



Large House Review (LHR) Committee Meeting Minutes
Monday, July 21, 2025
7:00 p.m.

Committee Members Present:

Artie Crocker Planning Board Member / Planning Board Designee (Co-Chair)
Bill Paulson Real Estate Broker appointed by the Planning Board
Oscar Mertz Architect appointed by the Planning Board
Joe Matthews At Large appointed by the Planning Board
Jeanne McKnight Planning Board Member / Planning Board Designee
Moe Handel Design Review Board Member / Design Review Board Designee (Co-Chair)
Rob Dangel At Large appointed by the Planning Board
Marianne Cooley Select Board Member / Select Board Designee
Heidi Frail Select Board Member / Select Board Designee
Ed Quinlan At Large appointed by the Planning Board

Staff Present:

Lee Newman, Director of Planning & Community Development
Alex Clee, Assistant Planner

Committee Members Absent:

Nik Ligris Zoning Board of Appeals Member / Zoning Board of Appeals Designee
Tina Burgos Finance Committee Member / Finance Committee Designee
Paul McGovern Developer appointed by the Planning Board
Chris Cotter At Large appointed by the Planning Board

1. Welcome and Introductions

Introductions of Committee members present were made.

2. Presentation *Oscar Mertz*

Oscar Mertz explained that the Committee saw its role as reviewing the impact from the 2017 bylaw and which trends have been occurring in Needham. The Committee also looked at similar towns regarding their rules and processes. Needham does not currently have any processes around large house review, and these are allowed by-right. The Committee considered an analysis of how to adjust some of the dimensional controls currently being used in order to adjust the size of houses. The Committee discussed wanting to determine an appropriately sized house for the size of a lot. The Committee reviewed 32 nonconforming and conforming lots in terms of the range of sizes on the lots. All of the homes reviewed seemed to be maximizing on the floor area ratio (FAR, with a 0.38 FAR for any lot under 12,000 s.f. and a 0.36 FAR for lots over 12,000 s.f. The Committee discussed a basic program with assumptions around what houses should have as a minimum target. Many of the houses sampled often exceeded those basic programs. The Committee reviewed which houses it felt were too big for the lots with many

46 conversations that height seemed often to trigger this. The Committee discussed what impacts
47 there could be from reducing the allowable height, which is currently 35'. The Committee
48 discussed some other potential adjustments to the dimensional controls for a house on a given lot
49 such as that the FAR definition may need to include the first floor, second floor, attic, and
50 garage. The controls could provide for less than a 600 s.f. allowance of a garage. The question of
51 including basements was discussed by the Committee but the thought was that basements are not
52 often part of the visible structure of a house. A 50% exposed basement could trigger including
53 the basement in the FAR; or if any basement is included in FAR it could be pro-rated based on
54 the percent exposed. At the moment, most of the Committee feels that the FAR calculation
55 should include the first floor, second floor, attic, and the garage. The Committee also discussed
56 property setbacks. Side setbacks could be considered as an additional dimensional control
57 without having many negative impacts. The Committee considered coordination with the Town's
58 tree bylaws and stormwater bylaw. There may be a consideration for larger setbacks in historic
59 districts. There was agreement on the Committee not to legislate anything that has to do with the
60 design of a house, such as the aesthetic appeal. The Committee also discussed preservation of
61 trees around the perimeter of lots. The Committee discussed the redefinition of FAR and
62 potentially setting a baseline or maximum and then allowing a range compared to the actual lot
63 size.

64 65 3. Conversation / Listening session with Builders. *Moe Handel*

66
67 Moe Handel explained that this is a study Committee which will bring recommendations to the
68 Planning Board. This purpose of tonight is to engage with the development community around
69 the issues just presented on.

