

# THE NEWTON THAT WE WANT

“No place is perfect. We’ve got high taxes, clogged streets, a high school in need of repair or razing (North), rampant political correctness (Tug of Peace in place of Tug of War in elementary school), and too many stressed-out parents and kids. But on the whole, I’d rather be in Newton. If you don’t live there, you’re just camping out.”

-Dan Shaughnessy

Newton is a great place in which to live and work. Sportswriter Dan Shaughnessy aptly summed it up in the above extract from his March 9, 2003 *Boston Globe* column. Consistent with that spirit, the future Newton that we who make up this community seek through our *Plan* closely resembles the current city. However, that doesn’t mean that we can passively stand still, for two reasons. First, reaching for further excellence has marked the City in the past and should continue to do so in the future. Second, changes outside of our control threaten to erode much of what we like about our community and to worsen the things about it that we regret. The burden of taxes, especially on those with low or fixed incomes, is too high now, and might well be made worse by the regional economy and tax structure. Street clogging might well get worse, as could other public facility concerns. The diversity, feeling of open space, and the benefits of this location that we value so highly could all be seriously damaged unless we make concerted and visionary efforts at improvement.

Importantly, our City is part of a larger community. We need to work with our neighbors to preserve and enhance the quality of land use, natural resources, social services, and transportation that span invisible political boundaries. We are crossed and bounded by major urban elements, including the Charles River, the Mass Turnpike, Route 9, rail lines, the MBTA and the MWRA. Through them we are joined to and have access to the region, while at the same time those elements create barriers within and between our neighborhoods and those of neighboring communities. We need to transform the power of those elements to connect rather than to divide us.

There is a striking agreement on basic planning principles between our own planning and that going on at other levels of government. At the regional level, the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) has begun planning “MetroFuture,” and it appears that our own planning will easily dovetail with it. The Office of Commonwealth Development (OCD) together with other state agencies is pursuing what they variously call “Smart Growth,” “Livable Communities,” and “Sustainable Development,” terms widely found in planning efforts across the United States<sup>1</sup>. Massachusetts’ state-level efforts, however named, are pursuing intentions with which our Newton planning is solidly consistent. Douglas Foy, Secretary of OCD, recently noted these as being among the key steps towards the Commonwealth’s vision for livable communities. They could equally well serve Newton:

- Repair existing infrastructure before building anew: “Fix it First;”

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<sup>1</sup> Those terms are commonly used synonymously, but planning professionals see differences among them. Those interested should see David R. Godschalk, “Land Use Planning Challenges: Coping with Conflicts in Visions of Sustainable Development and Livable Communities,” *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Winter 2004.

- Put communities first in road-building: incorporate context-sensitive design, accommodate all modes, and calm traffic;
- Support transit-oriented development;
- Support development-oriented transit;
- Support smart growth zoning that reflects infrastructure and walkability;
- Support environmental smart growth policies, including smart land conservation; and
- Support historic building preservation and development<sup>2</sup>.

Pursuing those principles in Newton is consistent with what our history tells us, with where we are now, and with our regional context. Accordingly, such principles should be reflected in the amounts, kinds, and locations of growth that we intend the City to have. Those principles should be part of what guides our priorities for the locations of that development, the functions on which we spend capital funds, and the locations where we spend them, as well as being a guide in seeking both excellence in design and sensitivity to the rich individuality of our neighborhoods and village centers.

There is also striking agreement between our own planning and the “Charleston Principles” adopted in 1990 by the 44<sup>th</sup> National Preservation Conference, and widely adopted since then by local governments, including Newton, which in 1992 adopted them as part of the City’s *Comprehensive Plan*:

Principle I: Identify historic places, both architectural and natural, that give the community its special character and that can aid its future well-being.

Principle II: Adopt the preservation of historic places as a goal of planning for land use, economic development, housing for all income levels, and transportation.

Principle III: Create organizational, regulatory, and incentive mechanisms to facilitate preservation, and provide the leadership to make them work.

Principle IV: Develop revitalization strategies that capitalize on the existing value of historic residential and commercial neighborhoods and properties, and provide well designed affordable housing without displacing existing residents.

