

Minutes
LARGE HOUSE REVIEW STUDY COMMITTEE
Friday, November 7, 2014 8:00 AM
Charles River Room PSAB

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

Not Present: Imogene Hatch.

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 October 9, 2014 meeting. The Committee voted unanimously to approve the minutes of the October 9, 2014 meeting of the Large House Review Study Committee, after two typos were corrected.

Ms. McFadden showed a new model of a home on a conforming lot; the home is 3,600 square feet, which is an example that the Committee wanted to see. The previous model house that the Committee has been reviewing is approximately 3,750 square feet, not including the garage (which is 506 square feet). 150 square feet were eliminated. To do this, she mostly took out circulation space; it is less grand, but the program is mostly the same. For the 4,200 square feet example house, Ms. McFadden added 200 square feet to the original floor plan on the first floor (which included an additional full bathroom and expanded living space) and 250 square feet to the second floor (which could include a fifth bedroom, or to add walk-in closets or expanded bedroom space). For the first example, the lot coverage is 21%, with first floor being approximately 1,700 square feet, not including garage. The second example has a lot coverage of 24.5%, with first floor being approximately 1,950 square feet, not including garage. The lot is 10,019 square feet.

Mr. Gluesing stated that the previous non-conforming example that the Committee was looking at was 3,050 square feet. He showed the non-conforming lot the Committee at 3,600 square feet. There was room for a breakfast area, a larger mud room and a pantry, as well as expanded living space. The second floor allowed larger laundry room and larger master bedroom suite. It makes for a more comfortable space with the same program. Next, he showed sample site plans that illustrated lot coverage. When he looked at doing a 4,200 square foot plan on a 7,071 square foot lot, it fills a lot of the lot. The first sample site plan shows the site plan of the example the Committee had been looking at, with 25% lot coverage. The second example site plan shows that a house of 3,530 square feet would take up 29.7% of lot coverage on this sized lot. The third example site plan shows a 4,200 square foot house on the same sized lot. This house is built right to the setback line and takes up 33% of lot coverage. He did the diagrams because this is the house that was built before the current regulations (which were put in place 15 years ago) and he didn't feel it would be productive to do floor plans of a house that would be going backwards. The site plans show the difference on the non-conforming lot.

Mr. Schneider asked if they are suggesting that lot coverage be loosened to build a better house architecturally. Mr. Gluesing said no, they were just illustrating the 3,600 and 4,200 square foot houses. They thought about looking at a 9,000 square foot non-conforming lot, but it would be so close to the 10,000 square foot conforming example.

Ms. McKnight asked if a ranch house already violated lot coverage, could they take it down and rebuild it. Mr. Schneider said the Zoning Board of Appeals would issue a Special Permit. The Planning Board says you can't voluntarily do this. If it's a one or two family house, there's a provision in the Zoning By-Law that speaks to this.

Mr. Kaufman asked if they took into consideration the trend of elderly living with parents. Mr. Gluesing said the Committee has talked about it. If you use Floor Area Ratio (FAR), you can ease up on lot coverage so that you can have flexibility to do a more variety of design. Mr. Kaufman stated that it is a trend nation-wide. Mr. Gluesing said it's tough to do at 3,600 square feet. At 4,200 square feet, Ms. McFadden was able to add the full bathroom on the first floor.

Mr. Roche said that our Zoning By-Law states what a dwelling unit is. He has had a lot of inquiries about in-law units. Mr. Schneider said it's a way to work towards affordable housing.

Mr. Gluesing stated that the non-conforming lots have a bigger impact. The Committee needs to think about the non-conforming lot. Mr. Lesanto said maybe something like a step increase.

Mr. Gluesing said Newton doesn't think FAR is best because the program for the house is the same. If the program for the house is the same no matter what, no one is taking advantage of the FAR.

Mr. Lesanto asked if anyone's seen a different approach that has been successful. Mr. Gluesing said he's really only seen FAR or lot coverage. The program doesn't change. Ms. Cooley asked if there's a way to use setbacks and FAR. She likes the idea of the flexibility. Ms. McFadden said that FAR gives flexibility if the program changes in the future.

Ms. Newman said that in Needham setbacks are measured from overhangs and bay windows, rather than the foundation. There was an idea to make an adjustment to add some restriction on setback but then measure from the foundation. Mr. Lesanto said he adds a window bump out because it can make a smaller room make a much more grand appearance, so it's a good way to go. It encourages architectural diversity.

