

Minutes
LARGE HOUSE REVIEW STUDY COMMITTEE
Thursday, June 26, 2014 8:00 AM
Charles River Room PSAB

Members Present: Elizabeth Grimes, Marianne Cooley, Jeff Kristeller, Mark Gluesing, Jeff Heller, Lindsay Acomb, Gary Lesanto, Krista McFadden, Imogene Hatch, Gary Kaufman; and Lee Newman, David Roche, Karen Sunnarborg and Alexandra Clee, staff.

Not Present: Jon Schneider and Jeanne McKnight.

The meeting was opened by Director of Planning and Community Development, Lee Newman, at approximately 8:05 a.m. Ms. Newman informed the Committee that since the last meeting, she pulled together a small working group primarily of people from the design field, to assist the Department in looking at lot coverage and how adjusting lot coverage on both a conforming and non-conforming lot affects bulk. Also, it would be helpful if people would like to volunteer to be on a subcommittee on an issue that they have an interest in or an expertise in.

Ms. Newman stated that then next item of business for the Committee is to elect a Chairperson. Mr. Gluesing made a motion to nominate Elizabeth Grimes. The Committee voted unanimously to nominate Elizabeth Grimes as Chairperson to the Large House Review Study Committee.

Ms. Grimes asked if there were comments or questions on the minutes from the May 22, 2014 meeting. She asked for a motion to approve the meeting minutes. Mr. Gluesing made a motion to approve the minutes. The Committee voted unanimously to approve the minutes of the May 22, 2014 meeting of the Large House Review Study Committee.

Ms. Grimes asked if anyone had a chance to drive by Williams Street and Ware Road to review the different architecture. Mr. Heller stated he lives near there and has witnessed the evolution. He thinks there is a variety of houses, both large houses squeezed in and some nice ranches that are good starter homes.

Mr. Kaufman stated he has been into almost all of the houses that were torn down in the 2014 list that was emailed. He thinks the group should focus on architectural suggestions and not necessarily drastically changing the foot print or lot coverage. Almost all of the homes needed modernization. Two questions are very important: 1) If you are a seller, and a builder would give you \$600,000 for the house and an end user would give you \$500,000, who would you sell to? 2) If you are a buyer, how do you purchase a house for \$600,000 to compete with the builder, if you know that it needs a lot of work (and then be underwater on the house)?

Ms. Newman said it is important to maintain value and maintain the marketability.

Ms. Grimes turned the conversation to Ms. Sunnarborg to discuss the table that she created regarding 2014 tear down activity in Town, as compared with the new homes being built on those lots. Ms. Sunnarborg has provided additional research, per the request of the Committee. She explained the table that was provided.

Mr. Kaufman stated that the newer public data is more accurate than the older public data. Mr. Gluesing noted that you can still study a trend.

Ms. Grimes collected the sales price for the demolitions. It could be helpful to have resale value. Mr. Kaufman and Ms. Grimes will provide that information.

Mr. Kaufman stated that Needham is perceived as cheap compared to Wellesley and Newton. It's a whole economic system that is tied together.

Mr. Kristeller acknowledged this is true, but the question is what does the town look like for the people who are still living here, versus those who are selling? It used to be the trend in this town to live in a \$600K house for 20+ years and do \$200K worth of work in that timeframe. He is hearing that the character of the Town is changing, demographically and psychically. There needs to be a balance of the issues.

Mr. Heller stated he hopes the Committee can get to a point where the conversation can be about various by-laws and the pros and cons of implementing them.

Ms. Newman noted that the Planning Department has collected information from other towns (Newton, Wellesley, Weston), who have taken the FAR approach, and there is a table that summarizes each. She will invite Planners from these towns to come in and talk to the Committee.

Ms. Clee showed the map that illustrates the location of tear downs over the past several years. Ms. Newman stated that she was surprised by the broad area that the tear downs are happening; they are not as focused into clusters as she had expected they would be.

Mr. Kristeller said if you went back about 20 years, there would be more pockets.

Mr. Kaufman stated this goes back to the economics, as well as the schools. Usually a large driving force is the Elementary School.

Mr. Kristeller clarified that his comment meant that some neighborhoods don't have as many tear downs, as shown on the map, because they've already been done.

Mr. Gluesing asked the Committee how the Ware neighborhood feels to them. It's one of the few consistent new neighborhoods after the late 90s changes. What are the Committee's thoughts on the siting on the lot, relationship with the street and with the other homes, density, etc.

