

NEEDHAM PLANNING BOARD MINUTES

April 15, 2025

The Needham Planning Board meeting, held in the Great Plain Room at Needham Town Hall, and virtually using Zoom, was called to order by Natasha Espada, Chairman, on Tuesday, April 15, 2025, at 7:00 p.m. with Messrs. Block, McCullen, Crocker and Greenberg, Planner, Ms. Newman and Assistant Planner, Ms. Clee.

Ms. Espada noted this is an open meeting that is being held in a hybrid manner per state guidelines. She reviewed the rules of conduct for all meetings. This meeting does not include any public hearings, and no public comment will be allowed. If any votes are taken at the meeting the vote will be conducted by roll call.

Heather Lane Definitive Subdivision and Heather Lane Extension Definitive Subdivision/Residential Compound Special Permit Bond Reduction.

Ms. Newman noted the first section is the Heather Lane Residential Subdivision. The Board is holding \$15,000 in surety. There is a recommendation from the DPW to release that amount. The Town put a conservation restriction in the easement that is perpetual in nature. This needs to be signed off from the state which has not been done yet. The documents have gone to the state and Town Counsel is closing that out. She does not want that holding up the release of the bond. The other recommendation from the DPW is for the release of \$8,500 surety they are holding for the Heather Lane Extension.

Upon a motion made by Mr. Block, and seconded by Mr. McCullen, it was by a vote of the five members present unanimously:

VOTED: to authorize the release of \$8,500 with respect to surety currently being held for the street maintenance related to the Heather Lane Extension Subdivision.

Upon a motion made by Mr. Block, and seconded by Mr. McCullen, it was by a vote of the five members present unanimously:

VOTED: to authorize the release of \$15,000 related to the surety with respect to the street maintenance for the Heather Lane Subdivision.

Update from the Large House Review (LHR) Committee.

Moe Handel, Co-Chair of the Large House Review Committee, gave a brief overview. The study is the result of a charge from the Planning Board to this Committee. It is a very public process, and the Committee will develop information that can be shared. There will be public workshops starting in June with a pause over the summer and will pick up again in the Fall. They are developing information from 4 similar communities to share with the Board and others to see what others have done and what is applicable. The 4 communities are Concord, Wellesley (who they have already met with), Newton and Lexington. There are plans to meet with Newton. A consultant will be involved with the financial aspects of costs. The Committee is committed to having the maximum public process.

Oscar Mertz, the architect on the Committee, stated they are 4 months into the charge. The Committee looked first at non-conforming lots under 10,000 square feet and are now looking at conforming lots 10,000 square feet up to 15,000 square feet. They will compare and contrast with other towns. One aspect that is being analyzed is the best way to measure houses. The Committee decided the main task is to measure bulk, which is above ground and the most obvious factor. Currently FAR, setbacks, height and lot coverage are being measured. The Committee wants to test best control measures. The coverage limits are very generous. Builders are maxing out FAR and not lot coverage. Mr. Handel stated how FAR is defined is part of this. Mr. Mertz noted setbacks are another tool. There are 2 sizes of setbacks – 14 feet on conforming lots and 12 feet on non-conforming lots. It is not significant, but they are keeping it open. People are very conscious of height. Height limits are 35 feet now and will be analyzed. Lot coverage is currently very generous. There may be an opportunity to limit coverage. All this will be looked at.

Mr. Mertz stated FAR is currently measured by ground floor and first floor. Basements and third floor, or attic space, are not counted by Needham. The Committee is studying all existing houses and drawings so they can see exactly what is being built. He thinks it is important to measure to include the first, second and third floor. There is a debate about including the garage or not. The lower level is not necessarily to be calculated, but there is some discussion regarding this. Mr. Crocker noted anything related to bulk. Mr. Mertz noted what can be seen is being measured. They are analyzing what is being done in Needham. The Committee is reviewing surveys, will compare to other towns and will be getting together with the community to hear their concerns. Then they will develop ideas and a proposal to bring back to the Board. The next meeting is scheduled in June. Data will be collected over the summer, then there will be 2 meetings in the Fall and it will be brought to the Planning Board in November or December. Ms. Clee stated the meeting may be June 9 due to the High School graduation. She noted it is not a hearing but a community meeting. Ms. Espada noted the goal is to bring to the May Town Meeting. Ms. Newman stated there is time to hold a hearing and have 2 continuances, if necessary, before Town Meeting.

Mr. McCullen stated, in regard to the fiscal impact analysis, he asked if they could talk a bit more about how they would handle that process. If capping the valuation, or the ability to sell a house by reducing it by \$200,000, that is the most important thing of this entire process. Mr. Handel stated that is on the list and it can be addressed further. Bill Paulson, the Realtor on the Committee, stated they are looking at the numbers and different ranges of sizes and lots. They are looking at what was paid for knock downs and what is being built. It is being kept in mind. He does not know how an independent company would analyze this or what would happen if they cannot build a big home. Mr. Mertz noted all information will have to be weighed and data will be received from everyone. Mr. Crocker commented what size the builder wants to build also needs to be considered. Mr. Paulson noted there is a cross-over between builders and families. Mr. McCullen noted they are looking to incentivize people's ability to add on or to at least make it easier. Mr. Paulson stated that has not been looked at that much.

