

NEEDHAM HOUSING PLAN WORKING GROUP
*** MINUTES ***
December 9, 2021

7:17 p.m. A meeting of the Needham Housing Plan Working Group was convened by Jeanne McKnight, Co-Chair, as a virtual Zoom Meeting. Present were Jeanne McKnight and Natasha Espada representing the Planning Board, Dan Matthews from the Select Board, Michael O'Brien from the School Committee, Carol Fachetti from the Finance Committee, Helen Gregory from the Council on Aging, Ed Cosgrove from the Board of Health, and Rhonda Spector and Oscar Mertz as Citizens At Large. Also present were Director of Planning and Community Development Lee Newman, Assistant Town Planner Alexandra Clee, Public Information Officer Cynthia Roy Gonzalez, and Community Housing Specialist Karen Sunnarborg.

Welcome and Introductions – Ms. McKnight welcomed all members of the Needham Housing Plan Working Group to the meeting and asked each member and staff to say their name in turn.

Approval of Minutes –

Motion: Mr. Matthews moved that the Minutes from the October 22, 2021 meeting be approved. The motion was seconded by Ms. Spector. Approved: Unanimous 9-0.

Progress Report on the Work Plan – Ms. Sunnarborg indicated that she has been conducting background research and information gathering on demographic, economic, and housing characteristics and trends; and has made progress in drafting the Housing Needs Assessment. As mentioned in the previous meeting, only very limited 2020 U.S. census data has been released thus far, and the Census Bureau now estimates that the bulk of the data will not be available until March. So as not to lose momentum in the planning process, she will use the 2019 census estimates in the interim and is also compiling data from other sources. She stated that the Housing Needs Assessment will also include affordability analyses and indicators of housing needs that will inform priority housing needs. Ms. Sunnarborg added that the draft Housing Needs Assessment will be completed by February 2022, and the first community workshop will occur in March.

Public Engagement Process – Ms. McKnight indicated that during this meeting we want to receive comments on the draft Community Housing Survey and give all members an opportunity to speak on the key issues they want addressed in the Housing Plan.

Mr. Matthews stated that he had sent some recommended changes to the Work Plan and also had concerns about the survey. He added that it was important to note that Working Group members do not speak for their own boards but instead have been appointed because of their interest and experience in housing.

Ms. Gonzalez indicated that the survey was just one piece of the community engagement process. She has provided notifications of our work in newsletters, on the Town's website, in social media, and to other local entities in addition to press releases in local papers. In regard to the survey, the purpose was to get broad feedback from the community on housing issues, using a company that the Town has effectively brought on in the past.

Ms. Fachetti asked whether it might make sense to reverse the order on local outreach by spending more time on community education prior to issuing a survey. Ms. Spector agreed and suggested that we might be jumping ahead of ourselves. She indicated that the draft survey was too broad, complicated and jargony. Mr. Matthews said he had concerns along the same line and felt that the survey required the respondents to already have some knowledge of housing issues. He suggested that it might also raise expectations on potential actions that aren't feasible. The 2007 Plan has a basic framework for consideration, and we should focus on specific actions items that remain feasible, drafting a reasonable list and then obtaining feedback. Perhaps the survey could include sliding scale questions, simple yes/no questions, as well as open-ended ones. The questions should be reframed so the public can answer in an informed way.

Ms. McKnight suggested that she was particularly interested in the first part of the survey related to locations for new development. Mr. O'Brien expressed his appreciation for the effort of preparing the survey but agreed with the comments. He indicated that we need to reflect on the goals of the survey and need more community education on the topic. He also would like to see more open-ended questions as well as those related to demographics to learn where respondents are living, whether they have children and if so their ages, and if the children attend Needham Public Schools or private schools. Ms. McKnight suggested that we might ask a question concerning their precinct to get at the locational issue.

Mr. Cosgrove said he agreed with most of the comments and felt the survey would take too long to complete. It will be important to get folks to respond to a survey and observed that not many residents are aware of this project. He stressed the need for good community pre-education on housing before the survey is released.

