

Dear Planning Dept. Staff,

Attached are citizen comments about the Draft Pattern Book. Due to today's deadline, we are sending the comments which are completed. If the deadline is extended, we will have other citizens submitting more comments to expand on this submission.

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Purpose of the Pattern Book - comment from Peter Harrington, 157 Lowell Ave

Over the past 30 years± various municipal officials have attempted to establish the Newton Planning Department in a position much like the Boston Redevelopment Authority so that Newton will have one agency in charge of development. This agency would supervise planning, public works, engineering, inspectional services, zoning, granting of special permits and variances, along with other departments and municipal services involved with development and redevelopment within the City. Newton's unique village concept would give way to a sterile, but modern, stylistic city of uniformity and stratification.

The establishment of the Pattern Book methodology and its acceptance as a restructured guide to expansion and development will end the process of natural development and replace it with a plan for uniformity. The architectural detail found in older cities that have preserved their historic neighborhoods, buildings and sites will be replaced with modern steel, glass, cement, stone or composite structures that are efficient, accessible, easily monitored against unauthorized intrusion and ultimately incorporated into a plan for a holistic community of the Boston metropolitan area.

The first and most important decision is to declare whether or not the purpose of the Pattern Book is to protect the rights of the residents and preserve the village concept or to provide a path for redevelopment that will change the present concept of suburban village design. While no such declaration has been made in the present draft of the Newton Pattern Book, it is apparent that the present DRAFT favors expansion and redevelopment.

Understanding the purposes and use of Zoning

The use of zoning in the United States is less than 100 years old, the concept of protecting the property rights of landholders dates back to the beginning of the second millennia of the current era. The roots of United States zoning go back to England and the need to protect London from fire. Many of the concepts incorporated into our Zoning Laws come from those regulations of buildings and construction developed over the last 1,000 years.

Pattern Book Issues

One basic concern is how the Pattern Book has redefined Newton through its designation of the different land areas it has studied. Rather than define the land areas by village, the Pattern Book defines 17 neighborhood land areas comprising 68% of Newton land area. For an overview see page 113 of the Pattern Book. Some may follow the old village designations, but most do not. The diversity of the historic Newton village pattern of diversity in density, diversity in home styles, diversity in economic background of homeowners and apartment dwellers is going to be replaced by a more sterile, non-diverse neighborhood description. West Newton is divided in half and Nonantum is extended west from Nevada Street to Cheese Cake Brook.

Newton's village centers have been broken down into three categories, based upon size of commercial space.

"Neighborhoods" or newly defined land areas have replace Villages. They include new neighborhoods of West Newton Hill (pages 150-157), Route 9 East (pages 206-213), Needham Street (pages 222-229), Oak Hill (pages 230-237) Wells Avenue (pages 238-245 and Oak Hill Park (pages 246-253). Gone are the villages of Newton (the original) and Thompsonville.

Many of our villages have been redefined, eliminating some portions and adding new sections.

However, the planning of a city of villages should require an agreement on what constitutes a village.

Population

Newton's population has remained steady at 85,000 to 95,000 for over 50 years. The City in nearly built out (Pattern Book page 8). The first question that comes to mind is, Why is the Newton Government seeking to expand "growth and development" (page 9). The answer that it is needed to maintain equality of access, diversity and economic vibrancy seems to fail when one examines the present day projects being encouraged by the City.

Recent development has been over weighted in favor of residential development. Residential development has, historically, placed an increasing burden on our attempts to collect tax revenues. Recent developments have shied away from increasing our commercial tax base on land designated for commercial development and has used the land for residential purposes (Austin Street and the Orr Block).

Commercial Development

What commercial development there is uses an outdated business model established in the last century. The City has no plan for attracting new business that deals with modern business practices of open office space, reduced retail space and an increase in e-business through internet advertising and catalogues.

It is well known that the lack of a strong commercial tax base is an increasing burden of the residential property tax and is depriving Newton of funds needed to improve it's social programs.

P.S. The photo of Nonantum Square is a lovely picture, but the location of the building was actually in Newton Corner.

Comment from Colleen Minaker, Bemis St:

Here is some information from a book entitled The Hub's Metropolis Greater Boston's Development from Railroad Suburbs to Smart Growth by James C. O'Connell, which would be a good point of reference for the Planning Book when describing the development patterns in Newton:

A vernacular region: is a distinctive area where inhabitants collectively consider themselves interconnected by a shared history, mutual interests and a common identity. Pg.2

Boston's early growth and development pattern was shaped by the government and private sectors as well as railroad and highway development. Communities shaped their own suitable suburban modes of city living. They created a vernacular development pattern not dictated by a premeditated plan but it evolved slowly from new modes of transportation and thus built distinctive regions of growth.