Principle V: Ensure that policies and decisions on community growth and development respect a community’s heritage and enhance overall livability.

Principle VI: Demand excellence in design for new construction and in the stewardship of historic properties and places.

Principle VII: Use a community’s heritage to educate citizens of all ages and to build civic pride.

Principle VIII: Recognize the cultural diversity of communities and empower a diverse constituency to acknowledge, identify, and preserve America’s cultural and physical resources.

This *Plan* thoroughly reflects those principles, which upon adoption of this *Plan* will continue to be in effect for this City.

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<sup>2</sup> Summarized from Secretary Foy’s presentation at the 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Regional Sustainable Development Forum, October 29, 2004.

## **HOW MUCH WE PLAN TO GROW**

Careful analysis of our land and regulatory system indicates that when the City is fully developed we can expect only about 10% more housing units than the year 2000 total, given strict consistency with current rules. That much housing growth, coupled with shrinking household size, would likely mean about a 6% population decline between now and build-out. History suggests that exceptions to the rules through rezoning, Chapter 40B projects, and unpredicted exceptions are normal. If that pattern of exceptions were continued it might result in a 15% growth in housing units, which is probably just about enough to maintain our population at the year 2000 level. Our planning for housing, economic development, transportation, and other capital facilities indicate that a 15% growth in housing can reasonably be serviced consistent with the City we want. Importantly, that amount of growth would facilitate efforts to meet affordable housing needs, mitigating the threatened loss of diversity in this City.

Similarly careful analysis of business development indicates that the City's land and regulations can reasonably be expected to allow up to 70% more business floor area and jobs than the year 2000 total, but there is little likelihood that there will be a market for that much job growth, and equally little likelihood that the City would welcome that large a jobs increase and its impacts on City quality of life. Our planning calls for a build-out total of jobs somewhere between a small decline and stability, with jobs just about paralleling population change. It is important to be selective in our business development in order to have the kind of place that we want. We can do so and still maintain roughly the current level of jobs in Newton, meet our fiscal objectives, and work towards matching housing and jobs for Newton residents.

## **PRIORITIES FOR WHERE DEVELOPMENT OCCURS**

The Office of Commonwealth Development has described "Smart Growth" as being:

"...about growing where it makes most sense: in and around central business districts or traditional city or town centers, near transit stations, or in [areas previously developed non-residentially]. It is about growing where there is existing infrastructure and utilities, with greater pedestrian access to schools, civic facilities, retail and employment centers, and other destinations<sup>3</sup>."

That classic set of planning preferences, newly having gained popular recognition, is applicable for Newton, joined with a few additional considerations that stem from this being a fully developed community having a valued structure of neighborhood character and cohesion. "Growing smart" in Newton must give important consideration to neighborhood as well as Citywide impacts.

Consistent with that, we seek to protect the rich choice among the City's neighborhoods, some highly diverse and others not, some quite compact, others more open. We seek to assure development densities well related to both neighborhood character and infrastructure capacity. We seek to assure promotion of a range of housing opportunities. Sometimes those intentions

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<sup>3</sup> From "Draft Transit Oriented Development (TOD) Program Guidelines," OCD, January 5, 2005.

will be in conflict, so we need a management system able to resolve conflicts while making decisions in ways that are predictable, fair, and cost-effective.

## **INVESTING CAPITAL FUNDS**

Consistent with all of the above, investments in capital facilities should give priority to building onto what we have, fixing first, and supporting the amounts and locations of growth that are in our adopted plans. Just as with development permitting, capital facility priority-setting decisions should follow procedures which assure their predictability and fairness.

## **EXCELLENCE IN DESIGN**

We know that we want excellence in the design of our village centers and neighborhoods, of the places within them, and of the individual buildings and streets which make them up. However, at this point we are not yet of one mind with regard to the nuances of design in development most suitable for Newton. We need to develop a reflective process so that we can provide guidance which across the City's neighborhoods and village centers is as diverse in both administrative arrangement and design preferences as are those neighborhoods. The trace of history, professional designer's insights, and the sensitivities of our citizens can be joined in different ways producing different outcomes in different neighborhoods and village centers: What is right for one is not right for all, and our approach should reflect that. Accordingly, the guidance for design excellence should be chiefly based upon planning efforts centered on those neighborhoods, village centers, and other places individually, building a sense of place for each, but with some reliance on guidance regarding what constitutes Newton-wide "excellence."