Ms. McKnight interjected that the fact that Needham no longer has a local newspaper makes it more challenging to get the word out about local issues. She mentioned that the League of Women Voters put a great deal of effort into a public forum on basic issues related to affordable housing and very few attended in person or virtually.

Ms. Espada suggested that the Working Group plan a meeting in January to hear resident perspectives related to housing. Mr. Matthews voiced his support for this. Mr. Mertz mentioned that the Working Group needs to find ways to make people more aware and excited about participating in the planning efforts. He suggested

that we include links to the League of Women Voters forum and Health Department's Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) materials in the project website.

Ms. Gonzalez offered that it is easier to get people to react to something that is presented to them instead of just asking for open-ended responses. We have tools to get people's attention and can partner with other organizations to get the word out about our effort.

Ms. Spector observed that this was a great conversation. She added that the Town is in an incredible position because we have surpassed the Chapter 40B 10% goal and can decide what we want to focus on next. Let's look at what we have accomplished and put out some ideas as well.

Ms. Espada said that she was impressed by the Needham Housing and Zoning Analysis that summarizes accomplishments to date. She suggested that we put together a PowerPoint presentation that shows where we are today to kick-off a special listening forum. Ms. McKnight offered that we can use a wide range of local stakeholder groups to get the word out on the forum and boost participation in the planning process. Ms. Espada added that the forum could be a vehicle for marketing our efforts.

Mr. Matthews expressed his agreement and added that it will be important for the Working Group to identify the housing needs of subpopulations in town and make recommendations to the Planning Board on key actions to address these needs through the Plan. Perhaps it would be better to work from a limited list of actions including multi-family housing in the Town Center, Needham Housing Authority (NHA) efforts to improve and potentially expand their properties, ADUs, General Residential (GR) area expansion, greater density in certain areas, and inclusionary zoning for example. He mentioned that we need a basic plan of action and then get feedback through a survey. The survey should also include open ended questions.

Ms. Fachetti added that there are economic implications for each action that the Town might propose that should also be identified. Ms. McKnight mentioned the School Department's Demographic Study related to school capacity issues that can be helpful in our work. It will be important to be transparent on the trade-offs involved in recommending various actions as part of the Plan. Ms. Fachetti also mentioned the fiscal analysis that was done for Muzi property rezoning.

Mr. Mertz said he appreciated the comments and suggested there was a rationale for holding a community meeting earlier in the planning process. The meeting can help people feel that their voices are heard, and we can raise some excitement about our work.

Ms. McKnight indicated that the Working Group should redirect what we will do over the next couple of months to integrate more community education into the process, emphasizing what the Town has done to date. Ms. Espada added that we

need to revise the Work Plan and find ways to make it easier for people to participate in the process including a special education and listening forum in January. Ms. Sunnarborg indicated that she will revise the Work Plan accordingly.

Member Comments on Key Housing Issues/Concerns

Ms. McKnight moved to the next item on the agenda that invites Working Group members to weigh-in on key issues and concerns. Ms. Spector expressed her concerns about teardown activity. She also stated that there's a lot to do to with respect to improving NHA properties.

Mr. Cosgrove also indicated that there are real problems with the condition of NHA properties, most of which are approaching the end of their useful life spans. He also suggested that the Town needs to look at housing for the elderly, many who are finding it harder to afford to live independently. He added the need to address the housing needs of those in the middle class who are still shut out of the private housing market.

Ms. McKnight concurred on the need for more senior housing and asked about the respective needs for condos or rentals. Mr. Cosgrove responded that the smartest thing for seniors to do is to buy, given capital gains taxes, but rentals are also needed.