Letter from Kathleen Kouril Greiser, Mill St:

From: **Kathleen Kouril Greiser** <kik860@mail.harvard.edu>
Date: Sun, Dec 31, 2017 at 5:35 PM
Subject: Comments on pattern book
To: zoninaredesign@newtonma.gov
Cc: Ruthanne Fuller <ruthannefuller@gmail.com>

Dear Mr. Heath and Planning Department Staff,

I am very disappointed that you have wasted taxpayer dollars -- that might have been spent usefully on Newton's most at-risk residents, pressing infrastructure needs, or to pay down our municipal debt - instead on an over-priced consultant report that is based on disputable assumptions and riddled with errors. As a taxpayer, I want our money back.

This pattern book is at its core completely unreliable because it is not an accurate reflection of Newton's built environment. There was no attempt to follow the traditional understanding of where Newton's 13 villages begin and end, and no formal way for the residents and business owners in each village to define their village and their aspirations for it. The villages, the 13 parts of Newton with which residents in each most identify, seem to disappear in this document. Was that your instruction to Sasaki, or did the Sasaki staff decide Newton's villages didn't matter? This document presents a Newton made up of neighborhood patterns and village centers, but not villages. How does one have a village center without a village surrounding it?

The insensitively-named "*Co-Urbanize*" website was an entertaining diversion - a step up from post-its and stickers - but hardly a rigorous way to collect data about the understandings and preferences of Newton residents. The same goes for the "questions board" post-its at the kick-off, and the chalk drawing "data collection" at Newtonville Village Day. I asked a Planning Department staffer that day if she seriously expected taxpayers to get down on their hands and knees on the street and draw pictures in chalk to record our village's built environment and also how she was recording the chalk drawing data since I didn't see anyone photographing any drawings. She handed me a piece of white paper and told me I could draw a picture on that. That this Planning Department continues to treat residents like children and with contempt with these

childish "engagement" games is a wasteful problem that I hope our new mayor will put an end to once and for all.

I attended almost all of the types of engagement activities for this pattern book process. In every case, the "data" collected would be scattershot, random, and subject to manipulation by a determined person or group with a specific agenda. I laughed when I saw the tremendous number of gold stars for "preservation" plastered on top of Newton Centre after the Historic Newton data collection event. I can guess exactly which two residents are responsible for all those stars. The same kind of manipulation was done by the pro-high-density-developers at other events and on the "Co-Urbanize" site. Developers had their proxies providing "data" supporting development at locations they wish to develop.

I take issue with the statement on page 15, claiming that "the team also completed several custom analyses to review the most recent data available with a variety of approaches" and that "in chapter 4 of this document, the processes and specific methodologies employed in these analyses are described for reference". The "custom analyses" are nowhere to be found and chapter 4 is just a scrapbook of some of the engagement events at which questionable "data" was collected. The consultants claim that "this strategy provides both confidence in and objectivity to the results presented in this document as well as different ways of understanding the data at different scales to serve the needs of many different constituencies". Asserting doesn't make it so. If this were a graduate school paper it would barely get a passing grade.

If I had the time, I could dissect this document paragraph by paragraph and find flaws in most, but because time is short, I will just provide a brief sample of the many things wrong with this pattern book, specifically - flawed assumptions, sloppy fact-reporting, and inaccuracies.

Flawed Assumptions:

1. "The city must encourage growth and development to maintain equality of access". Where is the proof underlying this critical assumption? (p.9)
2. There is "a growing consensus on what needs to change". Where is the proof that there is "consensus" among Newton residents/taxpayers about what needs to change? (p. 12)
3. An audit of Newton's zoning ordinance is meant to identify areas that "are inconsistent with the community's goals". When did we as a community decide on our goals for our zoning ordinance? When did we the residents say that we have defined and agreed upon goals that require an audit of or changes to our zoning? (p. 12)
4. The authors' state that their "intention is to guide change so that it reinforces what we have building on our assets". Change does not equal growth. Change can represent enhanced diversity, fiscal health, improved quality of life, and greener outcomes without growth in population or residential density. (p.12)
5. The authors state that "this pattern book is intended to be used as a resource for decision-makers, property owners, developers and designers working outside the formal zoning approvals process who aim to make informed choices on the design, siting, and uses of *new development* with respect to its compatibility with

existing contexts." So residents and business owners who want to live and do business in a stable community are out of luck? We taxpayers get to pay for a document that's designed to help those who want to do new development, even if we don't necessarily welcome that new development? (p.13)

6. The authors recommend that the "data and determinations found in this pattern book be updated as regularly as needed to accurately reflect the built condition of Newton and maximize the value of this document in ensuring context-based development/re-development". So in other words, context is 'all relative'. This pattern book won't protect the existing patterns, because it's aimed at helping developers of new development. That new development will change the context and the patterns (more density, no doubt), and that will necessitate hiring (these same?) consultants to re-assess the new, denser patterns in preparation for the next iteration of altering patterns for more density. Where is the proof that residents want this approach or this densification? There is none underlying this assumption, nor most of the others in this document. (p. 13)

Sloppy Fact- Reporting:

1. "Transit, biking, and walking make up ##% of commuter trips by residents." How much did we pay for this report? (p. 27)

2. "Car ownership rates are more reflective of the City's walkability and strong transit options with an average of # cars per household and a few sections of the City where households have 1 to 1.5 cars on average." (p. 27) How many cars?

