in our collective best interests, and critical to the future of our community.