

EXCELLENCE IN PLACE-MAKING

“If places are indeed a fundamental aspect of man’s existence in the world, and if they are sources of security and identity for individuals and for groups of people, then it is important that the means of experiencing, creating and maintaining significant places are not lost ... without such knowledge it will not be possible to create and preserve the places that are the significant contexts of our lives¹”

Newton has a rich array of varied and wonderful places. Some of them are dominantly natural, for example:

- Hemlock Gorge;
- The Charles River’s “lakes district” near Norumbega Park.

Some are compactly developed for a diversity of uses:

- Newton Highlands village center;
- Nonantum at Adams and Watertown Streets.

Some are dominantly single-use, compact or not:

- Wells Avenue office park;
- Oak Hill Park;
- The Chestnut Hill residential area.

Some are linear rather than nodal, but still are coherent as “places:”

- Commonwealth Avenue;
- The Sudbury Aqueduct;
- The Nahanton corridor.

In each of these and in many other areas of the City there is a clear and distinct sense of place. What distinguishes *good* places involves many elements. In almost every case both public and private actions were involved in their creation. Both natural and man-made components are critical, as are both physical form and human activity, all mutually interdependent and supportive to at least some degree. Those *good* places illustrate the excellence in place-making that has gone on at many (but not all) places in this City over many decades. This *Plan* seeks to assure that such excellence will continue to characterize change as it takes place in the future. “Place excellence” is easier to describe than to prescribe, but if we can’t make clear in advance the kind of place excellence that we seek then we aren’t likely to attain or even maintain it.

The City actions which are involved in place-making include our investments in buildings, open space, streets, and utilities, and the standards and procedures through which we guide the design of our community facilities. Critical City actions also include how we regulate private development, most prominently through zoning and historic districts, less obviously but just as importantly through myriad other regulatory imperatives. We also powerfully influence place-

¹ Ralph, Edward, *Place and Placelessness*, London: Pion Limited, 1976, p.6., cited in Rebecca Mattson, *Sense-of-Place Ideals in Small Town Planning*, MIT MCP thesis, 1992.

making outcomes through our non-codified and often misunderstood understanding of and advocacy for what will be publicly supported or opposed. Nowhere, however, has guidance been developed to connect all of those public actions – investment, regulation, and persuasion – with our intentions for the kind of places we want, nor have we a clear process for bringing together all of those strands of place-making into a coherent strategy for implementing our intent. That is one of the things that this comprehensive planning process is centrally about.

Beyond building agreement on a comprehensive plan, four steps can importantly contribute to guiding place-making in the City.

1. DOCUMENTING A CLEAR VISION. We need to document and make clear and vivid what we seek as a City with regard to place-making, going beyond what is possible in any single plan at any single point in time. The elements of excellence, except in the most abstract sense, aren't going to be the same for Hemlock Gorge and for nearby Newton Upper Falls, and they aren't going to be the same for energy management and for land use management, although in that case they will have a great deal in common. All of those perspectives can be complementary in adding up to the City and places that we want. We need many plans, some for places, prepared by people from those places mindfully integrating across topical interests, and some for topics, prepared by people well-versed in the topical area involved but mindful of the value of place diversity.

Some of the necessary plans and documentation exist, such as the 2003-07 *Recreation and Open Space Plan*. Others, such as well-documented architectural design guidance, don't. Our need is not only to make sure that we are effectively communicating what we want for all of the relevant topics in all of the places, but also to make sure that a way is in place for continually updating that vision as our current actions mature into relevant history. The *Planning with & for History* element forcefully makes the case for such efforts, both reflective of the past and prescriptive about the future, both City-wide and place-centered.

This task is made more demanding at the many key locations where the “place” of greatest coherence includes elements in another community. In our initial listing of place examples, Hemlock Gorge, the Lakes portion of the Charles, Chestnut Hill, Commonwealth Avenue, and the Sudbury Aqueduct all include areas within other municipalities, and there are many more such shared places. We need to develop ways of working efficiently and effectively with our neighboring communities.

2. CONNECTING PUBLIC INVESTMENT TO THAT VISION. We need to have a process for connecting our shared vision to the investments that the City makes in the infrastructure which is a key part of all of our places. Some relatively modest changes in the present system for consideration and decision-making about public facility investments are outlined in the FACILITIES AND SERVICES ELEMENT of this *Plan*. It calls for making consistency with City-adopted plans an important consideration in capital funding prioritization. The existence of a comprehensive plan approved by both the Mayor and the Board of Aldermen, coupled with those system changes, would help assure that there is a well-considered connection between place-making intent and the City's facility

expenditures, not only in project-by-project decision-making, but also in the topical plans and policies which shape spending proposals. For example, existing City materials regarding the standards which should apply to various street classifications still reflect an earlier context and understanding than currently exists, although the classifications have recently been modernized. As a result those standards have little ability to guide current investments and gain concurrence on their design. The refinement of those materials in the ways discussed in developing this *Plan* and outlined in the TRANSPORTATION AND MOBILITY ELEMENT can importantly contribute to making transportation change a powerful tool for building place excellence. The same is true in many other topical areas.