3. "It is well known that much of Newton's existing development is 'non-conforming' with respect to the existing zoning ordinance... Given the complexity of the existing zoning ordinance and the distinction in rules depending on the age of a parcel, the City of Newton has not embarked upon a comprehensive inventory of conforming and non-conforming parcels. In order to capture a close approximation of the number of parcels classified as either conforming or non-conforming, a detailed evaluation of the city's many neighborhoods and properties would have to be undertaken." (p. 278). So, the planner experts and consultants don't actually know how many properties are non-conforming, if it's a significant problem, if it's a problem that could be addressed in a way that doesn't involve paying consultants to create a pattern book, or if the pattern book will be in any way useful for resolving the problem, if it is, in fact, a serious problem.

Inaccuracies:

1. It's curious and inaccurate that West Newton Hill has been separated by the planners and consultants from the less-wealthy and therefore more-likely-to-be-further-densified West Newton. The same goes for Chestnut Hill being removed from Route 9 East. Why are only these very wealthy enclaves to be protected from further densification and "co-urbanization"?

2. The boundaries of Newtonville in "Context-Based Area #6" are inaccurate. According the maps in the pattern book on pages 161, 163 and 165, Newtonville does not include the houses across the street from my home in Newtonville, nor those on the streets just to the east. This is my neighborhood and we know ourselves to live in the village of Newtonville. We have an active neighborhood association, we take a deep interest in what's happening to our village center, we vote in Ward 2 (mostly Newtonville), our children are zoned for Cabot School, and on the City's own Residential Services App, it says we live in Newtonville. I am attaching a screenshot of the Residential Services App page that shows my neighbor's house directly across the street. He knows he lives in Newtonville. The City knows he lives in Newtonville, but the planning experts and

consultants have drawn maps indicating that he (and a lot more of my neighbors) don't live in Newtonville. This is inaccurate and unacceptable.

3. According to the pattern book maps on pages 161, 163 and 165, Newton City Hall is now in Newtonville. According to the City's own app and Google Maps, City Hall is located in Newton Centre with a 02459 zip code. Newtonville's zip code is 02460. Newton City Hall has never been in Newtonville and I doubt Newton residents want it to move to Newtonville now, no matter what the planning experts and consultants think.

Finally, I could cite many more errors of fact, sloppy reporting and unsubstantiated assumptions. This pattern book isn't worth the \$25 I paid for my copy (which was missing the appendices, by the way), and certainly not worth the cost to Newton taxpayers in consultant or staff time. I do not see how this document is of any use in informing possible changes to our zoning ordinance.

Instead, I believe we need to restart the zoning review process with an authentic resident-led planning process. We have a new administration. It's time for a new approach - one that is based on residents' preferences, not those of profit-seeking developers who would urbanize our beautiful community and impose their unsustainable, externalized costs onto our indebted municipality.

Sincerely,

Kathleen Kouril Grieser

Mill Street

Village of Newtonville

Issues with Pattern Book public comment process – Comment by Sarah Quigley, Atwood Ave.

I attended two of the Zoning Redesign events; the Kickoff in October, 2016, and 'Cracking the Code' for Homeowners' in Nov, 2017. While I appreciate the city's efforts to hold educational programs and 'workshops' to collect community input, I think the process is not optimal for most people.

I appreciate the city's willingness to receive feedback through email because it allows residents to write their own thoughts and analysis, rather than being led by city planners through an exercise which will give the appearance of genuine interaction and input through a 'workshop' which discourages thoughtful and independent responses. I found the expectation for interaction in a workshop with random people sitting together at a table actually limited genuine contributions, analysis, and feedback, rather than allowing people to describe their thoughts, interests and concerns more fully and independently in writing. The problem with the 'workshop' method of sharing and attempting to come to consensus among a group of residents with disparate opinions who happen to be sitting at a table together is that it dilutes diversity of opinion, and may result in less meaningful feedback than if people were able to contribute authentic independent comments in writing.

The city planners and consultants may believe it is easier to measure data by collecting responses to an exercise in a group exercise or workshop, however I believe the city would receive much more productive responses by having an educational presentation on a topic which includes presenters with

varying viewpoints, and then distributing a list of open-ended questions related to a particular zoning topic discussed during the lecture. People could then respond to the questions individually in writing in person during the session, or afterwards through email or online. If people then want to share their responses by reading them aloud at the end, or posting them on the Co-Urbanise site, that would be an opportunity for people to learn from each other without stifling individual comments.

I agree with the following comment which was posted on the Co-Urbanize site to describe the restrictions imposed by the workshop approach to community feedback:



[Alan Mayer](#)
Mar 27, 2017

“City of Newton, I think it is the nature of a Design Charrette that we don't preset priorities. I attended the Newtonville meeting with the 20 minute table talks and as an architect with some real experience I found that this was more about making people feel like they had input than about real thoughtful dialogue. The parameters that were preset as the limits of the conversation said so much about predetermined ideas it was discouraging even though everyone there had the best of intentions. Years ago Boston had a Washington Street Charrette that required a real time commitment and, while imperfect, was a thoughtful generator of ideas. The current political mess with the development on the corner of Washington and Walnut is a simple result of the city NOT being proactive in it's master planning process....”