Mr. Roche stated we're one of the only towns that measure this way. It makes it difficult for the Building Department because they can't certify it until everything is in. He'd also like to allow basic bulk heads, generators etc in the setbacks. But the setbacks need to be increased to make up for this. He would like to see the setbacks in every residential zone the same. Unenclosed entry porches with a roof would be allowed also. Mr. Schneider said it makes sense from a safety point of view. Mr. Kaufman added that it is a nice look.

Mr. Roche counts air conditioning units as accessory structures. He thinks bulk heads should be exempt because it's a safety issue.

In some towns, the front setback is dictated by the setbacks on either side. It enables you to get a nice street line. Brookline has an example of this, as does Norwood. There's still a minimum setback. It can push houses forward and have the garage in the back.

Ms. McKnight asked if the attached garage is important to people. The Committee said it is very much desired. Mr. Kaufman said some people have thought about it, but they've wanted to add a covered breezeway, which wouldn't be allowed in Needham. Mr. Gluesing said they tried to incentivize a detached garage in previous zoning amendment; detached garages allows for greater square footage. It is rarely used.

Ms. McFadden said maybe they should look at incentivize putting the garage, or larger garages, in the back of the house, even if it is attached. Mr. Lesanto says it's hard to put it in the back. Ms. McFadden said if your lot is so narrow that you can't get a garage in the front, then you have a deeper lot that would allow the garage in the back. Mr. Kristeller said you often end up with an unfortunate design.

Mr. Roche said if you increase the side setback, it would allow room for a driveway down the side of the house. There has also been push to limit the size of accessory structures. He has seen by-laws where the setback of accessory structures is determined by the height of said structure. The current setback of accessory buildings is only 5 feet.

Ms. McKnight asked if there's a demand for work-at-home space. Mr. Roche said they get phone calls about this. He said the answer is usually no, because of deliveries etc. The home occupation provision was more designed for professionals with a small office in the home. You can have plumbing in the accessory building. It just can't be a dwelling unit.

Mr. Schneider thinks that in the smaller lots, accessory structures should be limited on 10,000 square foot lots; but in districts with larger lot sizes, he doesn't think they should be limited. Mr. Kristeller thinks there should be a limit on these on smaller lots.

Mr. Roche said in Norwood the building can be 5-10 feet of the lot line, but the building is limited to 15 feet high.

Ms. Newman asked to circle back to reach some conclusions. She hears there is consensus on changing the setbacks to allow for overhangs in the setback, about restricting the accessory structures relative to height. The Committee agreed. Mr. Schneider said that he thinks the drainage issue is far more offensive than the other issues.

Mr. Roche said he downloaded some sample stormwater by-laws. There is not a lot on residential. Mr. Heller said he thinks there is a lot of support, but that it's a larger conversation. Ms. Newman said it's on the next meeting agenda.

Ms. Grimes asked Mr. Roche what setback number should be if they change it. He replied about 14 or 14.5. There is also a provision that after 28 linear feet of wall, the wall has to be pushed back another 2 feet. Ms. Newman said it doesn't have to be exactly there, it just has to be somewhere along the way. Ms. Gluesing said we have to find a number that doesn't give us a large garage and then only a 15 foot wide house.

Mr. Roche said he thinks it would be easier if it was uniform in all the residential zones.

Mr. Kristeller thinks there should be a compromise that allows bump-outs to go a little further into the setback than now, but the house would stay the same size.

Ms. Newman suggested they should create a small working group and they will bring back more details to the Committee. Ms. McKnight stated she is interested in stormwater and would be glad to work with Mr. Roche on it and finding examples.

Mr. Roche explained Wellesley's regulation on retaining wall. Over 15 feet is a special permit in Wellesley. Currently Needham will require engineering for some larger walls; it is on a case by case basis. Mr. Roche said they also require certain walls to have fences on top or other fall protection.

Mr. Kaufman said he'd like to encourage retaining walls be made of natural stone. Versa log is much less expensive. Mr. Lesanto said that he doesn't know how you start choosing building materials and where does that stop. Mr. Schneider said the Wellesley approach says after a certain height it needs a special permit and design review, which would give the opportunity to speak to this. The Committee seems to like the tiered approach.

Ms. Grimes asked for a small group to form a working committee. Mr. Kaufman, Mr. Lesanto, Mr. Kristeller, Mr. Gluesing and Ms. McFadden will serve on the working group on this issue.

Ms. Newman said at the next meeting, they will bring back language from the working group, as well as start the conversation on stormwater with Tony Del Gaizo.

Wrap up – The next meeting is December 4, 2014 at 8:00 a.m. (*note: the meeting was subsequently rescheduled for December 18, 2014 at 8:00 a.m.*) Meeting adjourned at approximately 9:30 a.m.