

NEEDHAM PLANNING BOARD MINUTES

September 2, 2025

The Needham Planning Board meeting, held in the Charles River Room of the Public Services Administration Building, and virtually using Zoom, was called to order by Artie Crocker, Chairman, on Tuesday, September 2, 2025, at 7:00 p.m. with Messrs. Block, McCullen and Greenberg, Ms. Espada, Director of Planning & Community Development, Ms. Newman and Assistant Planner, Ms. Clee.

Mr. Crocker noted this meeting will be led by Vice-Chairman Mr. McCullen as he is remote. This is an open meeting that is being held in a hybrid manner per state guidelines. He reviewed the rules of conduct for all meetings. This meeting includes no 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. Mr. Crocker turned the meeting over to Mr. McCullen.

Decision: Minor Modification: Major Project Site Plan Special Permit No. 98-6: Town of Needham, 1471 Highland Avenue, Needham, Massachusetts, Petitioner (Property located at Existing Municipal Parking Lot on Chestnut and Lincoln Streets, Needham, Massachusetts). Regarding request to approve a new site plan accurately depicting the existing conditions of the parking lot.

Ms. Espada was not at the meeting and could not vote. Ms. Newman noted there is a draft decision in the packet that approves the Town's request to modify the parking spaces from 189 to 192 and allows allocation changes at the Town's discretion. Mr. Block asked if Town Counsel has reviewed it. Ms. Newman stated he has and had no comments.

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

VOTED: to approve the relief requested for Special Permit No. 98-6 as a minor modification.

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

VOTED: to accept the decision as drafted in the packet.

Presentation of Large House Review Committee

Mr. McCullen acknowledged the work of the Committee so far. Significant work has been done and there is still significant work to do with public engagement. He truly appreciates all the efforts. Moe Handel, Co-Chair of the Large House Study Committee with Mr. Crocker, noted there were 2 working groups. One worked on an architecturally based analysis and the other worked on the economic and real estate implications. This working group has done a lot of analytical work and there has been excellent staff assistance. The next meeting is on Monday. On the 15th there will be a second public meeting to engage the public and get input. A survey was done to get public input on reducing the effect of bulk. There were 1,155 responses with a good level of input. 70% of Needham have a large house or teardown issue. Ms. Espada asked if there was someone from the Finance Committee on the committee and was informed there was. Mr. Handel stated there was an enormous amount of architectural analysis and data analysis. The Committee is looking at what other towns have done successfully.

Oscar Mertz discussed the dimensional regulations, what is in place and the purpose of the Committee. He noted the house reduction study which was a comparison of house reduction studies and neighboring towns. The reduction study information was shared with the consultants. He feels it is important to share what an actual reduction would look like. The Committee is collecting information from surrounding towns regarding what kinds of houses they are building, what their By-Laws are doing and how Needham relates with the size of houses being built. He noted the Reduction Study parameters. Three houses on 3 different lot sizes were selected. There were guidelines on how the houses would be reduced. Limits on FAR, coverage and heights were adjusted. They found height was generally an issue people commented on in 35% of the houses. There will be another public session in 2 weeks. Ms. Espada asked if they were looking at 10,000 square feet and lower and was informed, they were. The Committee is looking at some Residence B, which is generally 10,000 square feet.

Mr. Mertz noted the fine tuning of smaller lots. There are definitely larger lots in the Single Residence B (SRB) District. A model of 3 existing houses was created. Then reduction models were created and the changes made relevant to the original house. Jeanne McKnight, Planning Board representative to the Committee, noted he did not mention what is included in FAR. Mr. Mertz stated the question is what is to be counted if there is a change in FAR. FAR is a point on focus. It is important to measure what is visible. One town includes the basement, but all towns include garages. Mr. Block noted they do not include basement square footage, only first, second, attic and garage. He wants to talk about garages at some point. Mr. Mertz noted there was a rationale for not including the basement. They feel it is the visual impact of the house on the lot. A basement might count if there is a sloping site, but the Committee felt definitely first, second, third and garage. Mr. Block stated some build up 4 feet which some say has caused drainage issues and shadowing issues. If working with a sloping site does that encourage raising the house up? Bill Paulson stated the existing grade will be taken into account in the average grade. Mr. Mertz noted a number of these conditions they would like to track including wetlands. Studies have been done on the plans and in all cases they wanted to track new floor plans and size of rooms. First and second reductions have the same size first floors. There is a difference between the second and third floors. The second reduction is 85% to 60%. The difference is how much square footage is used on the second floor.

