

Minutes
LARGE HOUSE REVIEW STUDY COMMITTEE
Thursday, August 28, 2014 8:00 AM
Charles River Room PSAB

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

Not Present: Jeanne McKnight.

The meeting was opened by Committee Chairperson, Elizabeth Grimes, at approximately 8:00 a.m. Ms. Grimes asked if there were comments or questions on the minutes from the July 24, 2014 meeting. The Committee voted unanimously to approve the minutes of the July 24, 2014 meeting of the Large House Review Study Committee.

Mark Gluesing and Krista McFadden made some changes to the floor plans and elevations that were shown at a previous meeting. A member of the Engineering staff helped them. Mr. Gluesing explained that with the change in lot coverage, 5% of the footprint is lost. For the most part, the larger lot coverage has a bigger first floor plan and a similar second floor plan. The reason they looked at this was to examine what the impact of changing the lot coverage is.

Mr. Kaufman said that in the past, the dormer rule has affected an architect's ability to make the house more aesthetically pleasing to the street.

Mr. Gluesing replied that is something the committee should and will look at. One of the first questions floating around in the committee was how does reducing lot coverage affect the house? The examples show this; the second floor is pretty much the same, sitting on a smaller first floor. Ms. McFadden clarified that the height of the building did not change. The second floor was expanded over the garage and the study or family room came off of the first floor.

Mr. Kaufman said that the first floor study is very important to buyers in Needham, as is the size of the kitchen and family room.

Ms. McFadden said that it a good argument for why Floor-Area-Ratio (FAR) may be a better tool than lot coverage, because it gives more flexibility to owner or builder. Mr. Kristeller added that with lot coverage you're more likely to end up with a box.

Mr. Gluesing asked if there are buyers for a fourth bedroom being on the first floor. The reply is that the fourth bedroom has to be on the second floor.

Ms. Newman stated that most lots are not taking advantage of the maximum lot coverage of the current rules. 66% of homes in the Single Residence B district has lot coverage values of under

15%; 90% of them are under the 20% lot coverage level. 8% of the houses are between 20% and 25%.

Ms. Newman showed the Committee the maps that the GIS Administrator prepared. The analysis included the first floor, second floor, additional finished areas (lofts, etc) and attached garage. Finished basements were not included. The average FAR is around 20% with a median of 19.4%. About 30% of the properties had FARs above 25% and of these 5.6% were more than 40%. In comparison, the 25 properties we previously examined that involved demolition and replacement activity from January through May 12, 2014, the FARs ranged from 24.5% and 71.9%, with almost three-quarters over 40%.

Mr. Kaufman reported that over half of the houses that are being built are being built by owners; they are not just being built spec.

Ms. Grimes stated that from the examples that Mr. Gluesing and Ms. McFadden provided and from the conversation of the Committee thus far, it seems like lot coverage is not the method the Committee wants to pursue. She asked the Committee if this is the correct conclusion and the Committee agreed.

Ms. Newman stated that the Committee should think about both Wellesley and Newton's approaches. Wellesley's is a square footage limit for home and garage size and applies across zoning district; Newton's approach is a floating FAR, a percentage. The next step is to have a conversation about these approaches and if the Committee feels it is appropriate, to bring in someone from Newton.

Mr. Lesanto noted that in Wellesley you have to go to Zoning Board to build on any non-conforming lot, whereas in Needham you can build on them without having to go to Zoning Board. Mr. Kristeller said that is a significant difference; it means there are a lot of smaller homes in Wellesley that likely won't be touched.

Ms. Newman noted that 24.3% of the inventory is less than 10,000 square feet, meaning they are non-conforming in terms of lot size. 17.2% of the inventory of non-conforming in terms of both lot size *and* FAR.

Mr. Kristeller stated that there is value in having an original house that has been added to, versus a tear down. He wondered if there is a way to encourage additions instead of tear downs. Although some homes will need to be torn down no matter what.