## **PROMOTING THE CITY'S RICH DIVERSITY OF PLACES**

Design excellence is just one of the ways in which guidance for Newton's future development should reflect neighborhood and village-level planning. Implementing land use, housing, transportation, and other intentions of this *Plan* needs to be done with sensitivity to the variations in places across the City, as well as to how they are related and joined. We therefore intend there to be a framework within which place-centered planning can take place. As that area-level planning enriches our understanding over a period of years, it is intended that the City-wide plan should from time to time be revised in response.

## **HOW TO MOVE FORWARD**

The *Plan* elements which follow spell out more fully the intentions of this planning effort. *Plan* implementation began with the dialog that the process has produced, and with the agreements among parties that have preceded completion of this document. The framework now articulated next needs translation into concrete actions being taken.

Throughout this document the terms "we," "our," and "intention" are used repeatedly with specific purpose. This *Plan* is meant to be a statement of intentions, not recommendations, made on behalf of the community of people who make up this City, not just by a committee or a board. In that way, this is a plan which belongs to the community, reflecting that community's

intentions for itself, not recommendations to others for what they should do. That way of framing a plan is basic to it becoming a vital and effective creation.

## BACKGROUND

### Change in Housing, Population and Jobs

Expectations regarding trends in housing development, population change, and employment are basic for many parts of the *Plan*. There is a brief summary of those expectations in a table and text on page 3-5, and are they are expanded upon at a variety of other locations in the *Plan* and in its supporting studies. Some annual data is available to check for recent departures, including building permit data from which housing unit counts can be estimated, US Census annual population estimates, and MA DET annual employment tabulations. In each of those cases, the current (2006) data contain no departures from expectations.

Table 1-1. CPAC HOUSING, POPULATION, AND JOB FIGURES UPDATE

Year	BASE PROJECTION				HIGH SCENARIO			
	Housing un	Hholds	Population	Local jobs	Housing un	Hholds	Population	Local jobs
2000	31,300	31,200	83,829	48,090	31,300	31,200	83,829	48,090
2005	31,800	31,700	83,371	45,500	31,800	31,700	83,371	45,500
2006	31,850	31,750	82,810	45,913	31,850	31,750	82,810	45,913
2007	32,050	31,950		46,731	32,050	31,950	-	46,731
2010	32,240	32,140	83,920	46,750	32,240	32,140	83,920	46,750

2000 and 2005 figures are from baseline sources.

2010 are the forecasts from the August, 2006 draft *Newton Comprehensive Plan*.

2006 and 2007 are based upon:

Housing units: building permit data.

Households: permit data modified.

Population: US Census estimate

Jobs: MA DET count.

Projections of municipal-level households, population, and employment by the MAPC have been an important input to our own forecasts, and have been revised a number of times during our work. The most recent revision came this summer when the basis for the MAPC figures shifted from expectations assuming continuation of past policies and directions to expectations based upon implementation of that agency’s MetroFuture Plan, which was affirmed this Spring. The CPAC *Plan*’s “High Scenario” figures are very consistent with the MAPC’s resulting MetroFuture figures. That provides comforting assurance that the future intended by the draft *Comprehensive Plan* is in those respects consistent with the regional future sought by the MAPC.

### Housing Costs

Hardship and community stratification resulting from the loss of housing affordability in Newton is central to the Housing element. The widely publicized “bursting of the housing bubble” has in some locations significantly contributed to mitigating affordability problems, and some have

suggested that the same may be true in Newton. However, the most reliable available indicator of housing price change by municipality, the Warren Group, indicates that not to be the case here. The median sales price for single-family homes in Newton through September of this year was \$753,000, higher than any prior annual median. The median for Newton condos was \$449,000, 8% below the highest median ever, but the all-sales median of \$449,000 through September, like the single-family figure, is higher than any prior annual median. It is clear that the needs and intentions of the *Plan* regarding housing need no reconsideration as a result of recent market change.

