

Minutes
LARGE HOUSE REVIEW STUDY COMMITTEE
Friday April 10, 2015 8:00 AM
Selectmen's Chambers, Needham Town Hall
1471 Highland Avenue

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

Not Present: Jon Schneider.

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 February 26, 2015 meeting. The Committee voted unanimously to approve the minutes of the February 26, 2015 meeting of the Large House Review Study Committee.

Ms. Newman said the Planning Board held the public hearing on the Retaining Wall article at its last meeting. There were some questions on the article coming from an attorney and a builder in town. Given the questions raised at the public hearing, the Board did not feel there was enough time to make sure the article is ready for the Annual Town Meeting; so the article will be done in the fall. Ms. Newman explained that Robert Smart, an Attorney, had some questions about the language. Bob Hentschel, a Developer, also had some concerns about the wall height along the driveway edge. Ms. Grimes elaborated that the Planning Board members also had questions about which garages this applied to, i.e. attached versus detached versus garage under. The article on the dormer is on the Annual Town Meeting Warrant, so that will go forward.

Mr. Gluesing explained that the working group met and discussed some different ideas. The group looked at possibly doing an average front setback from abutting properties. They thought a 13.5 side yard setback worked, across the board. They prepared a sliding scale Floor-to-Area Ratio (FAR), beginning with a 38% FAR on a 10,000 square foot lot. Ms. McFadden and Mr. Gluesing prepared a design showing these proposals and to see if it was possible to add a master suite on the first floor. The massing changes quite a bit when adding the master suite to the first floor. It still fits within the setback parameters. The second example is the non-conforming lot. They are trying to look at some ideas that adjust volume, since that is the main concern.

Mr. Kristeller asked if decks count in lot coverage. Mr. Gluesing replied that they do not count in lot coverage but they do for setbacks. Mr. Roche said that we need to be clear in the language. The homes are being built very tightly on the lots. Mr. Kristeller said the group has been thinking about allow certain porches that don't count as the setback to encourage farmer's porches and other similar things.

Mr. Lesanto asked why they used the 13.5 foot setback and if that works architecturally with a 2-car garage. Ms. McKnight suggested if you wanted to incentivize separate garages, you could

say if you make a detached garage, you can add additionally square footage to the house. Mr. Heller asked why they would want to encourage that when it would be another structure closer to the lot line. Ms. McKnight said there would have to be height restrictions and it would be treated as an accessory structure. It makes a better impact on the front of the house. To her, the looming garages in the very front are the most troublesome.

Mr. Kaufman said that no one would build it. Mr. Lesanto said that as a neighbor, he wouldn't want to be looking at another building 5 feet off of his lot line. Ms. McKnight showed some photos of homes with garages in the rear, as well as some with attached garages in different style homes. She explained that the homes that do not have the garage right up front seem more like historically Needham homes to her. Ms. Newman said that there have been replacement homes that have detached garages.

Mr. Heller said that they are talking about controlling the size of houses on small lots. Maybe there has to be compromises made on smaller lots. Mr. Lesanto said that he thinks they should make the setbacks such that they allow a lot with 70 foot frontage enough room for an attached two car garage. Ms. Newman stated that in Karen Sunnarborg's memo, from the inventory of the new-builds that were done over the course of the last year and a half, around one quarter of them don't meet the FAR; the noncompliance is happening on the smaller lots. The proposed FAR is not affecting anything on the lots that are larger. Mr. Kaufman said that it won't look good going into Town Meeting with something that is affecting 25% of lots. Mr. Gluesing said that he said it could also be viewed as 75% of the lots won't be changing.

The 13.5 foot setback is not decided but was used as an example in the diagrams.

Ms. McKnight asked if they are contemplating allowing for a special permit process for further relief. Ms. Newman said not from lot coverage but perhaps from FAR.

The Committee reviewed the memo and the data prepared by Ms. Sunnarborg. They looked at homes that didn't build out to the maximum. There are a number of reasons why builders may not maximize: corner lot, some area not buildable (topography), neighborhood, etc. Ms. Hatch said very few of the examples come anywhere near the lot coverage.

Mr. Kristeller said he thinks the direction they are going is good. The specific numbers they have thrown around are not set in stone. Ms. Newman said she's curious about if people think they are going far enough, if they are capturing 25%. Ms. Hatch and Ms. McKnight said they need to take the list prepared by Ms. Sunnarborg and go out and look at the houses in person. Ms. Newman asked if it would be helpful to provide a questionnaire to provide to the committee. Mr. Roche said it is going to come down to non-conforming lots and the setbacks and what all we want to allow on these lots. Mr. Gluesing suggests committee members look at the conforming lots to see how they turned out. Look at the street front versus the lot coverage.

Mr. Kristeller said that another thing that affects how a house fits into the community is the front setback relative to the existing properties. Mr. Lesanto said what the committee is talking about is a good step to deal with the massing. He thinks it is in line with other towns.

Mr. Gluesing said the last thing to note is the map that was prepared showing lot sizes in the Single Residence B District. There are random larger lots in areas with primarily smaller lot sizes, but that doesn't mean those houses need to be smaller. Mr. Kaufman said that 75% of all new construction is built in the Mitchell and Broad meadow school districts. They are perceived as the two better schools in towns. Ms. Cooley said that they are the two walking schools. Mr. Roche said that many lots are exactly 10,000 square feet so some of the lots showing as 10,000 square feet and under might be conforming because they are exactly that amount.

Ms. Newman stated that a next step would be to hold a community workshop in June. Committee members should go out to the sites and see what they think about the examples. At the next meeting, we will look more at the setback issue and the FAR. Ms. Newman wants to make sure that the Needham Channel covers the community workshop.

Wrap up – The next meeting is May 1, 2015 at 8:00 a.m. (It was subsequently rescheduled.) The community workshop was tentatively scheduled for June 11 (and was subsequently cancelled to allow for further study). The meeting adjourned at approximately 9:20 a.m.