3. CONNECTING REGULATION TO THAT VISION. There is no structure in place to assure that our regulatory actions are similarly given consistent guidance. The Board of Aldermen has a powerful role, being that body which creates much of the regulatory code which shapes City decisions and also being the permit granting authority for many of the most important actions, such as zoning's special permits. However, a great deal of the City's regulatory decision-making goes on outside of that body's direct control. As outlined in an early CPAC memo², the Historical Commission reviews and acts on a large and growing share of building alteration or construction proposals in the City. Within their areas of jurisdiction, the City's four historic district commissions act on virtually all such proposals. The Zoning Board of Appeals is increasingly the venue of choice for those seeking to do residential development, acting through either variances or comprehensive permits under Chapter 40B, rather than Newton's adopted zoning rules. The Conservation Commission, Housing Partnership, DPW, Fire Department, and many others have potent impact on development outcomes through their regulatory actions under rules often framed at the State level but subject to much local interpretation.

The regulatory proposals contained in the elements of this *Plan*, further developed in the place-centered planning that is intended to follow it, can provide the means of assuring that the variety of regulatory efforts which the City makes will be more fully supportive of the Citywide and place outcomes being sought.

4. THINKING AND ACTING FROM A COMPREHENSIVE PERSPECTIVE. Many residents supported adoption of the Community Preservation Act (CPA) in major part in the belief that it would lead to partnerships across the four topical areas it supports – open space, preservation, housing, and recreation – and that belief has been rewarded. Leaders in those topical areas forged new ties in the process of advocating adoption. An important share of the proposals supported under CPA truly reflect multiple interests, most visibly at Kessler Woods (open space and housing), but also at the Forte property at Webster Park (open space, recreation, and housing) and Linden Green on Elliot Street (preservation and housing). We are getting past “we/they” divisions between public and private and between topical interests within the public realm, and can begin to make partnerships a usual way of getting to excellent outcomes, not only when CPA funds are involved, but more generally.

² CPAC, “Development Review Procedural Inventory,” September 23, 2002.

5. PROVIDING AN EXCELLENT SYSTEM FOR PROJECT REVIEW. The excellence we seek in our places should be matched by the excellence of our system for project review, chiefly but not exclusively dealing with public review of private development. The remainder of this chapter addresses what that excellence might entail, summarized as:

- Clarity About What The Community Wants;
- Reconciling Individuality and Place;
- Sound Process Mechanics.

CLARITY ABOUT WHAT THE COMMUNITY WANTS

- **Guiding intentions and goals.** We should provide a clear statement of intentions and goals both for the City as a whole and, with careful relationship to those citywide statements, for each of our neighborhoods, village centers, and other places so that proposals and actions can be measured against them. The process of articulating those statements should critically involve those who live, work, or have other stakes in those places. That can result in guidance for which they feel real proprietorship and responsibility, not something imposed on them (although ultimately subject to City-level approval or adoption, assuring consistency with City-wide planning). The process of developing that kind of guidance can be an important element in building a sense of community relating to those places. That spirit of responsibility can help to energize supportive community response when a proposal for change is happily consistent with the planning that has gone on, as well as helping to moderate the “not in my back yard” syndrome.

A process of neighborhood or other place-centered planning is anticipated as the follow-through to this *Comprehensive Plan*. Such planning would be a good process through which to develop guidance materials for those places, and in the future might well serve as the usual basis for action on such matters as establishment of historic districts, adoption of on-street parking regulations, or investments in neighborhood park improvements³. It would provide a means of informing those choices through a broad-based dialogue that is part of a comprehensive effort to create and protect particular places. Just as importantly, such a process should be the means through which over the course of time the impacts of those initial plans and guidance are reflectively evaluated for how well they have been working, and are revised as needed in light of that evaluation.

- **Clear Rules.** Intentions and goals should be reflected in zoning and other development regulations and in guidance for public investments. That guidance should be clear, readable and unambiguous in both letter and intent. Periodically it should be thoughtfully evaluated and revised as discussed earlier. Development standards should be predictable and understandable. If we know what we want, we should let those who are planning development know what that is⁴. The guidance documents by their design and distribution

³ One of the groups developing alternative plans for Newton Centre went so far as to advocate (at a September 9, 2006 workshop) that 10% of the annual capital budget for certain improvements should be reserved for neighborhood-selected investments.

⁴ Exactly as stated at page 18 of *A Framework for Newton's Planning*, April, 2001.

should be easily accessible not only to officials but also to both citizens and prospective developers.

- **Helpful interpretation.** We should have procedures and supportive written materials that provide non-confrontational interpretation of intent for both those making proposals and those affected by them, especially in the inevitable cases that have unusual aspects of context or design.

