

NEEDHAM HOUSING PLAN WORKING GROUP
*** MINUTES ***
February 10, 2022

7:04 p.m.

A meeting of the Needham Housing Plan Working Group was convened by Jeanne McKnight, Co-Chair, as a virtual Zoom Meeting. Ms. McKnight announced this open meeting is being conducted remotely consistent with Governor Baker's Executive Order of March 12, 2020 due to the current state of emergency from the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus. She said all supporting documents used at this meeting are available on a special section of the Town's website www.needhamma.gov/housingplan2021. Present were Jeanne McKnight and Natasha Espada representing the Planning Board, Dan Matthews and Marcus Nelson from the Select Board, Laura Dorfman from the Community Preservation Committee, Michael O'Brien from the School Committee, Helen Gregory from the Council on Aging, Ed Cosgrove from the Board of Health, as well as Emily Cooper, Rhonda Spector and Oscar Mertz as Citizens At Large. Also present were Director of Planning and Community Development Lee Newman, Assistant Town Planner Alexandra Clee, Public Information Officer Cynthia Roy Gonzalez, and Community Housing Specialist Karen Sunnarborg.

Welcome and Introductions – Ms. McKnight, Co-Chair of the Housing Plan Working Group, offered a welcome and asked for a roll call of Working Group members. She mentioned that there was a quorum and additional members would be brought into the meeting as they became available. She also introduced staff and noted that the Town had a special website dedicated to the preparation of the Housing Plan at www.needhamma.gov/housingplan2021 and invited community members to access these housing resources.

While Ms. McKnight indicated that public comments will not be entertained as part of this meeting, the Working Group sponsored a Public Education and Listening Session on January 27th to obtain early input from the community on the Housing Plan and there will be other opportunities for community input throughout the planning process. She emphasized that written comments were also encouraged.

Approval of Meeting Minutes

Motion: Ms. Espada moved that the Minutes from the December 9, 2021 meeting be approved. The motion was seconded by Mr. Mertz. **Approved: 6-0 with Ms. Cooper abstaining as she was not present.**

Motion: Mr. Matthews moved that the Minutes from the January 27, 2022 Public Education and Listening Session be approved. The motion was seconded by Ms. Spector. **Unanimous: 7-0.**

Debriefing on January 27th Meeting – Ms. Espada indicated that the Working Group has a great deal of talent among its members and some have expressed an

interest in being more involved in preparing the Housing Plan. She went over a list of issues that were presented at the January 27th meeting and suggested that it might be useful to break into Subgroups to focus on particular categories of housing strategies. She then shared a first take on an organizational framework for these Subgroups. Mr. Mertz indicated that Subgroups would be a great structure to enable the Working Group to divide and conquer various elements by meeting in small groups between regular Working Group meetings. Ms. Espada added that NUARI has organized Subgroups which have been helpful.

Ms. Cooper thanked everyone for including her as part of the Working Group and suggested that breaking into groups was the only way to deal with the material, breaking it into manageable pieces. She stated that she was not sure she was fully aligned with the recommended categories.

Ms. McKnight indicated that she will be delving deeply into the zoning strategies and is particularly interested in the Housing Choice Initiative requirements for MBTA Communities. She added that while she is retired, she is involved with so many boards and committees that scheduling Subgroup meetings would be challenging. Consequently, she preferred daytime meetings.

Ms. Spector indicated that breaking into Subgroups was a great idea and offered that there were overlaps in the proposed categories of strategies that need to be addressed. Ms. Dorfman indicated that she was not sure what capacity building meant as a category, and Ms. Espada responded that the categories were just a first pass at trying to organize the Subgroups and deserve further discussion.

Ms. Gregory voiced her interest in participating in a Subgroup, expressing a particular interest in senior housing and some other topics. Mr. Cosgrove asked whether there can be a doodle poll to identify Working Group member preferences for particular Subgroups. Ms. Cooper would like to be on a Subgroup but suggested there be a different structure starting with a problem statement and moving to specific findings and solutions. She would like to see a topic on teardown activity.

