

Minutes
LARGE HOUSE REVIEW STUDY COMMITTEE
Thursday February 26, 2015 8:00 AM
Charles River Room PSAB

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

Not Present: Jon Schneider and Imogene Hatch.

The meeting was opened by Committee Chairperson, Elizabeth Grimes, at approximately 8:00 a.m. Ms. Grimes stated that the Committee received a letter from Joan Sheridan regarding her home on Valley Road. Mr. Roche shared a photo of her back yard just before the first snowstorm which showed substantial pooling. Additionally, the Committee received an article that was in the Globe about the subject of tear downs. Ms. Grimes asked if there were comments or questions on the minutes from the January 22, 2015 meeting. The Committee voted unanimously to approve the minutes of the January 22, 2015 meeting of the Large House Review Study Committee.

Ms. Newman said the working group met since the last meeting. Also, some data was collected from Wellesley of their standard 3,600 square foot house on a 10,000 square foot lot. The group decided it makes sense to look at modeling a 3,800 square foot house on a conforming and non-conforming lot, and looking at a Floor-to-Area Ratio (FAR) where the attic and basement are exempted and 600 square feet are allocated for garage.

Mr. Gluesing said that he and Ms. McFadden had worked on examples. The first example was a non-conforming lot, with 70 feet of frontage and 7,071 square feet. Initially, they looked at 20% and 25% lot coverages. They wanted to compare the impact of the new approach to the older examples. They focused on living space. With an FAR of .38, there would be 2,685 square feet for the living area (first and second floors), in this example. The current example has 27% lot coverage. The first floor is a little bigger than the previous example, which had 20% lot coverage. By increasing lot coverage and using FAR, there is more flexibility to allow the first floor to be larger and take in the second floor. It can also help the elevations to have more going on. The current lot coverage regulation is 25%.

Mr. Gluesing is advocating for not counting the attic. Ms. McKnight said if there's a better way to regulate height than the current way, then this would be perceived as going in the direction of having some control. Ms. Cooley said using this method gives someone the option to do a first floor master.

Ms. McFadden explained the conforming lot example on Hazel Lane. The FAR is .38, so she can include a 3,800 square foot house. She added a 5 foot porch into the setback (she included it in

the lot coverage but not the FAR). The house size that is typical can go in with the proposed FAR. She also showed a comparison to a plan in Wellesley on Halsey Avenue. It has the same architect and the same layout, but is 3,600 to meet Wellesley's requirement. She highlighted where the square footage came out to show the difference between 3,600 and 3,800.

Mr. Kaufman asked if the Committee is discussing replacing Lot Coverage requirements with FAR or replacing it. Ms. Newman replied that they are contemplating using them both so they complement each other. Mr. Gluesing said that one suggestion is to ease the lot coverage. The only way it would be needed is to add a first floor master, which isn't desired in Needham yet, but could change. Mr. Kaufman said people ask for it a lot but cannot get it because of the lot coverage.

Ms. Acomb asked if they have decided how high the attic should be. Mr. Gluesing said the governing factor is the overall height from the ground. Mr. Roche said they are going to allow them to use the attic; it won't be counted in the FAR. There will still be a height requirement.

Mr. Gluesing said maybe the next step is to look at putting a master on the first floor and increase the lot coverage. Mr. Kaufman said you could put in an exception, allowing people to go higher on lot coverage, then they'd have to reduce the height. Mr. Gluesing said he plays with the roof line and gables in Wellesley when he's up against height.

Mr. Heller said if they are increasing the side setbacks, they end up just pushing the house back and reducing the back yard. Ms. McFadden said, depending on what they choose to do, there may not be a huge change because they will increase the setback, but measure it from the foundation (not the overhang).

Mr. Kristeller asked Ms. Cooley, based on the feedback the Selectmen are getting about the issue, if she thinks it's going to make a difference to people. She replied that if we can create something that is less imposing, that it's a desirable outcome. She added that this alone is not the only factor – trees, and stormwater are examples of the other issues. No one will like a new larger building next to them, that's not going to go away.

Mr. Heller said he hopes people at Town Meeting don't vote the zoning down based on misperceptions.

Ms. Cooley said she doesn't think that what they are talking about is going to result in loss of value. Mr. Kaufman said it's on the borderline of a value detractor. He said he thinks putting things in place to encourage nice architectural design is good. But they need to be careful not to take away value. Mr. Lesanto said he does not think it will affect value. It gives him, as a builder, flexibility and he thinks it is fair. He said Krista's example was helpful in showing that it's not really restrictive.

Mr. Heller asked Mr. Lesanto if he thinks other builders will see it so positively. Mr. Lesanto replied that there's always going to be people who don't agree. It's important that the playing field is even town wide.

Mr. Roche said most of the complaints he hears of from people are where the houses being replaced are much bigger than the houses around them and where they don't blend in.