70
71 Tripp Pace, 99 Evelyn Road, asked if anyone on the Committee is a practiced surveyor in terms
72 of discussing potential height restrictions for houses. Most plans are currently under 32' in
73 height. The Committee noted that the houses reviewed were in the 32'-34' range with some
74 coming close to the 35' height. Mr. Pace stated that he does not believe garages should be
75 included in the FAR calculation, though the maximum could be decreased from 600 s.f. to 500
76 s.f. instead. This would make the look from the street more aesthetically pleasing without
77 removing potential living space for buyers. Bill Paulson stated that, if the garage is included in
78 the FAR, the builder would have more flexibility overall. Mr. Pace agreed that this could be a
79 possibility.

80
81 There was discussion regarding lots being raised due to the basement areas. Nick Tatar, 14
82 Standish Road, stated that there are three properties in his neighborhood that have clearly been
83 raised or mounded. Garrett Federow, Federow Development, stated that there are areas in Town
84 that have a lot of ledge, and it may be necessary to raise the lot to bring the houses out of the
85 water table. This can lead to issues with the pitches of the roof. He stated that change is
86 inevitable and there should only be so much regulation on people's properties. He has been
87 through the Total Living Area plus Garage Space (TLAG) process in Wellesley and there is a 35'
88 rule to show the setbacks from nearby houses. Combining the regulations with the new stretch
89 code items can make building more expensive overall.

91 The Committee asked if developers are generally building smaller houses in Wellesley than in
92 Needham. Lou Wolfson stated that larger homes become more valuable over time than smaller
93 homes. People need extra space for the mixture of family dynamics. Much of Needham was
94 previously filled in order to bring them out of the water table. Builders include perimeter drains
95 and sump pumps to help with these issues. Attics do not add to the bulk of a home. Larger, more
96 stately homes in surrounding towns have finished third floors. In Wellesley, many of the homes
97 are moving toward truss designs in order to accommodate the regulations. He expressed concern
98 regarding the potential changes to the side setbacks.

100 The Committee stated that there was a sentiment expressed in the survey results that some of the
101 houses being built in Town are too large for the lots and do not fit into the neighborhood.

103 Juan Wolf, builder, stated that there are already constraints due to the updated energy code.
104 Adding additional constraints, as is being discussed, will make it more difficult to build in Town.
105 There are not only market-driven conditions, but also family situations have changed. Most
106 builders will take the path to tear down and rebuild as a way to maximize profits on a lot.
107 Starting with a smaller lot and a more affordable house leads to less space to make any profit. He
108 asked how the efforts of this Committee may interact with the efforts toward ADUs. Artie
109 Crocker explained that ADUs will fit within the existing lot requirements. These will not
110 increase the allowances on the lot. The Committee discussed that smaller lot sizes could lead to
111 less opportunity for ADUs and this should be considered. Not all lots are created equally.

113 Rob Dangel stated that Wellesley noted that there was a noticeable drop in tear downs and
114 rebuilds once they began their large house regulations. This then picked up after some time.
115 Wellesley stated that they did not see a large impact on home values. He asked what these
116 changes could have on the prices for smaller lots. Mr. Olson stated that prices will likely only be
117 impacted for a short period of time because demand will increase the values along with the cost
118 of construction. Larger homes will end up costing more.

120 Kevin Griffin, Griffin Building & Development, stated that in Wellesley smaller homes are still
121 being sold at the same price point as the larger homes. This could lead to people migrating to
122 other towns. Needham has better zoning laws in terms of its setbacks which sets it apart. He
123 expressed concern that the proposed changes could increase the price of smaller and larger
124 homes in Town. Many builders may pause their work to see if the market supports the proposed
125 changes, if they go into effect.

127 The Committee noted that houses in Wellesley that do not go through the TLAG process tend to
128 be significantly smaller than the houses in Needham and sell at a premium. Mr. Griffin agreed.
129 He stated that he believes Needham will see a drop in prices for tear downs because builders will
130 not want to gamble to see if the market will support the change in prices. Artie Crocker asked
131 what kind of change could be proposed regarding the bulk of a house that would not have a
132 negative impact on builders.