Ms. Spector offered that it was difficult to fully articulate the full breath of any single topic under the proposed framework but stressed the need to focus on the MBTA Communities zoning issue and teardown activity. Ms. McKnight also proposed a doodle to evaluate responses from members on their interests in various topics and then appropriately divide them into Subgroups.

Ms. Cooper then suggested that starter housing was tied to teardowns. Ms. Spector mentioned that possibility of considering subsidized housing and market housing separately, also looking at different strategies related to seniors and first-time homebuyers. She stated that racial equity is an issue that is pertinent across all strategies and added that there could still be a category related to zoning.

Ms. Dorfman offered that the historic preservation category relates to changes to existing housing whereas housing development pertains to the creation of new units. She added that starter housing can be a product of both new construction and housing rehab or conversion. Additionally, she suggested that under housing development, there may be some consideration of subsidized versus market rate projects. She also mentioned that the Town already has permitting for ADUs and that regional approaches to housing production should be explored.

Mr. Matthews indicated that the initial grouping of actions was pretty good and interrelationships of housing issues across categories can be sorted out. He stressed the need to focus on goals and offered that the implementation of the NHA's Capital Plan should stand out on its own. Project plans are ready to go if the necessary pieces come together. He added that racial equity crosses over all issues, and that infrastructure needs have to be addressed. The Town has not had a property tax override in years but may have to do some rethinking on infrastructure investment in the future given continued growth. He added that the Group should not be too concerned about the specific Subgroup categories.

Ms. Espada stated that categories might include NHA, zoning, and perhaps a breakout under Housing Development by subsidized versus market rate units. Ms. McKnight suggested that the first two issues under the Capacity Building category are relevant to all actions but the capacity of Town resources and transportation/traffic issues are important. Working Group members should be able to answer questions related to these issues.

Ms. Cooper shared her screen and provided a spreadsheet for organizing the activities. Ms. Spector responded that the chart provided some clarity but the original breakdown was good too, concluding that everyone was on the right track.

Ms. McKnight mentioned the issue of time and recommended that there be a separate Subgroup on the NHA. She followed up with the suggestion of a doodle to help sort out the Subgroups.

Mr. Mertz recommended that there be a focus on housing goals, rethinking the goals that are listed on page 11 of the Housing Needs Assessment. Mr. Matthews said that developing some unified goals is a good idea, and members should submit written suggestions.

Ms. Espada concluded that the discussion of the Subgroups is fluid, and there will be more information forthcoming on a framework for moving forward.

Review of Draft Housing Needs Assessment – Ms. Sunnarborg provided a PowerPoint Presentation on the highlights of the draft Housing Needs Assessment with initial slides from the Public Education and Listening Session pertaining to the basics of affordable housing and key demographic, economic, and housing

characteristics and trends. She also presented some new slides related to indicators of need and other considerations that prioritize housing needs.

Ms. McKnight noted that the draft document is very detailed, and she has not gotten through it all. Mr. Nelson brought up the problem of limited options for those with disabilities including those for young adults who were raised in Needham. He added that approving changes to ADU requirements should not be a huge lift and that the Town should be able to tackle it in the near term. He further added that NHA has \$150 million in new funding available to make progress on its Capital Plan.

Mr. O'Brien said that the Housing Needs Assessment was very comprehensive and thorough but there should be more information on the impact of various actions on infrastructure and schools. He suggested that we need to look at the needs of multi-generations as well as those who work in Needham and would like to live in the community. He added that perhaps the upcoming survey can address this.

Ms. Dorfman mentioned that there should be a focus on first-time homeownership, offering that there are so many financing programs available and perhaps lenders can be helpful to those looking to purchase homes in Needham.