Similarly, the city used a ‘Lego’ exercise run by consultants to obtain ‘feedback’ for the Mayor’s Housing Strategy in Nov, 2015. It forced participants in groups to agree upon locations where varying degrees of density should be placed, rather than allowing individuals or groups to disagree with the exercise’s premise that density in the form of different configurations should be placed on different areas of a map of the city, or to come up with their own ideas about master planning.

By distributing open-ended questions and allowing residents to submit their responses in writing, the city would generate more creative, genuine community input than by emphasizing the workshop and online posting formats as feedback gathering mechanisms for the Zoning Redesign process and the feedback for the Pattern Book.

Wendy Plesniak and Ravikanth Pappu, 38 Waban Street, Newton, MA, commenting on “Newton Corner”

First concern: Analysis does not capture human parameters essential for designing human spaces.

The analysis of the city is based on parameters that don't capture the human side of our City and the human side of its Villages. Each Village in Newton does have its own character, and we believe that reflects both a set of common and a set of distinct sensibilities. We can feel them as we travel around the City. The Pattern Book does not identify them nor does it state any intent to preserve our village characteristics.

People discover and settle in villages whose sensibilities feel like “home” or feel like they're “right”. Understanding and translating those sensibilities are at the core of good design. On accommodating growth, the Pattern Book states *“In addition to identifying several areas throughout the city where concentrated growth is expected and welcomed, the plan states that while protecting character often but not always means minimizing changes; well-designed change can strengthen existing qualities.”*

Note that:

- Character is not captured (or even defined) in this analysis.
- Existing human-valued qualities are not captured in this analysis.
- Metrics for and validation of “expected or welcomed growth” are not specified.
- Existing qualities to strengthen are not identified.

Further the Pattern Book fails to identify the growth areas, making it impossible to comment on their appropriateness.

Good design always registers itself against metrics. Without human-centered metrics, how can well-designed change be encouraged, much less ensured? Instead, the current analysis promotes “go-with-the-status-quo”. It assumes what it finds today was welcomed by neighbors and created by thoughtful design, and so advocates building on that.

Second concern: the Pattern Book does not address the measurements of equity.

Making sure that the all Newton residents enjoy a similar level of public affordances that come with a City's progressive change is essential. Development brings new revenue as well as new expenses to the City of Newton, and Newton Corner already bears the burden of housing density, traffic congestion and new, heavy construction. Yet Lincoln Eliot school children have been without heat in their building in the winter, and have no cooling on the very hot days at the end of school. Is this true of all Newton Public Schools? This is a question not just of planning, but also of morality. How can we imagine the Pattern Book's power as a design tool without human parameters included in its sweeping analysis?

Without human-centered considerations, this is a clinical prescription to use the existing resources of the city, and accept the existing (well- or ill-considered) development patterns, and regard them simplistically as part of areas "where concentrated growth is welcomed and expected". Using cold facts in absence of complicated human and historical context encourages existing patterns to spread in support of revenue-seeking adventures. Our city has been around for a long time and deserves to be richly described as she is today, and as she should be in the future.

Finally, this analysis and city planning that gets built on its foundation, will be entrusted for generations to lawmakers who will have the habit of leaning on its rigor, and the length (and cost) of its production process to justify whatever motivates lawmakers in the moment. People, and what they value, need to be represented well, respected and protected. So, we better get it right. Comment collection for this book is a start to capture human values, Village by Village (or CBA by CBA), but it risks being anecdotal and without power. While the Planning Department has tried to reach out to Newton citizens in general, community response has been limited because of preoccupation with the recent elections and a general lack of understanding of the future impact of the Pattern Book and the commentary contained within. It's very name is benign and abstract, failing to convey its relevance to zoning changes, and failing to promote the sense of interest and urgency among the public that it should.

Third concern: Classification of Newton Corner is vague and imperils area neighborhoods.

Another serious concern with the Pattern Book's methodology is that it packages all previous developments and their design (without considering their merit on any scale) into the parameter set used to describe the existing character of a Context Based Area (CBA). This approach is vulnerable to producing poor characterizations of collections of long-standing neighborhoods. We are especially concerned for how this impacts Newton Corner, whose village center has been designated as a "Gateway Village Center".

Consider this in the Pattern Book's description of Newton Corner: *"The Pattern Book acknowledges the resulting scale and intensity of development concentrated within the center. Situated above and beside I-90 are some of Newton's tallest developments. In addition to these large commercial and hospitality developments, there is a substantial clustering of retail establishments primarily focused around dining."* The Pattern Book methodology is blind to the fact that considerable development patterns in Newton Corner were poorly conceived, poorly designed in ways that changed, offended or dominated the historical character of a neighborhood, divided our Village in half, created congested or dangerous traffic patterns, subtracted from the sweetness of our properties, and rendered our Village unwalkable. These terrible consequences of development without planning for and investment in appropriate human benefits to the hosting community has got to be recognized. The description of our *"...retail establishments focused around dining"* makes Newton Corner sound like a real dinner destination! It is not.

