

**Needham Planning Board
Highway Commercial 1
Frequently Asked Questions**

1. Why is the Planning Board trying to rezone Highway Commercial 1?

The Planning Board is responsible for guiding future physical growth and development in Needham. Zoning is a tool by which the Town shapes land use, housing, public facilities, economic development opportunities and transportation systems. The Planning Board regularly reviews existing zoning and recommends updates so that the Town may continue to be a desirable place to live and work.

The land within the proposed Highway Commercial 1 district is currently governed under the rules of the Industrial-1 district, which was established in 1987. In 2018, the Planning Board identified Highway Commercial 1 as a priority area to rezone because the existing regulations are outdated, may result in uses that are no longer wanted (e.g. boarding houses, distribution warehouses, storage facilities) and as a key location, which serves as a gateway into Needham, was appropriate for conversion from an industrial district to a mixed-use district consistent with the land use profile of the remainder of the Highland Avenue corridor from Chestnut Street through Needham Center and Avery Square to this locale.

Based on a build-out analysis, traffic report, and dimensional analysis, the Planning Board determined that certain dimensional requirements, including front setback, height, floor area ratio, and side setbacks, and use requirements are constraining development under the current zoning rules, and, given the properties' regionally prime commercial location along Route 128, is significantly underperforming economically, to the detriment of the Town. Further the Board found that the current industrial district zoning at the property was not reflective of the Town's land use policy goals for this gateway location and that a conversion to a mixed-use district consistent with the land use profile of the remainder of the Highland Avenue corridor was warranted. With rezoning, in time, the area should attract significant high value redevelopment consistent with the Town's land use objectives, which will be overseen by the Planning Board under its site plan review and special permit obligations.

2. Why is the Planning Board rezoning before they have a specific proposal from a developer?

Rezoning can occur before or after a specific development proposal is received. Setting zoning requirements before a specific development proposal is received allows the Town to proactively determine a framework for the types of land uses the Planning Board will allow, or be willing to consider, in a particular geographic area. Determining the zoning requirements after a development is presented narrows the discussion to strictly reacting to what has been proposed. Proactively rezoning an area provides clear guidance for all stakeholders, including residents and current and future landowners.

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Establishing the conditions that trigger a Special Permit allows the Planning Board to both proactively shape the zoning and reactively review a specific development proposal to make sure it adheres to Needham's land use goals. (see question #5 for more detail).

Examples of other proactive rezoning and planning efforts in the Town of Needham include the Avery Square, the Chestnut Street Corridor, the Center Business District as well as the New England Business Center.

3. Town Meeting rejected this proposal two years ago. Why is it up for debate again? What has changed?

A rezoning plan for Highway Commercial 1 was developed and presented to the October 2019 Special Town Meeting where it received a majority vote but fell short of the 2/3 vote required for passage. Concerns with the overall density profile, traffic impact, use profile and lack of sustainable development principles were noted by Town Meeting members.

In response to input received at the October 2019 Special Town Meeting, a Town-wide Community meeting was held in January 2020 with residents, neighbors, public officials, businesses and landowners to further develop and refine the Town's overall land use goals and strategy for the district. Additionally, a working group comprising representatives from the Planning Board, Select Board, Finance Committee, and Council of Economic Advisors was established to review the policy objectives of the district and to offer strategies to address the concerns raised at both the October 2019 Special Town Meeting and the January 2020 Community meeting. The working group commissioned an updated traffic study of the district to determine the capacity of the Town's traffic infrastructure to accommodate development at variable density and use profiles. 3D modeling and an updated fiscal impact analysis of the district were completed once the density and use profile of the district were finalized consistent with the capacity of the Town's traffic infrastructure to accommodate development at variable density and use profiles. A revised land use plan responsive to community concerns was developed. The following four changes were made from the 2019 rezoning proposal to the current 2021 proposal as follows: (1) The overall density of development within the district has been reduced. (2) The maximum building height within the district has been reduced by one story for both the as-of-right and special permit condition. (3) Permitted uses within the district have been expanded to include multi-family dwellings. (4) Special permit criteria for permit issuance has been expanded to include green building standards.

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4. Does this zoning change require 2/3 vote at Town Meeting? Or less than that if housing is included?

The zoning change to Highway Commercial 1 which proposes mixed use development (commercial and housing land use) at the property will require a 2/3 vote at Town Meeting.