Mr. Matthews provided a slide comparing the definition of affordable housing in the Plan and a recommended alternative. He emphasized that need to look at affordability based on the ability to pay for the house, providing a further definition of market affordable housing. He suggested that there are two housing shortages, one related to subsidized affordable housing, which is affected by limited land availability, as well as market affordable housing which is largely caused by an imbalance in regional housing supply and demand.

Ms. Cooper indicated that she works in the affordable housing industry and emphasized that affordable housing is tied to income. She also mentioned different definitions of subsidized housing. She offered that it was important to enable households with different incomes and of different races to afford to live in Needham and also stated her agreement that the Working Group needs to come to an agreement on the definition of affordable housing.

Ms. Spector voiced her agreement and added that the term of affordable housing is a term of art. They include units that are subsidized by some governmental entity including tax credit projects. Affordable housing also includes units that people can afford including market rate affordable units.

Mr. Mertz mentioned that the NHA Capital Plan is very important and this Working Group's task is to support project feasibility. Hopefully there will be sufficient funding coming from the federal government. He offered the need to look at smaller units and greater density in proximity to the MBTA stations. He stressed

the importance of honest discussions with the community and the substantial need for more subsidized housing.

Mr. Matthews reemphasized the importance of the NHA Capital Plan which is almost shovel ready and should become a separate topic as part of this planning process. He suggested that there are a lot of things the Town can do to support development plans including help in the area of community relations. In regard to market affordable units, he stressed the need to increase the regional housing supply to bring prices down. He also noted that ADUs can be helpful in promoting market affordable units.

Ms. Cooper indicated that ADUs are still market-based units but perhaps there are ways to better promote them as affordable such as requiring that they be occupied by those with incomes at or below 80% AMI or available to Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher holders. She pointed out that there is currently a great deal of funding available for affordable housing through the American Rescue Plan, and this is an unprecedented time for new rental development which should help the NHA projects. She also identified the need for supportive housing for seniors and that the Town should be prepared to do a tax credit project. Mr. Mertz offered the example of a project that is being developed in East Boston that includes both market rate and affordable units as part of a private/public partnership.

Ms. Espada interjected that state requirements regarding MBTA Communities are moving forward with some deadlines in May, well before the Housing Plan is completed. Ms. McKnight suggested that the MBTA Communities requirements present a challenge which will involve by-right zoning for over 2,000 multi-family units within a half mile of transit in order to be in compliance.

Mr. Matthews pointed out that there are a lot of moving parts to the MBTA Communities guidelines that impact 175 communities in the region. He stated that the requirements involve zoning to include 50 acres, and early calculations suggest that Needham has 14 acres that meet the requirements. He said that the Town might consider allowing three-family dwellings by-right in the General Residence District. He added that the Town needs a thoughtful and engaged approach to the rezoning.

Ms. Dorfman inquired as to whether compliance with the MBTA Communities requirements is something the Town has to do and whether not being eligible for certain state funds is a problem. Mr. Matthews responded that the Town has not received much state funding in the past and non-compliance in the short-run is unlikely a problem. However, in the long-run it is better to comply given future benefits in better balancing housing supply and demand throughout the region.

Next Steps – Ms. Newman mentioned that the Working Group will next meet on March 10th to focus on plans for the Community Housing Workshop scheduled for March 24th. The Workshop will include a presentation of the highlights of the draft

Housing Needs Assessment and then small group discussions in breakout groups to obtain important community input on a vision for Needham's housing future, housing goals, as well as priority strategies. The Working Group also intends to conduct a Community Housing Survey as a means for obtaining further community input and will hold another community-wide forum to present the Strategic Action Plan once it has been prepared.

Mr. Mertz suggested that it would be helpful to promote the participation of those who work in Needham as part of the planning process. Ms. Espada responded that it would be useful to check with Ms. Gonzalez on this.

9:01 p.m. **Motion: Ms. Espada moved that the meeting be adjourned. The motion was seconded by Mr. Matthews. Unanimous: 11-0.**