Ms. Espada noted the biggest change is the articulation. It gets a little flatter. Mr. Mertz showed examples of the differences. Mr. Block stated the lot coverage is reduced by an 11% reduction on the first and second and an 11.6% reduction on the third. Mr. Mertz feels 20% is the tipping point on larger lots and there should be a sliding scale for smaller lots. There should be 24% for larger lots and 20% for smaller lots. It goes hand in hand with FAR. Their thinking is the current step function that happens at 12,000 square feet is awkward. They looked at different towns. Concord was the most helpful and calculates from lot size. Every lot has a calculation of FAR and it favors small lots. He feels it makes a lot of sense to track lot size.

Mr. Mertz showed the calculations for other towns. He noted Concord was one line which was clear and simple. Ms. Espada asked if it was correct that other towns are 20% to 40% less than Needham. Mr. Mertz stated all other towns are smaller. Mr. Block was surprised Natick and Dedham were not looked at. He asked how many are part of the large house process in Wellesley. Mr. Mertz has the figures and will share them. In Wellesley the Planning Board deals with conforming lots and the Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) deals with non-conforming lots. All have a cap of 3,600 square feet. Mr. Paulson stated towns were picked that were economically equal to Needham. Mr. Mertz feels it is important to have a safety valve and that would be a special permit process. He showed a chart with livable area and noted Needham was over other towns.

Paul McDonough noted Needham builds to the far limits. There is a big discrepancy between what Needham is building and other towns. He reviewed the studies with other towns. The FAR goes down with a sliding scale. He showed what can be built in other towns of the same lot size. Ms. Espada asked if there could be a summary slide. With so much information it is overwhelming. She suggested they could show one slide with lot size, then add Needham's current, then add reductions and then add other towns. Mr. McDonough showed the comparison compared to other towns, what was built in Needham compared to what could be built in other towns. Mr. Handel commented they are struggling to compare apples to apples. Mr. McDonough showed a reduction comparison with other towns chart. He stated that between 3,500 and 5,000 is very desirable.

Mr. Mertz summarized the dimensional control standards. For FAR it is ok to count what is above grade. The formula could be changed so FAR is related to lot size. For Lot Coverage, the formula should be changed to a sliding scale based on lot size and favoring small lots. For Height Limits, limits could be reduced for pitched roofs, flat roofs, sloping site and at side setbacks. The recommendation would be 35 feet to 32 feet at setbacks, no more than 2 stories. They want to be mindful of adjacencies. Setbacks in front to preserve special characteristics were talked about. For setbacks, the recommendation would be average front setbacks. Mr. Paulson noted a 600 square foot garage is allowed now and a 3-car garage needs a special permit. Many are building a 2-car garage with a bump. They want to include garage space in the FAR. Mr. Block recommended, if counting square footage of the garage, counting over a certain amount. Demand is for a 2-car garage 24 by 24 minimum. Then increase the difference to reduce the bulk. Mr. Paulson stated the key is what is the appropriate bulk for a house on the lot. Mr. McDonough noted other towns have made decisions to count garages and those are smaller. A discussion ensued.

Mr. Mertz talked about the Tree By-Law and stormwater. The discussions will continue with other committees and coordination is ongoing. He showed a sliding slope and summary slides. He brought information from 2017 for reference. He discussed lessons learned from Wellesley. Mr. Handel stated they are deliberately making the exception process difficult enough to disincentivize people from increasing the standard home of 3,600 square feet. They need to look at the impact

in the large house review and the impacts on neighbors such as light, vegetation and there needs to be neighborhood input. Mr. Mertz stated Wellesley has a tree by-law that is tracked. More people are involved and there is more scrutiny. Mr. Crocker commented they are maintaining the character of the neighborhood and the worth of the neighborhood. Mr. Mertz noted Concord has a sliding scale of lot coverage. He has the survey information that he can share. He compared data collection from neighboring towns, and he is following through with them with trends, changes and such. The public session in 2 weeks will focus on this information discussed tonight.

Mr. Block asked what the marketing is for that meeting as this is the first he has heard of it. Ms. Newman stated flyers will be going out. Mr. Handel commented he wanted to get the word out after Labor Day so it did not get lost. Mr. Block stated he is mindful of how hard everyone is working. He is excited to see it move through the process and get feedback. He asked if they are on target for a May Special Town Meeting or the regular Town Meeting? Ms. Newman noted they are planning for the Spring and are looking to hand it off to the Planning Board in the Fall. Ms. Espada thanked them for the tremendous amount of work and asked if they are recommending one of the options. Mr. Crocker stated they are not there yet. Mr. Handel noted the public needs to be heard from. Ms. Espada recommended putting all information in a PDF online and streamline it so people can digest. Mr. Greenberg echoed the thanks of his fellow members. The presentation was very detailed. It would be helpful to look at comparisons of Dedham and Natick. He would like a follow-up survey on the visuals to get people's take on them. Would the third reduction satisfy people?