RECONCILING INDIVIDUALITY AND PLACE

- **Excellence in both process and outcomes.** The excellence that is sought in development should be matched with excellence in the conduct and content of review. The process should facilitate achieving the spirit of working together to build better places. When well designed, such process makes efficient use of both applicant and City resources. Achieving this level of excellence in process requires skilled professionals including municipal staff, board members, and an applicant's design/consultant team. Where internal expertise is required but not available, outside consultants should be utilized to provide the best possible resources for the review process. The City is moving in this direction: our intention is to do more.
- **Sensitivity to place and openness to creativity.** Both rules and practices should assure that the special characteristics of locations are respected in development without stifling creativity and individual choice. At the very least, new development should not damage the valued qualities of that which exists in the vicinity. Guidance materials and practices must protect these special characteristics while also respecting both the rights of property owners and the diversity of the community.
- **Structured opportunities for exchange.** The breadth and timing of opportunities for public voice should be related to the scale of a proposal's impact, enabling early and adequate input without overburdening either public agency resources or public attentiveness. It should be recognized that projects of major impact require a corresponding level of review, where minor projects may not require the same process. Communication with the public should be clear, open, encouraged, and well-informed. For the project review process to be well-informed, it needs to involve a public whose understanding of what the community wants has been built through its involvement with earlier planning and community education.

SOUND PROCESS MECHANICS

- **A clear decision process map.** Procedures and applicability of regulations should be clearly documented and relevant materials should be easily available. Steps in this direction have recently been accomplished. More remains to be done.
- **Early predictability and reasonable timeframes.** Both those seeking to build or change uses and affected community interests are best served by learning early in the process what is or is not going to be allowed, rather than experiencing lengthy procedures which come to much the same conclusions. Again, recent efforts have made improvements.

IMPLEMENTING THE VISION

The following are among the potential actions for improving Newton's ability to guide change towards greater excellence in place-making, and through that towards building a stronger sense of community in the City and in those places.

- **Clarify guidance appropriate for the various place types across Newton**, such as for neighborhoods, village centers, scenic road corridors, or uniformly single-family residential areas, to provide a City-wide framework for more local guidance to particularize for individual places. That guidance should be vividly communicated using photos, drawings, and diagrams in documents conveying to the public, to those proposing development, and to City agencies and officials what excellent building in Newton entails, using non-regulatory but concrete terms.
- **Support the place-centered planning efforts alluded to above and in a number of this Plan's elements.** Newton Centre, given the planning studies already under way there, might well be the first to begin such efforts, but others need not await the conclusion of that process, but could parallel it, even if a few months behind. At the City level decisions need to be made about how best to organize and provide technical support to those area efforts, the basis for review and approval of their outcomes, and the relationship between those approved outcomes and City implementation activities within the areas covered.
- **Enhance Zoning's special permit criteria.** Most developments larger than a single-family house (and some of those) require Aldermanic approval of one or more special permits under Section 30-24 of the Zoning Ordinance based on the criteria in that section. Well-crafted criteria, and easier access to information about previous projects as models or examples, could greatly help designers anticipate what the City is qualitatively seeking, and could produce more predictable decisions, more quickly.

Enhance Zoning's site plan review criteria. The site plan review criteria (Section 30-23 of the Zoning Ordinance) deal not with whether a proposal is or is not allowed at a given location, but rather with how it must be designed. Its seven listed criteria are only a little more concrete than those for special permits (although the procedures and required submittals are spelled out in great detail).

- **Add Zoning performance standards.** Either as a part of the above options or independently of them explicit performance standards to be met by all large-scale development should be developed, making measurable and testable what is required regarding topics of concern. Such guidance now exists for some topics: lighting, noise, and tree removal. Even more powerful might be performance rules regarding such diverse topics as land use and traffic, as discussed in the *Transportation and Mobility* element, or landscaping and screening beyond the parking lot-related rules now included in zoning. Such rules can replace lengthy dialogue with a technical basis for determining if certain aspects of a proposal really are "excellent," as defined by this City.

KNOWING WHEN WE ARE SUCCEEDING

In the course of our considerations on this topic, some have suggested that a key to improving the excellence of place-making in Newton would be to wholly replace the Zoning Ordinance with an entirely new one⁵. Others stop short of that, but suggest changes in the role of the Board of Aldermen in acting under Zoning on specific development proposals, reserving involvement of that Board only for the most consequential level of individual project decisions, if any. Making the entire City an historic district has been suggested⁶, as has establishing a city-level design review board with powers much like those of an historic district commission, perhaps having hegemony everywhere that there is no historic district.

The steps outlined in this chapter would be valuable whether or not major changes such as those in the paragraph above were to occur. Until having given the more modest steps outlined here a chance to demonstrate how well they might achieve what is sought, more aggressive actions will lack a sufficient basis for serious consideration.

At some later point, then, how will the City know if more change is necessary? If, following approval of this *Plan*, the proposals of this chapter (however it then is written) remain un-acted upon for two or three years and prominent voices continue calling for change, then pleas for greater departures from what exists will have greater legitimacy. If, however, the kind of place-centered planning being called for really takes place, and is fruitful; if the Zoning Ordinance is given greater clarity in its key decision-making criteria and those criteria have the beneficial effects they promise to have; and if the underlying intention of having development make places better, not worse, is being achieved, then larger change would be viewed in a very different and better-informed light.

⁵ Morris Robinson, Esq., "Is Newton open for business?" *Newton Tab*, March 9, 2005.

⁶ Anatol Zukerman, "Make the entire city a historic district," *Newton Tab*, August 21, 2002.