The Pattern Book states *"Development within the Newton Corner CBA is among the most dense in the city, with an intersections per square mile metric of 190, or 78 intersections per square mile above the city average. The area is also one of the least permeable with a percentage of permeable land within the CBA of 59%."* The Pattern Book does not mention "the Circle of Death" in this clinical discussion -- a signature problem that City lawmakers and planners have bemoaned for so long.

So, this dense development and proximity to Mass Pike access qualifies us as Newton's only "Gateway Center". But what does "Gateway" mean? -- Gateway to what? Gateway to Newton? Gateway to Boston? Gateway to "the American Dream"? Maybe all of these are the case. For residents, however, how exactly this will be understood and translated into city planning could have enormous and varied consequences.

Gateway to "the American Dream"? The Pattern Book notes that: *"Despite hosting one of Newton's largest and most dense village centers, Newton Corner is largely a residential CBA with approximately 87% of the total development square footage consisting of residential properties. Of that 87%, a larger portion than is common in Newton is multifamily (45% of all residential square footage), which is mostly concentrated within and around the village center in the north of the CBA. The remaining 55% of residential square footage is single family and is concentrated in the northeastern most corner and the southern half of the CBA. As a result of greater prevalence of multifamily units in this area, the median development sizes are larger than is common throughout the city."* Newton Corner has many multi-family homes which are an affordable way for a family to move into Newton: a safe city, with good schools, diverse and welcoming neighborhoods, and easy access to Boston. This is a very meaningful piece of Newton Corner's character that the Pattern Book states but does not channel into methodology. Newton Corner is a civil and social attractor and incubator for neighbors who value diversity, seeking a similar way to live. The Pattern Book fails to capture this very valuable characteristic of Neighborhoods in the Newton Corner CBA. The density of Newton Corner's homes also fosters a sweet and social atmosphere. Many neighbors share strong friendships, children who play together, and neighbors who socialize and assist each other in supportive ways. The Pattern Book fails to capture this

very valuable characteristic of neighborhoods in any CBA. If indeed we are the “Gateway to the American Dream”, as may be true, what does this prescribe in terms of city planning?

Or, “Gateway to Boston”? Newton Corner has existing business infrastructure and an exit from the Mass Pike, which gives it a tremendous value to entrepreneurial businesses. However, and critically, to my knowledge, Newton has not yet developed a vision for what would constitute a great Gateway Village Center plan to attract businesses to Newton Corner, no strategy for investment and no incentives to promote the kind of development that might deliver on this vision. Will we be “Boston-lite” or should we be “Newton-lite”? Urbanish, creative and edgy, or more meditative and green, a blend? Or, will we just make zoning changes that encourages a hodge-podge of development at the expense of the dense residential properties buffering the commercial zone? The size of the Village Center area drawn on the map is enormous, and has so many abutting homeowners put at risk by this vague “Gateway Village” characterization. Certainly, things along a commercial zone are going to keep changing always; but zoning must protect property owners from changes that degrade their daily life, their property, and that erase the historical character of a village.

While recognizing the facts, in general, the Pattern Book does not address the issue of preserving the diversity of neighborhoods that go to make up the Village of Newton Corner nor does it address the question of how to protect these neighborhoods.

If Newton Corner is the “Gateway to Newton”, then this Village Center should strongly represent what Newton is all about. The Pattern Book states that a Gateway Village Center has *“a total average commercial and retail square footage of up to 2,000,000 square feet. The predominant use is commercial, with many offices above the ground floor. The retail mix is located on the ground floor and supports business operations, including banks, dry-cleaners, coffee shops, and restaurants. Building heights range from two story to nine stories. These buildings face the street and are somewhat articulated, with a general consistency in materiality. There is often a continuous street wall.”* -- In short, fairly devoid of character and canyon-like. If we settle, going forward, that this is the character of Newton Corner, then that pattern will replicate. That is a real danger of the Pattern Book’s approach.

Rather, what should a Gateway to Newton convey? Some ideas are: Education, the Arts, History, Diversity, Distinct architectural character, Safe society, Gardens, Walkable neighborhoods, Habitable space (not too much noise, pollution, traffic, and human-scale operations), Commitment to sustaining civil society, A place with something for everyone: kids, teenagers, electricians, professors, clerks, receptionists, lawyers, athletes, CEOs, scientists, full-time moms, retirees, taxi-drivers, police, nurses, doctors, artists, landscapers *etc.* How do we reflect and promote these ideals? Certainly, planning and investment in the ground level in any commercial corridor should strongly convey neighborhood character, serve the spirit of greater Newton and the needs of Newton Corner’s people, without sacrificing the livability and walkability of our neighborhoods. Development’s imposition in height and density should be in proportion to its **measurable value** to the hosting area.

