

Large House Review Study Committee

Draft: July 15, 2024, revised August 14, 2024

General Purpose

In response to concerns expressed at the May 2024 Annual Town Meeting as to the impact new or expanded homes are having on the character of the surrounding residential neighborhood and specifically the action taken under Article 44 to refer the issue to the Planning Board for further study, the Planning Board is appointing the Large House Review Study Committee to develop recommendations on how best to ensure that new residential construction in the Single Residence B and General Residence Districts will complement existing buildings, settings and neighborhood character. The Committee will also explore how the updating and upgrading of structures in such neighborhoods can and should be done, while at the same time conserving the neighborhood's distinctive qualities as change occurs. The Planning Board is taking this action as directed by Town Meeting and with the support of the Select Board.

Background

Tear downs have been an issue in Needham for over a decade. Data indicates that the demolition of older, smaller, and less expensive houses is now the principal source of lots for the construction of new single-family houses. A total of 845 building permits for single-family houses were issued between July 2013 and June 2023. In that same period there were 99 building permits for two-families issued (for a total of 944 building permits on two- and single-family buildings). There were 840 residential (both two- and single-family) demolition permits issued in that timeframe. One could deduce that approximately 840 of the new home building permits, or 89%, were replacement homes. The remaining 11% was allocated to infill construction and to subdivision construction. Needham is thus at a place where the majority of its new single family home construction is derived from tear downs driven by market demand and the unavailability of infill and subdivision lots.

Current observations suggest that the reforms adopted in 2017 are not meeting the Town's current planning goals and should be further revised to limit and/or disincentive tear down, and/or incentivize additional buildout activity via further changes in the Zoning By-Law. Specifically, that current by-law regulations for new construction in Needham's residential parcels do not appropriately regulate house size. This is to the detriment of the Town's goals as set forth in the Town of Needham Housing Plan, dated December 2022.

To address the tear down issue a Large House Study Committee was created in May of 2014 to consider the impact new or expanded homes were having on the character of the neighborhoods within the Single Residence B (SRB) and General Residence (GR) zoning districts. The Committee was tasked with developing recommendations on how the updating of structures in such neighborhoods could and should be done, while at the same time conserving the neighborhood's distinctive qualities as change occurred. As a result of the Committee's work, Zoning By-Law changes focused around issues of house design and neighborhood character were adopted by Town Meeting in May of 2017 as follows: Side and rear yard setback requirements for conforming and nonconforming lots in the SRB and GR districts were revised to encourage the breaking up of building massing overall and along the sideline in particular; height requirements in all residential districts were revised to secure a height profile for new construction which was more in scale with that of the existing neighborhood and to further discourage the mounding of the grade along the perimeter of the house as a strategy to maximize building height; garage setback requirements in the SRB and GR districts were increased to help reduce the overall perceptions of massing related to new home construction along the street line without significantly altering desired interior space composition; a floor area ratio requirement was established in the SRB district in an attempt to balance the desire of individual land owners to maximize house size on a lot with the preservation of

collective neighborhood character; lot coverage requirements were established in the SRB and GR districts to assure conservation of open space; and front and side yard special permit exceptions for nonconforming structures in the SRB and GR districts were established to assure redevelopment options were available for existing structures rendered nonconforming as a result of the 2017 zoning changes.

Project Scope

The study area shall be all properties located in the Single Residence B and General Residence Districts, which are the residential zoning districts with the smallest lot size/dimensional requirements. The Large House Review Study Committee shall consider the impact new or expanded homes are having on the character of the neighborhoods within the studied zoning districts and shall develop recommendations consistent within the overall purpose for the Study Committee as noted above. The Large House Review Study Committee shall:

1. Review past reports, plans and maps prepared by town committees, town officials, state agencies and consultants including the previous Large House Study Committee.
2. Seek the input of neighborhood residents, builders, contractors, real estate agents, property owners and others as required. It is also expected that the Large House Review Study Committee will hold citizen information meetings to elicit general public comments and input.
3. Review and analyze the current Zoning By-Law and Planning Board Regulations and consideration of amendments to each.
4. Analyze the impact of recent planned and potential new housing constructed in the past 5 years in the Residence B and General Residence Districts.
5. Review and analyze alternative zoning dimensions, restrictions or limitations that may address neighborhood concerns.
6. Review the current FAR definition to determine whether it is too permissive and if so how it should be revised including whether the floor area designed for human occupancy on the third floor or basement level of a house should be included in the FAR calculation.
7. Prepare recommendations to amend the Zoning By-Law or propose other regulatory strategies that will protect the characteristics valued by residents in the Single Residence B and General Residence Districts.
8. Generally, identify key issues and needs, analyze alternative solutions, and make recommendations to the Planning Board, both short and long term, within the overall purpose of the Large House Review Study Committee.
9. Prepare Fiscal Impact Analysis to accompany recommendations of Committee.
10. Coordinate with current efforts around the Stormwater By-Law and Tree By-Law.

Membership

In making appointments to the Large House Review Study Committee, the Planning Board intends to identify qualified candidates who represent a variety of backgrounds and interests comprising representatives from select Town Boards and Commissions, residents with background or experience in architecture, construction, real estate and four (4) citizens at-large. The Large House Review Study Committee shall consist of fourteen (14) members as follows:

Two (2) members or designees of the Planning Board
Two (2) members or designees of the Select Board
One (1) member or designee of the Design Review Board
One (1) member or designee of the Finance Committee
One (1) member or designee of the Zoning Board of Appeals
One (1) Real Estate Broker appointed by the Planning Board
One (1) Developer appointed by the Planning Board
One (1) Architect appointed by the Planning Board
Four (4) Citizens at Large appointed by the Planning Board

It is expected that other interested citizens will also be asked/invited to assist with various assignments related to the mission of the Study Committee.

Target Time Frame

Charge and introduction of Committee – October 2024.

Background research, research of prior completed reports, review of other community approaches – October 2024 – January 2025.

Initial presentation of findings, goals, objectives to Planning Board with feedback from Planning Board – early/mid-February, 2025.

Prepare recommendations to the Planning Board and present – March, 2025.

Planning Board and Study Committee work to prepare zoning by-law amendments and community outreach – April – July 2025.

Warrant Article Town Meeting –October 2025.

Resources

The Director of Planning and Community Development and the Assistant Town Planner will be the staff liaisons for the Study Committee and will be responsible for ensuring that meetings are posted and minutes are taken, transcribed, and posted on the website in a timely manner. Staff resources will include representatives from the Planning and Community Development Department and the Building Department. Consultants will be engaged on an as-needed basis.

Budget

Normal costs such as printing and mailing will be absorbed by the Department of Planning and Community Development. Consulting expenses will be paid out from the departmental budget, to the extent possible, or such other appropriation as needed.

Other Considerations

The Study Committee shall elect a chair, who shall preside at meetings, a vice chair who shall preside at meetings when the chair is unavailable. All meetings will be conducted in conformance with the Open meeting Law, including the proper notice and posting of meetings, and all records shall be maintained in conformance with the Public Records Law.