Mr. Mertz agreed with Ms. Spector on the need to focus on teardown activity. Equal Justice Needham also has concerns about this issue. Perhaps a demolition delay bylaw is warranted or even a special tax that can generate funds for the Housing Trust. He further suggested that the Town think about incentives for building single-family homes on smaller lots and becoming more proactive in partnering with developers. He proposed looking at development opportunities for Town-owned property, potentially at the Hillside School for example. Mr. Mertz recognized that there is limited developable property in town, and therefore it is important to take best advantage of what we have at a greater scale of development. He also suggested that there are rezoning opportunities and the need to focus on a vision for various sites and locations, including the Town Center. Further use of Tax Incentive Financing (TIF) should also be explored.

Ms. McKnight added that partnerships with developers are important and asked how can we reach developers to talk to them about potential opportunities without being criticized.

Ms. Spector indicated that she was a developer and that parking requirements in tandem with high land costs make development very costly and challenging, pushing developers to build luxury housing. She added that you can't really build on top of existing buildings given structural and financial constraints. It's important to focus on things we can do. She also added that a lot of seniors want rentals as condos are too expensive.

Mr. Matthews offered a number of important action items. First is to fix NHA properties and also add more units. This will enable us to leverage funding from federal and state sources and will require political support. He also mentioned the need for smaller multi-family homes, such as duplexes, by expanding the GR areas. Such duplex units will likely be expensive however. He observed that redeveloping the downtown is complicated and is why zoning changes have largely not been sufficient on their own to promote development. Parking is an issue, and the Town can potentially get involved and help. New zoning might create possibilities but any specifics need study. Mr. Matthews also emphasized the need to coordinate efforts with other communities as the imbalance between supply and demand is a regional problem. This is challenging given the existence of 101 zoning entities in the Greater Boston area.

Ms. Spector offered the example of the Northland development over the border in Newton that is planned to add 600 market housing units.

Ms. Espada asked whether the Town had reached out to developers regarding some potential larger projects. Ms. Newman responded that there have been numbers of conversations with property owners, particularly those in the Town Center and Chestnut Street area. She indicated that parking has been a problem given impacts on project costs. Ms. Espada suggested that building parking might unlock some development potential.

Ms. Gregory observed that Mr. Matthews has spent a lot of thought on this issue and seconded his suggestions. She emphasized the importance of enabling residents to age and stay in the community and to also consider the housing needs of more moderate-income households who cannot afford rising market prices.

Mr. O'Brien inquired about how we can provide some real options for families who want to live in Needham. We need more equitable and affordable housing opportunities.

Ms. McKnight suggested we look at redevelopment opportunities in business and industrial zones where multi-family housing is currently not allowed, and she provided some examples. Ms. Espada agreed that was a good point. Also, while limited, development of Town-owned property should also be explored. Ms. Fachetti added that the Town is facing the need for significant renovations of several schools and is struggling to pay for these expenses. There are calls for swing space at the Hillside School. Ms. Espada mentioned that the school's use as a swing space is complicated and may not be feasible.

Mr. Mertz expressed his interest in more information on the implications of greater housing development on schools and that the School Department needs to provide input on where we can accommodate growth. Mr. O'Brien added that this issue came up in the rezoning of the Muzi property, and there should be more collaboration and dialogue on the future of growth in Needham. He stated that

there will likely be continued increases in school enrollments that are projected to plateau. The question is, however, whether this plateau could occur given continued development.

Mr. Matthews suggested that folks review the zoning map on the Town's website, which shows that the Town is largely composed of single-residence districts. It is worth noting where the GR areas are located, which is largely in proximity to commuter rail stations. We can discuss expanding these areas and redevelop with more units including triplexes and quadraplexes.

Ms. McKnight indicated that she has done some research on the history of zoning in Needham. She mentioned that in 1925 when zoning was first adopted, the whole town was zoned with 7,000 square foot lots and ADUs were allowed, for example.

Ms. Espada stated that we will work on next steps and revise the Work Plan.

9:03 p.m.

Motion: Mr. Matthews moved that the meeting be adjourned. The motion was seconded by Ms. McKnight. Unanimous: 9-0.