Newton Corner needs to have clarification on what kind of a Gateway we are, and future city planners and lawmakers should also carry the weight of making sure planning, investment, and development embody the right priorities to fit the characterization. Protecting Newton Corner residents' values, village and neighborhood character, and promoting city-wide equity should be strongly among these priorities. We hope that Newton Corner's residents speak out loudly about the importance of these elements of good design and hold City Planners to a high standard.

Comments on Nonantum by Sami O'Reilly:

The Pattern Book correctly describes Nonantum's physical attributes:

Dense

Tightly packed on small lots

Minimal setbacks

Diversity of Property types

Oldest properties in Newton

Traditional housing styles

Mostly Multi-family

20% Commercial/Industrial/Retail (by land use)

High degree of street connectivity (grid pattern with few dead ends)

Distinct composition compared to majority of Newton

These descriptions are true. But they only tell part of the story, the part that is already here.

There's another part, which is what Nonantum is poised to become as key properties are accumulated by real estate developers.

Nonantum is ready for well designed, small scale (3 stories) mixed-use development along Watertown Street/Adams Street commercial district.

Quality mixed use "village scale" infill development that knits this district together, improved sidewalks and streetscapes that are safer and more appealing to pedestrians young to old -- this is desired by many who live here. Closer to the Charles River, Nonantum's industrial districts would benefit from mixed use workforce housing located within that neighborhood.

But: Zoning Redesign needs to do more than simply dictate what can be built by right.

Rather, it should be a document that promotes communitarian interests. Beyond meeting housing and economic development goals, new developments should be judged by what they offer to the immediate

community in architectural beauty, green design, improved infrastructure, pleasant streetscapes, wider more walkable sidewalks, and other "neighborly" design qualities. These end results may be better obtained by the Special Permit process.

I question whether Newton's Zoning Redesign should focus on promulgating "by right" language for these larger developments. "By Right" may not successfully address the nuances of development within specific neighborhoods. Developers prefer "by right" projects, naturally. My sense is that is not always the best deal for the community.

If anything, the Pattern Book reinforces my preference for Newton's existing Special Permit process. Rather than put forth new "by right" zoning regulations, our Planning Department and Councilors might do better to improve/streamline the Special Permit process, and require designated neighborhood development councils to formally participate in every new proposed development to ensure robust community buy-in for every project.

I also think that Newton should pass an ordinance banning all City of Newton elected officials and public servants from participating as principals or agents in any project 4 units or greater, requiring a Special Permit.

Newton's Councilors should continue to take an active role vetting all future development by using the Special Permit process to examine and refine development schemes. The Planning Department and Zoning Redesign should not eclipse the critical dedicated oversight of committed, vested public servants.

NEWTONVILLE - Comments on Newtonville by Peter Harrington

The Newtonville CBA is an artificial designation and a misuse of the word Newtonville. When addressing issues in a geographical section of the City of Newton, for the purpose of clarity, one should not use a generally accepted term such as Newtonville to describe a section of the City that is not Newtonville.

Throughout the City of Newton many residents define the village they reside in by their Zip Code designation (previously a two-number postal code). Residents with a Zip Code designation of 02460 usually define themselves as living in Newtonville.

Context Based Area 6 (page 158) should be renamed as is includes a portion of the village of Newtonville and smaller parts of Newton Centre (02459), West Newton (02465) and 02458. Also, a large Newtonville neighborhood north of Watertown Street has been included in the description of Nonantum without distinguishing it as part of the Village of Newtonville.

The redesign of Newtonville and Nonantum allows the description published on page 160 concerning single family residences. The description fails to include the single-family neighborhoods in the northern section of the Village.

Other village descriptive inaccuracies include, on page 162 “Newtonville is served by some of the most highly-trafficked streets in all of Newton” might more accurately have said, Newtonville is *burdened* by some of the most highly-trafficked streets in all of Newton. The same language might have been used in the following sentence starting with, “Meridianally, Newtonville is served ...”.

The statement that Newtonville is one of the largest village centers is also questionable (page 164). There is no data to determine how the size of the center is measured. For example is it the length of street frontage, the total village center land area, the number of commercial establishments, tax income generated, or another standard of measurement? Also, the working industrial yards are in process of being assembled for a new project proposal. The inclusion of the Library and City Hall defies accepted use and understanding as both sites claim to have a Newton Centre address.

Comments on Planning Book description of Newtonville by Sarah Quigley:

The Context-Based Area (CBA) description of Newtonville in the Pattern Book has several serious flaws. First, it states that Newtonville is one of the largest and most dense village centers in Newton. Newtonville may be one of the largest village centers in Newton in terms of land area, however the characteristics of Newtonville as a village center are not described accurately as they exist today.

For example, the Pattern Book describes Newtonville as the 'Town Center' form of development. This description differs from Newtonville's characteristics in its current form, and instead seems to refer to how Newtonville may appear after Austin St and the Washington Place developments are constructed. In fact the 'Town Center' development concept is actually antithetical to Newton's village centered development concept which has no downtown. As a result, the Pattern Book sounds like it is using a development framework description which is not reflective of Newtonville village, and other villages in Newton.