Mr. Lesanto stated that both additions and tear downs should be permitted in zoning and market factors should determine what someone wants to do. There should not be greater incentive for one over another; should be equitable. Ms. McFadden added that the zoning should apply to either.

Mr. Kaufman noted that a homeowner could end up putting more money into the purchase and an addition on a home than the house is worth; i.e. purchase for \$700,000 and addition and upgrades for \$300,000 for a total of one million dollars into a home that may only be worth

\$900,000.

Ms. McFadden asked if people who live in older houses will be penalized by having less setback to work with to add additions.

Mr. Gluesing said that renovations should be easy. There are some things that can be included that in a small way can encourage renovations, like allowing dormers, etc.

Mr. Schneider finds it discouraging that the Zoning Board of Appeals cannot grant a special permit to allow people to horizontally extend when they have already a setback violation, since the Amendment to the Zoning By-Law ten years ago. People can go up but not horizontal.

Ms. Newman said we could look at options to make it easier to expand existing houses. Mr. Schneider stated they always grant the special permit to allow the vertical expansion. Mr. Gluesing said the Committee could consider making certain things as-of-right.

Ms. Grimes asked if we could pull some examples showing different FARs. Mr. Gluesing and Ms. McFadden can keep working with the examples. The Committee will need to decide what is included in FAR.

Mr. Lesanto asked what the square footage that is comfortable is. Mr. Gluesing said 3,600 with the garage extra allowance works, with a smaller study and garage. He did pretty much the same house in Wellesley and Needham, the one in Needham is smaller. He will show the Committee the examples. Mr. Kaufman said 3,800 to 4,000 square feet is what is being built these days, not including the garage.

Mr. Lesanto said he does not see why it would matter if someone finished an underground basement for a play room. It doesn't change the massing or the neighbor's view. Mr. Schneider agreed that the Committee most cares about the massing, versus the living space. Mr. Lesanto said that finishing an attic visibly is different.

Mr. Gluesing explained that previously, dormers were not allowed in Needham. If people saw them, they were generally fake. During the last Large House study, they wanted to encourage renovations, so they allowed limited dormers. The unintended consequence is that they were limited too much. The Committee discussed how much dormers space should be allowed.

Ms. Hatch said Site Plan Review is an opportunity to look at the impact of new construction beyond the size of the floor plate and massing of the house. It is a good tool; not necessarily for Needham, but allows Wellesley to look at trees, drainage, etc. If we don't have an "out" (like Site Plan Review), we would need to be really comfortable with our threshold.

Ms. Newman said she doesn't understand why we wouldn't want an "out" or an escape valve. Mr. Gluesing stated that if there is any review process, there should be a special committee and there should be a short process, like one month.

Ms. Grimes stated that next steps will be to look at if we do limit FAR, what that will look like. The Committee then discussed walk-out basements and dormers.

We will look at conforming and non-conforming lots and a range of volumes on those lots, specifically 3,800 and 4,200 square feet plus the garage (at 600 square feet).

Ms. Newman said that other controls that the committee has talked about are controls on trees, storm water, retaining walls. She said we can look at some of these issues at the next meeting. Mr. Lesanto said that property owners should be able to take down their own trees. Ms. Hatch stated that trees add more than just aesthetics, such as storm water benefits as well as heating and cooling benefits. Mr. Lesanto said that Wellesley gives you an out, via payment into a fund. The Planning Department will pull together what other towns are doing with respect to trees for the next meeting. A future meeting will include drainage and retaining walls. We will also discuss in the future where we measure the setbacks and what we allow to occur within the setback. Another issue is where to measure height from to avoid the dirt apron around a home.

Wrap up – The next meeting is September 25, but it is Rosh Hashanah, so we will reschedule it. The next meeting Committee Meeting was scheduled for October 2, 2014 at 8:00 a.m. (*note: the meeting was subsequently rescheduled for October 9, 2014 at 8:00 a.m.*) Meeting adjourned at approximately 9:40 a.m.