5. What is As of Right vs. Special Permit?

Zoning regulations are divided into what is allowed “as of right” versus what is allowed “via special permit”. The Planning Board *must* approve any development proposal that complies with the “as of right” zoning requirements. Development proposals that include uses defined in the zoning as requiring a Special Permit must go through a more robust vetting process. For these proposals, the Planning Board has broad discretion to deny the application, or attach conditions or require mitigation, funded and completed by the developer, as part of a Special Permit process.

Notwithstanding the above, any project whether allowed by right or by special permit, which involves the construction of 10,000 or more square feet gross floor area, or an increase in gross floor area by 5,000 or more square feet, or any project that results in the creation of 25 or more new off-street parking spaces requires the developer to apply for a major project site plan special permit. This process empowers the Planning Board to impose conditions, limitations, and safeguards to mitigate adverse impacts on the Town’s resources.

6. What mechanisms do you have to control the types of businesses that would occupy the site?

The zoning includes several mechanisms to control the types of businesses that could occupy the site. The use table sets out the uses allowed by right and by special permit. There are also various types of size restrictions. The most likely uses for this parcel are lab or office space as the primary use. Some housing is permitted, and ancillary retail. The Planning Board also utilizes the special permit process that enables the Town to alter or deny the project so it’s in line with the community’s vision. Part of that process includes a public hearing in which members of the public may comment and ask questions. Those comments and questions are considered as part of the Planning Board’s open deliberation process.

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7. Can you or will you be able to prevent this from becoming a destination like Legacy Place?

Yes, we can. Legacy Place is regarded as “destination retail.” As an example, Whole Foods is over 80,000 square feet. We prohibit any retail store over 10,000 square feet – about the size of Trader Joe’s on Highland Avenue. 10,000 square feet is permitted under a special permit; 5,750 square feet is permitted by right. This will not be destination retail.

8. Can you or will you be able to prevent a hazardous chemical or harmful pathogen lab from occupying the R & D space?

Any laboratory operator is required to adhere to federal, state, and local health and safety laws to safely handle any and all materials.

9. Are there incentives under the special permit that would allow for the increased volume with the addition of green space/buffer zone?

The greater density allowable by special permit is a natural incentive for a developer. The special permit process empowers the Planning Board to set standards on the location, size and contents of a buffer zone and green space, and the special permit provisions for HC-1 expressly provide for consideration of possible development of a landscape feature or park on Gould Street or Highland Avenue.

10. What is the projected cost to the town in terms of services with a full buildout at the 1.0 FAR and the 1.3 special permit FAR?

- The projected municipal cost of a by-right FAR buildout of 1.0 without housing is \$381,000 per year. The fiscal analysis by the Town’s consultant projects net tax revenue to the Town from this development scenario will be \$6,352,100.
- The projected municipal cost at a by-right FAR buildout of 1.0 with housing is \$1,154,900 per year. The net tax revenue to the Town is projected to be \$4,652,700.
- The projected municipal cost of a special permit FAR buildout of 1.35 without housing is \$502,000 per year. The net tax revenue to the Town is projected to be \$8,342,400.

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- The projected municipal cost of a special permit FAR buildout of 1.35 with housing is \$1,479,600 per year. The net tax revenue to the Town is projected to be \$6,028,900.

All these costs are based on modeled uses. For an actual project, new study data would be required as part of the permitting process.

11. How would an onsite taking affect the 20% green space requirement?

The green space requirement comes after any taking, if needed. Any onsite taking required to widen the layout of either Highland Ave. or Gould St. would push the 20' landscape buffer on Highland Ave. and Gould St. deeper into the lot, since the setback would be measured from the post-taking layout line. Furthermore, the developer would still be required to preserve the 20% open space requirement based on the new somewhat smaller lot size. The overall impact may reduce the density of proposed development in order to preserve the 20' buffer and the 20% open space requirement.

12. What is the current FAR at full buildout with the current zoning, if the warehouse and other undesirable uses were removed? What type of traffic would this generate?

Under current zoning, the maximum FAR is 0.75. The purpose of the traffic study was to understand the traffic impact based on a maximum buildout from the proposed zoning changes. The traffic study compared traffic impact based on this maximum buildout with the traffic impact from current development on the site rather than from the current maximum FAR of 0.75. Any actual project would include a traffic study based on the particular use and size of development proposed in an application.

13. What if an overlay district was used to increase building height at the highway, allowing for the 70' height as of right, but preserving more green space along Gould Street and put the lower profile retail/restaurants etc., similar to the Street in Chestnut Hill?