The Pattern Book describes a Town Center form of development as 'attracting people from the region' to businesses in the area, rather than serving primarily a local neighborhood clientele. Other than Newtonville Camera, and the former Boston Ballet location at the Orr Block, Newtonville businesses do not generally attract customers from the region. Instead, Newtonville businesses primarily consist of independent businesses such as dry cleaners, salons, banks, restaurants, and a supermarket which serve the surrounding local residents.

Prior to the Washington Place proposal, Newtonville village was most often considered to be the commercial district south of the pike on Walnut St. After Washington Place was proposed, the business district along Washington St began to be considered an extension of the village center. During the Washington Place special permit process members of the Land Use committee asked the Planning Dept. to define the boundaries of Newtonville's village center. The Planning Dept. had difficulty answering the question. The village center became progressively more permeable during the LUC meeting. The Planning Dept. indicated that the intersection of Washington and Harvard would be considered part of the village center since it was accessible by public transit. Throughout the Washington Place special permit process, as well as in the Planning Book, the boundaries of Newtonville village have continued to be expanded to the point where the intersection of Crafts and Washington St are now also being considered part of the village center. It is clear that during the Washington Place special permit process areas along Washington St came to be seen in a new light as additional areas for development, rather than as they are today. Currently there are clusters of businesses on a commercial street which are more compact at Washington and Walnut, and Washington and Central, but become significantly more spread out as one heads east and west on Washington Street. Washington Street in this area is a commercial street, but not a village center. The way the PB is presenting Newtonville is an attempt to justify expanding Newtonville's commercial streets into areas for more dense rezoning and development.

One of the problems in the way the Planning Book presents information about the different village centers is that it is not evidence-based. Instead, the information is presented in unsubstantiated generalities to support the authors' arguments. If we examine actual facts, we would draw different conclusions.

The Planning Book states that Newtonville is one of the most dense villages in terms of the number of intersections per square mile and the percentage of impermeable surfaces. The percentage of permeable surfaces in Newtonville may be higher than other villages because there is less open space in

this village than in villages to the south. The Comprehensive Plan discusses the importance of acquiring and preserving open space in the northern parts of the city. This is an important goal which seems to be overlooked in the Pattern Book. The implicit purpose of the Pattern Book seems to be to justify increasing density in neighborhoods which are already dense, and which already have traffic congestion. A more important and necessary goal would be to introduce more methods to increase green space and traffic calming measures in areas such as Newtonville, which are already more dense and have more traffic than other villages in the city. Similarly, the fair-housing laws, such as Ch. 40B were implemented to prevent concentration of new affordable housing in areas which are already dense. Instead, the goal is for affordable housing to be distributed more equitably among neighborhoods, even more sparsely developed ones. Newtonville already has more affordable housing on the SHI, as well as more moderately priced multi-family housing than many areas of Newton. The Pattern Book neglected to include a chapter analyzing the current locations of affordable housing in Newton's neighborhoods. This is an important consideration for any study of current and proposed zoning.

In reference to the 'commercial clusters' in Newtonville, the Pattern Book makes general statements such as "The three commercial clusters in the Newtonville CBA are employment, retail, and legacy industrial in character, consisting of a fairly large concentration of offices, service-oriented and bulk retailers..."

The Pattern Book would seem more accurate if it substantiated these claims. For example, when stating there is a 'fairly large' concentration of offices, it should instead be specific by stating there are office buildings at 288, and 246 – 254 Walnut St, 60 Austin St, and 29 Crafts St.

'Fairly large' does not quantify the number relative to other villages. In fact, many in Newtonville believe that office space in Newtonville is currently under-represented, and that the city should strive to increase office space in the area to help Newton increase its commercial tax base. Similarly, if the PB provided more specific metrics about the number and types of retailers, it would be obvious that many are small and independent. The 'bulk retailers' mentioned in the Pattern Book would probably be better described as grocery stores (Star Market and Whole Foods.)

The Pattern Book also makes the inaccurate statement that "the northern half, located just outside the Newtonville village center (to the north and south of I-90) is almost entirely commercial, retail, and multifamily products."

When one refers to the maps included in the Newtonville CBA section, it is obvious that the Pattern Book there are actually a large number of single family homes in neighborhoods north and south of the pike, as indicated on the maps in light color.

The Planning Book also fails to mention the Newtonville Local Historic district as a prominent and protected neighborhood adjacent to the Washington St business district.

The photos of Newtonville neighborhoods in the Pattern Book did not show diversity of neighborhood types. For example two of the photos appear to be taken of very similar neighborhoods which appear to be on Cabot St and Madison Ave. It would make more sense to include more photographs of more diverse streetscapes in Newtonville, and to label each, so that readers can be clear about which streetscapes they are seeing.

Due to the numerous flaws and evident bias of the Pattern Book content, I encourage the city to postpone the process of re-writing Newton's zoning code, and instead provide an opportunity for residents to receive open-ended questions about topics covered in the Pattern Book, which they can respond to in writing at events, through email, or online. I think such an improved community input process would provide valuable suggestions on ways the Pattern Book can be edited to be more reflective of Newton in its current form, and would generate more authentic and useful community input.