134 Mr. Tatar stated that he sees multigenerational living occurring near him in smaller capes that
135 have had small additions or renovations made to them. He also knows of people who have

136 purchased large houses because that it all that was available. He asked that the Committee take
137 care in describing what sorts of families purchase each type of home. This is not a simple issue.
138

139 Mr. Federow stated that most of his customers use the current FAR ratios as closely as possible,
140 but this is not always the case. He has had customers who did not build out their lot but still
141 received complaints from neighbors. It is impossible to make everyone happy.
142

143 Mike Niden, 178 South Street, stated that he does not see the demand for housing in Town
144 changing. He stated that he does not see the less than 10,000 s.f. being effected by the proposed
145 changes. There are people who want to move into Town and are willing to spend the money to
146 do so. The modifications may impact things in the short-term but likely will not in the long-term.
147 He asked about the Wellesley process. Mr. Federow stated that the Wellesley zoning board
148 process was quick in terms of a requested variance. This had a lot to do with their recent zoning
149 changes. The large house review is a long process of approximately 2-3 months, including many
150 requirements. Rob Dangel stated that the infrastructure Wellsley has for manpower is more than
151 Needham currently has. The Town would need new processes to allow for flexibility to
152 accommodate the changes.
153

154 Diane Hughes Valente, real estate agent, stated that she has heard about families where some
155 members are working at home and need the extra bedrooms as office spaces. Also, some
156 insurance companies will not cover certain properties if there are large trees that are not being
157 removed. She stated that those who are buying large houses love them. She expressed concern
158 regarding elderly people who make money on houses that have not been kept up well and this
159 opportunity being removed for them. If the houses are made smaller, they will cost more per
160 square foot. People will then buy in other towns. She stated that limiting house sizes will be a
161 detriment to most people and will fly in the face of ADUs. Artie Crocker stated that people find a
162 way to make alternative spaces, such as in a basement, work for home offices.
163

164 Mr. Tatar stated that a 14'-16' side setback change would likely not change the types of trees that
165 could be planted between houses. There may not be space for replanting trees in the front or back
166 of lots with the proposed changes. This would likely lead to smaller plantings.
167

168 Mr. Niden stated that the Committee could consider some changes at the Planning Board level in
169 order to match the way Wellesley is doing things.
170

171 Joe Matthews stated that there seems to be a lot of third floor space built and the 600 s.f. garages
172 because they do not count toward the FAR. If this did count toward the FAR it is unclear if
173 owners would prefer this space in a different area of the house, leading to a wider house instead
174 of a taller house. In terms of the height impact, the intention is to reduce the height while
175 allowing for a limit that allows for three stories.
176

177 The Committee explained that its work would continue through the summer and there would be
178 public hearings likely in the fall based on potential recommendations. These would then be
179 brought to the Planning Board which would have its own review and public hearing process. The
180 Committee continues to seek public input and would like to hear from anyone who has an
181 interest in this matter.

182
183 4. Approval of meeting minutes. *Artie Crocker*
184

185 Upon motion duly made by Moe Handel and seconded by Oscar Mertz, it was voted to approve
186 the meeting minutes of June 23, 2025, as amended. By roll call, the motion passed unanimously.
187

188 A builder requested that the Committee review 59 Henderson Street and 345 Central Avenue in
189 terms of their size and the way they blend into the neighborhoods.
190

191 5. Update on 3D Modeling. *Oscar Mertz*
192

193 Oscar Mertz stated that the modeling has begun with the consultant. A first round of proposed
194 reductions on the smallest house will be presented at the Committee's next meeting. This process
195 should be completed by the end of August.
196

197 6. Update on Fiscal Analysis RFP. *Lee Newman*
198

199 Lee Newman stated that the scopes of work for the Value Analysis and Fiscal Impact are
200 complete. The RFP will likely go out on Friday, with responses back in two weeks. This will
201 then coordinate with the modeling information.
202

203 Upon motion duly made by Moe Handel and seconded by Oscar Mertz, it was voted to adjourn at
204 9:02 p.m. By roll call, the motion passed unanimously.
205

206 *Respectfully submitted,*
207 *Kristan Patenaude*