Mr. Kaufman said they have to hold early public hearings on this. Ms. McKnight agreed. The Planning Board doesn't often hear a lot of people at the Planning Board zoning hearings. She suggested the working group meet with local builders. Mr. Heller suggested a workshop type meeting, maybe 2 of them. Ms. Newman said they could follow that process; it is similar to the process they did for the Downtown Study. It's an educational process. Mr. Lesanto said it should be to a broader group of people, not just the builders, since it's for the whole town. Mr. Kristeller agreed that it's important to include people before the official hearing. Ms. Newman said this group needs to shepherd the workshops. It can even be included on the Needham Channel. Mr. Roche said that many builders don't live in Needham, so they should be invited. Ms. Cooley said there are some areas of town that are just starting to see this and maybe we should reach out to these areas. Ms. Newman said in the past, they've done a lot of outreach, including through mailings to every town meeting member, newspaper, churches and synagogues etc. Ms. Grimes asked at what point is the right time for the first meeting. Ms. Cooley said if they are looking at bringing changes to the fall, they should try to have the first workshop in the spring. Trying to compact it all in the fall is too tight. Ms. Newman said it needs to be developed far enough for it to work.

Mr. Gluesing said if you take our approach, as far as what counts as living area and what doesn't, on the conforming example, you could build a 4,400 square foot house now. Not everyone would build that house. On the non-conforming example, it would be about 4,200 square feet smaller. He would like to look at the first floor master suite and see what that gives us for lot coverage.

Ms. Newman introduced a table discussed by the working group at the last meeting. She noted it is not set in stone. The table shows proposed FARs for various lot sizes and then what the maximum house size would be based on the FAR. They started at an FAR of .38. For a 10,000 square foot lot, the maximum house size would be 3,800 square feet (which, as proposed, would not include attic or basement and 600 square feet additional would be allowed for garage). Mr. Gluesing reviewed some other towns. Mr. Kaufman said he doesn't think there will be any problem with this at Town Meeting; it is fair. Mr. Gluesing said there's the question as to whether the FAR needs to be reduced. Mr. Kristeller said he's concerned that the FAR percentages might not be going down fast enough as lots get larger, because you can't always tell that the lot is larger because it might go back farther or have wetland in the back or something. So they appear the same at the street, even if they are larger. Mr. Kaufman said there are very few. Ms. Newman said we can map it. The table stopped at 15,000 a square feet lot because at a certain point, they don't care anymore. Mr. Kristeller said they should look at this a little more in the real world, since the FAR number is a really important number. Ms. Newman said they will map out the lots by lot size. Mr. Kaufman said you have to deduct from those that have other restrictions.

Ms. Grimes introduced the retaining wall article. Ms. Newman said that she was contacted by Jon Schneider, Chairman, Zoning Board of Appeals, who had some concerns about the degree of additional flexibility that was being provided versus what the current rules are. The way retaining walls currently work are they have to meet the building setback standard, unless it's

under a specific size and height. The original proposal allowed for a retaining wall of 4 feet at the property line and then when you came in 2 feet, you could go up to 6 feet for the average height of the wall. Mr. Schneider said he was concerned that the Committee would have difficulty explaining that at Town Meeting, as well as justifying the degree of liberalization outside of the special permit process. The working group looked at allowing the retaining wall to be built at 4 feet within the setback zone. Then, once you respected the setback, you would be allowed to build a retaining wall up to 12 feet, by right. Then above that, it would trigger a special permit. Additionally, any height within the setback above 4 feet would require a special permit. Then there was an exemption that was provided for walls that were providing access to garages under the building as well as attached to the building; such wall would be allowed to be 6 feet high and to protrude into the setback for 8 linear feet. Lastly, the wall could not cover more than 40% of the perimeter. Ms. Newman wanted to make sure everyone was aware of the changes and to see if the Committee was okay with the modifications. Mr. Kristeller said the other part of this they haven't dealt with is the grading and changing of grades etc. He wants to make sure there doesn't end up being any internal conflict.

Ms. Grimes asked the Committee if they are comfortable with the revisions. Ms. McKnight asked if you could have multiple retaining walls going up a slope. Ms. Newman replied yes. That allowance is still there but it's at a lower overall wall height. Mr. Kristeller said they are basically saying a retaining wall is no longer restricted to placement in a setback. Mr. Gluesing made a motion to submit the revised article to the Planning Board for public hearing. The Committee voted unanimously.

Ms. Clee informed the Committee that the Planning Board hearing for the Half Story Definition article will be held on March 10, 2015 at 7:00 p.m. and invited them to attend.

The working group will meet in advance of the next meeting.

Wrap up – The next meeting is April 10, 2015 at 8:00 a.m. The meeting adjourned at approximately 9:40 a.m.