Re: the Newton Pattern Book Draft and the Newton Centre section - by Carol Summers, Marshall St. and Nancy Honig, Dalton Rd:

It is not possible to fully critique this document since it is so large in scope, and so vague on so many issues. We think that the city we're planning for is already a place of historic and beloved character. We are concerned that many of the goals of the Pattern Book, while seemingly laudable, could be used to undermine or destroy that character if codified into a new zoning code. We do not believe that existing residents want to see Newton transformed into a denser, more urbanized city.

We do not understand the decision to avoid using Newton's beloved villages as a starting point and instead dividing the city into largely meaningless "CBA" units. This is not how Newton residents think of their city or their neighborhood and we feel its use leads to many negative consequences. Any zoning for the city should seek to preserve Newton's villages which the state of Massachusetts has named an important Historic Resource. This resource is what makes Newton unique and is already endangered by relentless pressure for new development in what is a fully built-out community.

The document seems to have an underlying goal of transformation for Newton, finding locations for development and urbanization. However most residents are much more concerned with preserving Newton's neighborhoods and villages and controlling undesirable density, urbanization, traffic and other negative impacts. This preservation is what most Newton residents want from any rezoning process, but they will not find much of that in this document.

Several concepts found in the Newton Leads 2040 document, for example Criteria for Good Housing Sites, recommends "context-sensitive development" in order to protect neighborhood or village character. And the document recognizes a scarcity of land for new development in Newton. Growth can be enhancing and desirable, but may also potentially create problems and destroy communities. The Pattern Book is quite vague as to how these problems will be avoided.

The Comprehensive plan affirms the need to respect the existing character of Newton including the village structure. And also that those people most impacted by a given project should be respected and not be left to bear the negative impacts of a development proposal while others reap the benefits. Although much is made of outreach in creation of the Draft, we believe that most Newton Centre residents are not aware of the process or the potential zoning changes.

One key goal of the Pattern Book is "identifying several areas throughout the city where concentrated growth is expected and welcomed" (although these locations are not identified specifically). This only makes sense if 'welcomed' means 'desired by the impacted residents'. We are aware that large-scale development in Newton Centre is a priority of the city planning department (as stated in Newton Leads 2040). Yet we do not believe that the residents of Newton Centre village are in agreement with this.

How will the new zoning ordinances insure that future development is truly welcomed by the existing residents?

The Comprehensive Plan states that locations for specific development should be considered individually as to desirability and impacts and not be the result of “abstract map exercises”. The pattern book concept seems to be in large measure just such an exercise. It purports to preserve existing communities but at the same time by characterizing some villages as “dense” or “urban” it could serve to encourage growth, even where density is already beyond what is desirable in that location.

In addition, it seems fundamentally unfair to encourage density in some villages while limiting it in others.

The Comprehensive Plan also says that “...we seek to assure development densities well related to both neighborhood character and infrastructure capacity. “Newton Centre lacks the infrastructure for urbanization and density. Increased traffic would make the village unlivable and impact all Newton residents negatively. Beacon Street, Centre Street and Commonwealth Avenue are already over-capacity. They are lined with beautiful homes and can never become a “commercial corridor”. Further capacity through the village is frightening to contemplate.

Newton Centre is ALREADY a so-called Transit Oriented village since it grew up adjacent to the commuter railroad. However, recent intensity of uses and multiple waivers of existing zoning regulations in favor of new development in the village and nearby have created unpleasant traffic problems for everyone. Several times a day it is impossible to traverse the village by car due to lengthy back-ups to other villages.

We agree that Newton Centre is a great place to live. The village is surrounded by quiet neighborhoods but close to Boston and commuter rail access. It has numerous restaurants and shops of many kinds, interesting architecture, a local listed Historic Business District and houses and apartments on the National Register. It also has Newton Centre Playground and a mix of housing options including many low-income and affordable units. The commercial area is very successful. But it is a fragile ecosystem that can be destroyed by unwise development decisions.

We also must comment on the difficulty in using the printed version of the Draft Pattern Book. The maps are basically unusable. There are no street names making it nearly impossible to use. The Newton Centre CBA itself, as delineated, seems arbitrary and does not reflect the actual village or the surrounding neighborhoods. The CBA encompasses Newton Centre village and also portions of what are considered to be the villages of Thompsonville, Chestnut Hill and Newton Highlands. (In general, the rationale for dividing Newton into CBA sections is not clear and tends to undermine what nearly all residents consider to be the geography of Newton.)

Conclusion: In the Pattern Book Newton Centre is being described as an “an urban village center” and “home to some of the busiest intersections in the city” and “dense residential transition zones”. We think it is obvious that Newton Centre is not suited for additional large-scale development as it is presently at capacity or close to it. Growth needs to be very carefully controlled and possibly capped at existing levels. Any future growth should be in the scale of the existing commercial zones. The assumption that further growth must include large-scale projects and increased density is questionable. **We hope residents of the village will have more input into the zoning code revisions going forward.**