Mr. McCullen thanked them for the level of detail and work. He feels that Dedham and Natick are comparable and would like to see what they allow. He likes the setback average concept. He agrees with Ms. Espada on a summary. He noted the renderings were amazing. He is anxious to see how the second session goes and he thanked Mr. Crocker for being on the committee. Mr. Crocker stated the work is very detailed. He commented that this is a very dedicated group and he thanked them. He feels it is important to look at the correct towns and ones that represent the same as Needham to compare apples to apples. He noted Mark Gluesing is the unofficial architect on the committee.

Minutes

There were no minutes.

Review of existing draft zoning for Needham Center and the Mixed Use 128 District.

Mr. Block reviewed the districts, uses by right and special permit, and reviewed dimensional regulations. The goal is to spur mixed use development that would service other goals. He noted there is some frustration with the type of retail Needham has. When increasing density, the members should be thoughtful with the approach. Work force housing is important. Residential multi-family should be included in the Center. He feels this is an opportunity to affect real change. He showed the geographic boundaries of the Center. Ms. Espada noted the goal is to look at piece by piece. She asked when this will go to Town Meeting – May or October? Mr. Block noted the goal is May. He feels the fundamentals are there. He showed base zoning and overlay zoning. He feels this is an opportunity to extend Linden Street. Mr. Crocker reminded him the agenda says review of existing zoning and not change.

Mr. Block looked at the use table for the Center Business District and dimensional regulations of existing zoning. He does not recommend changes to the agricultural category, the public, semi-public or institutional category or the residential single family detached category. He asked what the planned residential dwelling consisted of. Ms. Newman noted it was a type of planned residential development that is a mix of attached units and single-family houses. Mr. Block noted he is not looking at residential compounds for the Center Business District or 2-family, which are not allowed. He is not looking at conversion of single-family into 2-family. Apartments or multi-family dwellings are by special permit. He asked the maximum density and was informed it was 18 units per acre in Apartment 1. There is no maximum in the overlay. It is governed by the bulk of the building. Mr. Block stated that it is something he wants to flag and go back to. He wants to allow multi-family. It should be called out as mixed-use above commercial. It could be office or retail. Ms. Newman stated it was already allowed. Mr. Block noted to a limit. The Board may want to look at that and may want a different standard by right and not special permit.

Mr. Block stated elderly housing is not allowed currently. They may not want to modify that and there are no boarding houses. He noted for business uses the types and size of uses should be considered. He wants to consider outdoor displays of goods. Retail trade for custom work uses would remain consistent. Some business uses should be considered and talked about. Mr. Greenberg noted a lot of stores are going to market stores rather than full-scale grocery stores. The Board needs to be cognizant about that. Ms. Espada asked if they had precedence for examples of town centers they think are successful.

She thinks he is on track but missing the piece of precedence needed. Mr. Block asked if Ms. Espada would look at that. Ms. Espada stated she can look at a couple, but she is starting on the Stephen Palmer Committee. Mr. Greenberg feels looking at the downtown as a whole may be the wrong question. He feels they should think more of blocks. The common denominator is retail on the first floor with residential above. Businesses will feed off residential.

Mr. Block stated traffic impacts need to be looked at: 1) what uses are relevant and 2) what would add to economic vitality and diversity without adding an inverse impact to the area. They may want to consider regulating outdoor displays of goods. He noted there is office space on the second floor in the downtown. The members may want to reconsider that. Craft, consumer and professional or commercial services is a catch all that should be reviewed. Theaters are by special permit. Electronic games and amusement are not allowed. He would like to see the Board consider these uses to some extent. He noted there is a bowling alley in the center. Ms. Newman stated that it is non-conforming, pre-existing. Mr. Block feels they may want to consider allowing it by special permit. The intensity of the type of use needs to be considered. Food uses are all by special permit, but some do by right and some by special permit. Ms. Newman stated Needham wanted to control land uses and parking, so it is a special permit process.