### **School Facilities**

The draft *Plan* speaks of the new Newton North as going through initial design studies, while now it is under construction, as was anticipated. The *Plan*'s demographics anticipate that after some growth in the near term school enrollments are likely to ease in the longer run. The reason is the combination of modest growth in the total population and a declining share of that population being of school age, consistent with forecasts at national, state, and regional levels, as indicated at page 10-2 of the *Plan*. Newton's near-term enrollment growth projections by the School Department have been consistent with those expectations until last year, when they departed from previous projections to less slowly head upward. However, this year's October 1 Newton school enrollment count was far lower than projected, which is leading the Department to reexamine its projection methods. That will likely remove any need for reconsideration of the *Plan*'s general expectations regarding facility enrollment capacity needs. In all other respects, there is no inconsistency between the *Plan* and the findings of the Space Needs Assessment by HMFH Architects, Inc., completed this year for the School Department.

### **Fiscal Background**

Starting at page 10-6 of the *Plan* is a great deal of fiscal analysis based on annually available data. Upon review of more recent figures than those in the *Plan*, we find that without exception they continue the trends of the past. For that reason, no change in future expectations or intentions is needed on the basis of that review. Two illustrations are in the following table.

Table 1-2. RECENT FISCAL TRENDS

Year	Residential % of tax levy	Net state aid \$
1990	72.3	\$ 8,050,002
1991	72.6	\$ 7,267,753
1992	72.7	\$ 4,209,487
1993	74.9	\$ 5,152,715
1994	75.0	\$ 5,796,032
1995	75.7	\$ 6,173,929
1996	76.9	\$ 7,175,372
1997	77.7	\$ 8,358,814
1998	78.4	\$ 9,536,968
1999	78.8	\$ 10,943,961
2000	79.8	\$ 13,740,614
2001	80.5	\$ 18,228,743
2002	81.1	\$ 18,661,543
2003	80.9	\$ 18,638,086
2004	82.2	\$ 15,288,000
2005	83.2	\$ 15,655,462
2006	83.9	\$ 14,089,484
2007	84.0	\$ 13,944,645

## ACTIONS

A substantial number of actions of relevance to the *Plan* have been taken over the time since its contents were shaped. Some are gratifying implementation of actions called for in the *Plan*, some but not all of which having resulted from the *Plan*'s initiative.

At page 3-11 the Land Use element calls for preparation of a municipal facilities plan. Three steps in that direction have been taken since those words were first circulated: a School Department Space Needs Assessment, which is leading to formulation of a plan; a fire facilities plan; and a forthcoming study for remaining municipal buildings as called for in the Mayor's 2008-2012 Capital Improvement Plan.

The need for a functional classification system for streets in Newton is noted at pages 2-2 and 2-3 of the *Plan*. Preparation of that system was called for in the Transportation element at page 4-10 and again at page 11-6, and has now been adopted by the Board of Aldermen. At page 4-16 the Transportation element calls for extension of the T's Route 60 bus on Boylston Street. A small extension has been implemented, but it is far short of what is called for in the *Plan*. At page 4-21 the Transportation element calls for innovative transit-oriented development at Woodland Station, and such a development is now existing and partially occupied there, having gained wide recognition as an exemplar.

An intention expressed in the Natural Resources element at page 8-9 (and noted also at page 2-6) for adding energy and sustainability zoning criteria for special permit and site plan decisions was

adopted this Spring by the Board of Aldermen. Two energy actions from the City's Energy Action Plan and contained in the CPAC *Plan* are the designation of a City Energy Officer (page 8-7) and the upgrading of street lighting (page 8-8) to save energy and money. Both have been implemented.

Special State legislation to enhance the framework within which the Newton Community Development Authority operates was enacted this year (Chapter 75 of the Acts of 2007), just as is called for in the Housing Element at page 5-17.