Mr. Block cautioned about setting rules for an addition to an existing house having a larger FAR than for new construction. He is not sure that is a lawful activity as it is advantaging one group over another. Mr. Paulson stated it is not smart either. Mr. Crocker stated rules are triggered when people want to add on. Ms. Espada noted the biggest thing is the cost of the property. The same materials will be used. Mr. Block also cautioned the exercise is responding to public concern regarding the size of the box on the lot and not talking about a different goal of causing a reduction in land values for single-family homes. Ms. Espada noted they are not saying that at all. They are not talking about creating affordable housing. Mr. Mertz stated the Committee has had preliminary meetings with the Wellesley Planning Board and what has been built on their 7,000 to 10,000 square foot lots up to the 15,000 square foot lots. Wellesley has had less construction in the last 10 years than Needham has. There are a greater percentage of additions rather than new construction. Their control mechanism is a layered large house review. This deterrent has shown itself to be effective. They measure total livable area plus garage (TLAG). They have a deterrent of a large house review. Wellesley feels they have put a system in place that is successfully deterring people from knocking houses down. Their as of right is set at lower than Needham allows.

Mr. Paulson stated when opening up to large house review, Wellesley looks at everything including lighting, landscaping, tree removal, and a lot of things they would not be looking at with a by right approval. Mr. Mertz noted for by right Wellesley still has a tree survey. Ms. McKnight, the Planning Board designee, noted Needham has a special permit but Wellesley has a site plan review process. Mr. Crocker noted Wellesley also has a light survey. Mr. Mertz stated Wellesley involves the neighbors right away. Mr. McCullen asked what Wellesley's timeline was for approval of a standard house before they implemented this. It is now a 9 month to a year process. Paul McGovern, the developer builder on the Committee, stated a lot of people are choosing not to go through the TLAG process. Mr. Mertz stated Wellesley has a different level of final product. Mr. Block believes there is a relationship between trees and stormwater drainage or absorption. That is a valid concern. Ms. Espada noted the next steps will include a meeting in June and this will go to the Planning Board by the end of the year. She feels PR and marketing are critical.

Zoning Article Assignments for the Annual and Special Town Meetings and further Board discussion on Warrant Articles.

Ms. Newman noted the Board will present the Base Plan to Town Meeting. Ms. Espada is available to present it on Monday but will not be available on Wednesday. Ms. Newman noted Assistant Town Manager Katie King updated the capital memo and grant memo. They will be available on the town's website. The other Article is the Flood Plain Article which will be done on the Special Town Meeting the following Monday. Mr. McCullen will do that. The Warrant Article and room

assignments are in the packet for the League of Women Voters Warrant meeting on 4/28 from 7:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. at the Center at the Heights. She will schedule a meeting before Town Meeting.

Minutes

Upon a motion made by Mr. Block, and seconded by Mr. McCullen, it was by a vote four of the five members present (Mr. Greenberg abstained):

VOTED: to accept the minutes as written for the 3/18/25 meeting.

Summer Schedule.

Ms. Clee noted the members need to think about summer meetings. After discussion, the summer meetings were tentatively set for 7/22/25 and 8/12/25.

Report from Planning Director and Board members

Ms. Newman stated she has an RFP out to hire a consultant to look at the reuse of the Stephen Palmer property. She has extended the timeline for people to submit their proposals because she did not get any. The deadline is this week, and she is hoping to get some qualified proposals. Ms. Clee noted she has not seen a lot from Envision Needham and would like to know where they are at. Mr. McCullen noted communication is not necessarily the strongest point of any project in Needham. There are 3 slots on the Envision Committee – landlord, business owner and one other business-related role. There was one temporarily filled at the beginning then they left. Some have been engaged to galvanize the business community to object to the pilot program because of perceived implications and effects on their businesses. There are a lot of businesses in town who have seen tariffs and their assessments skyrocket. People disagree with any perceived change of traffic or parking. The messaging is not being done right. There are renderings on Facebook that are old and not truly what is happening. Envision Needham needs to go back and do a better job as a town and Committee communicating to the Businesses and listen to their concerns and then say what they are proposing, this is how we believe it would not impact as you believe and then go through with a pilot. In order to get funding, they need to look at outside funding and for that they need to look at multi-modal and that includes bike lanes. The bike lane has 3 feet between bike lanes and travel lanes so the bikes will not get doored by cars opening up. Both designs have larger sidewalks for alfresco dining. There have been some pitfalls. They tried to engage but the person left, and no one is applying for the Committee. No one will step up.

Ms. Clee asked what the next steps are. Mr. McCullen noted the Committee has not met again since the last time. The pilot is still going on but with genuine concern from the community they wonder if they should pause. There is some money that was granted. The Committee would lose that funding if they pause for more feedback. A pause would extend the project, and more money would be needed. Mr. Crocker noted he is on the Committee also but has not been able to make many meetings. Early on he heard the need for public meetings. They have not gone to businesses and said they need to have public meetings. Mr. McCullen noted a pause will be discussed tonight.

Correspondence

There was no correspondence.

Upon a motion made by Mr. Crocker, and seconded by Mr. McCullen, it was by a vote of the five members present unanimously:

VOTED: to adjourn the meeting at 8:10 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Donna J. Kalinowski, Notetaker

Artie Crocker, Vice-Chairman and Clerk