Mr. Block wants to consider adapting to modern day. Medical clinics are allowed by special permit, and brewery was rezoned several years ago. Veterinary offices are allowed by special permit, but boarding is not allowed. They may want to consider veterinary offices in a different framework. Manufacturing is not allowed. For other uses, some are allowed by special permit. The Board may want to consider looking at them. He noted dimensional regulations and existing zoning. The minimum lot area is 10,000 square feet with 888 Great Plain Avenue at 24,000 square feet. He feels 10,000 square feet is a more reasonable minimum lot area. They may want to review the 80-foot minimum lot frontage. Maximum height is by right. The setback standard should be considered. He does not think minimum building height is a relevant factor but FAR should be looked at. It would be helpful to have the dimensional regulations Attorney George Giunta Jr. laid out for 888 Great Plain Avenue. Front setbacks are something to look at. He wants a vibrant downtown. The side setbacks are a challenge with 888 Great Plain Avenue. There were less than 50 feet between districts. The Board should consider extending the Overlay. He asked how the Board wants to account for parking. Cars need to get off the road. A standard should be considered as part of a broader parking discussion.

Ms. Espada noted map use, dimensionals and then parking. There is so much information she asked if the members should review before the next meeting. It could be broken into pieces. Mr. Block noted the next step is to try to bring in members of the local community to discuss the relevance or irrelevance. That discussion will be over the next 2 to 3 meetings and will be with landlords, tenants and builders. He wants to have the opportunity for residents to come to the public hearings for discussion. Mr. Greenberg suggested it may be helpful to invite people who have left Needham Center to find out why. Mr. Block noted, at subsequent meetings, the homework would be to study up on this and come back with thoughts. He is just familiarizing tonight. Ms. Newman noted she has the proposal from Stantec on parking.

Mr. McCullen noted almost 48 minutes were spent on this and he asked how members feel. Is this a good time or should more or less time be allotted? Ms. Espada felt it was productive. She feels it should be done in small blocks. Mr. McCullen commented it was going to be a burden on top of what they already do. He wants members to think about that. Mr. Block wants to also talk about Mixed Use 128. Mr. Crocker does not think a discussion of 128 should be done now. It is important to know why some businesses have left Needham. He also wants to know what makes a successful downtown. That is what they want to accomplish. Mr. Greenberg wants to ask why businesses are leaving and why they are not succeeding. Mr. Block stated foot traffic, demand and amenities in the area. There should be a discussion with landlords, brokers and tenants which would be helpful. Ms. Espada asked what is going on with Envision Needham. Mr. Crocker stated 3 plans will be presented but he is not sure what they will look like. Ms. Espada stated these should be looked at together as they are happening concurrently. Mr. Block noted that it is about infrastructure and not policy. Ms. Espada asked if there were other reports done on the downtown. Mr. McCullen noted the Mobility Planning Committee is working on that.

Ms. Espada stated it would save time if research has already been done by using that information. She feels someone should put all this information together so the Board members can review it. Mr. Block stated, at the next meeting, he would like to see them meet for 35 to 40 minutes with tenants, brokers and landlords. Maybe for 2 meetings and then one-half hour of discussion to review dimensional by-laws. The homework would be reviewing the by-laws. Ms. Newman noted 100 West Street is on the next Planning Board agenda. Mr. Block feels that it will only be about an hour. They should then go to 9:00 or 9:30 with this. They will only be listening. They will discuss Mixed Use 128 next time and look at the Use Table for both Mixed Use 128 and the Center Business District. He will help with the list of invitees. Ms. Newman would suggest going to the Assessors database to identify people Mr. Block wants there.

Report from Planning Director and Board members

Ms. Newman stated the Rice Barn is looking to put a new restaurant there. The existing has 102 seats. The applicant wants 110 with 60 outdoor seats. Basically, there would be 68 new seats so would a parking study be required? Of the 68 seats only 8 would be internal and 60 would be seasonal outdoor. Mr. McCullen noted with an increase of that much he feels there should be a traffic study. Mr. Block commented there needs to be a plan to see what to react to. Ms. Newman noted she heard from the EOHLC in terms of compliance with the MBTA Communities Act and she heard from Stantec about doing a parking study for Needham. She is in the process of getting a contract signed on that. She heard from Gabby who is doing the coordination on the Tree By-Law. They may go in a direction comparable with Wellesley and do it through zoning. They may tie it to setbacks. When they settle on how they want, she is not sure if it would be done through a General By-Law or a Zoning By-Law.

Mr. McCullen noted the following correspondence for the record: notes on a draft ADU, dated 8/12/25, from Robert Smart; a Needham Observer article regarding 663 Highland Avenue; an email from David Hruska, dated 8/15/25, regarding the 663 Highland Avenue project; and a neighborhood announcement from Director and Planning and Development Barney Heath from Wellesley.

Upon a motion made by Mr. Block, and seconded by Ms. Espada, it was by a vote of the five members present unanimously:
VOTED: to adjourn the meeting at 9:52 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Donna J. Kalinowski, Notetaker

Justin McCullen, Vice-Chairman and Clerk