Ms. Hatch thinks the Ware neighborhood is a nice neighborhood. She likes the preserved trees. And likes the character of the neighborhood and prefers it over the Williams neighborhood.

Ms. Grimes suggested that everyone revisit these neighborhoods.

Mr. Kristeller likes the character of his neighborhood (defined by Railroad tracks, Greendale and Great Plain). There are some homes with additions and a few tear downs here and there. It could be helpful to do an analysis of a neighborhood like this and get into the nitty gritty of the numbers.

Mr. Kaufman noted that the economics wouldn't work in this neighborhood; these Streets wouldn't be affected. Mr. Kristeller clarified that his point would be to find out what a neighborhood that they like looks like in terms of numbers, what is the Committee trying to model.

Ms. Newman agreed that it would be helpful to identify what neighborhoods they find attractive and then identify the components of them that make them attractive. And then look at whether our zoning leads us in that direction.

Ms. McFadden thinks that Laurel Drive is also a nice street that is built-up, already dense and has an Oak Tree canopy. You can see what happens when there's a tear down in an already dense neighborhood.

Mr. Kaufman noted that most of the lots on Laurel are so narrow that the economics wouldn't warrant additional tear downs.

Mr. Heller added that the neighborhoods by Pollard are nice, Coolidge Street, etc. Mr. Gluesing thinks it's an area that is a nice consistent stretch of older houses in Needham. He has looked at this area before. Almost all of those houses have detached garages. People are looking for attached garages in new construction.

Ms. Grimes introduced the next item on the agenda. Mr. Gluesing and Ms. McFadden drew up some examples. They used one conforming house and one non-conforming house. They used the actual dimensions of homes built on each of the lots at the current lot coverage requirement and then showed what the floor plan might look like at a lower lot coverage. They showed how a similar program (meaning the kitchen, family room, etc) would look with less lot coverage and where and what would have to be squeezed or removed. Both conforming and non-conforming lots were used as examples.

John Rufo, a resident of Needham, asked what the Committee's take away from the study prepared by Mr. Gluesing and Ms. McFadden is. Mr. Gluesing replied that there is not take-away just yet.

The Committee noted that with the lower lot coverage, some architectural features cannot be included.

Mr. Gluesing noted that the same program is preferred for both new construction as well as renovations/additions.

Ms. Hatch asked how many lots are non-conforming. Ms. Newman says we can come up with those lots that are non-conforming due to lot size but coming up with frontage would be harder. The Department can pull together the data for review by the Committee.

Mr. Kaufman said that the lot would have to be acquired for less because it would be sold for less. Mr. Roche said there must be a market for the medium sized houses.

Mr. Lesanto said that the Committee is now talking about what people should or shouldn't do/buy/sell with their homes; they should be talking about *if* people decide to sell their homes as a tear down, then what by-laws can be put in place that can create and add architectural beauty and character to the neighborhood.

Mr. Kaufman stated that homes on the property cards that were sent out to the Committee went to market before they were purchased by builders.

Ms. McFadden said that, with this market, more people are willing to do work in order to be able to purchase a home in Needham. She wondered how efficiently are the homes actually being used; are homes being built to what people want and use. In other words, who's driving the market – the builders or the buyers?

Ms. McFadden said that her preferred method is to use Floor Area Ratio (FAR) because it allows for more flexibility. Mr. Gluesing asked if the approach was FAR and there was more room to play with on the first floor, would anyone do a first floor master. Mr. Lesanto and Mr. Kaufman stated that very few people would prefer that.

Mr. Heller stated that the diversity of homes in Needham is what makes it attractive. Mr. Kaufman added that Needham is \$300-400K cheaper than Wellesley, which makes it attractive. Mr. Kristeller stated that some people prefer Needham because of the character.

Mr. Lesanto said that the regulations in Wellesley are such that the houses have lost some architectural features.

Ms. Newman will ask Newton and Wellesley to come in at the next two meetings. Mr. Gluesing said he'd like to know how each municipality studied the issue.

Mr. Gluesing and Ms. McFadden will look at updating the sketches. Ms. Hatch asked for photos at the following meeting. Ms. Acomb said that it would be helpful to know how the new homes look from the back, not just from the street.

Wrap up – Next meeting Committee Meeting will be July 24, 2014 at 8:00 a.m. Meeting adjourned at approximately 9:35 a.m.