An overlay district is not required to achieve these goals which can be achieved under the zoning limits currently proposed. The current proposal only permits 70-foot/5 story buildings by special permit, and they must be located at a minimum of 200 feet set back from Gould Street and Highland Avenue. Within the 200-foot setback strip from Gould/Highland, the maximum heights are 2 ½ story/35 feet by right, with 3 stories/42

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feet allowable by special permit and 48 feet allowable only if the roofline is gabled or set back. The by-right limits are no higher than the limits for the Needham Heights, Needham Center and Lower Chestnut Street zoning districts (2 ½ stories/35 feet) and the Business District along Highland Avenue where Sudbury Farms and the Bertucci plaza are located (3 stories/40 feet); the special-permit limits are similar to the overlay districts for Needham Heights/Carter Building (4 stories/44 feet), Needham Center and Chestnut Street (4 stories/48 feet).

14. Why is housing capped at 240 units?

We see this site as an opportunity to meet part of the demand for housing in Needham. The Town looks to balance impacts housing has across all town services and infrastructure. We believe this capacity achieves a reasonable balance and enables the Town to predict with confidence the likely modest impact on our public schools and residential-services budget. 240 units may be permitted by special permit with a minimum of 12 ½% units to be affordable. The housing would be expected to house up to 38 new students for Needham Public Schools.

15. What will be the effect on schools of multi-family residential development? Can the schools handle this?

Yes, the schools can handle this. Multifamily residential development at 1.0 FAR is projected to generate 28 school children. Multifamily residential development at 1.35 FAR is projected to generate 38 school children. This level of school growth can be absorbed by our existing school infrastructure. This site is in the Eliot Elementary School district, which can accommodate the projected 2-3 more children per grade.

16. Is it likely that a developer would build under the special permit process?

Yes – we have designed the zoning to set the as-of-right FAR at a level such that a developer who wants to unlock the full potential of the property would need to seek a special permit.

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17. Are other buildings (not as large as the HC-1 zoning would allow) along Highland Avenue from this site to Needham Center, and is Wingate height lower than proposed heights and are Wingate setbacks further away than the proposed setbacks?

See response to Question 13 as to the comparable heights allowed for commercial and mixed-use buildings along Highland Avenue from this site to Needham Center and extending along Chestnut Street to Needham Junction.

As to Wingate, which is within the Elder Services Overlay District, the minimum required building setback from the front lot line is 25 feet (setback not required to be landscaped) and the minimum setback from the railroad right-of-way is 10 feet. The Wingate height limit is 40 feet/3 stories + uninhabited 4th story under a pitched roof. The proposed HC-1 zoning requires a fully landscaped setback of 20 feet all along Gould Street and Highland Avenue, and the setback from the railroad right-of-way is 10 feet; within the 200-foot setback strip from Gould/Highland, the maximum heights are 2 ½ story/35 feet by right, with 3 stories/42 feet allowable by special permit and 48 feet allowable only if the roofline is gabled or set back.

18. A number of people have asked why a sports complex requires a special permit when one is not required in current zoning.

The current zoning was written many years ago when the world was different. The Muzi family has owned their car dealership in Needham for 80 years now. As in Wellesley, sports complexes are governed by special permits because they are highly intensive land uses. They typically operate with extended hours (Wellesley operates from 5:30am to 12:30am seven days a week) serving traffic from a large geographic area (the Wellesley complex traffic study expected 3000 car trips per day – 1/3 of the total site anticipated to be generate on Highway Commercial 1 in the worst-case scenario). Gyms and fitness centers from decades ago are very different than athletic facilities today which now commonly include multiple pools, multiple ice rinks and turfs or courts for multiple sports to be played simultaneously, weight rooms, spinning classrooms, yoga studios, office space, food service, child care, changing rooms with showers and spa in addition to storage. These are large facilities and drive significant traffic. All neighbors are best served by oversight of the planning and construction process and operations. Therefore, a special permit is appropriate.

19. What is the impact of this development on neighboring commercially zoned sites? If they redeveloped by right, how much could they grow and contribute to traffic?

The impact a development here would have on neighboring commercial areas would depend on the specific type and size of development that would ultimately be developed on this site. We foresee demand for suburban office space and research and

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development laboratory (R&D) on this site, which is complimentary to area commercial sites. We believe we can add significant office and R&D capacity without cannibalizing neighboring commercial sites. Future growth on the site is limited to the specifications set out in the zoning.

20. How do we factor in the likely long-term impact of covid on traffic?

The actual long-term impact of covid will unfold over time. Return-to-work patterns will evolve significantly. The role of zoning is to lay out a framework from which a developer devises their own proposed plan based on the opportunities and demand they see in the market by use and size. Once a developer presents an application to the planning department, the Planning Board will assess the impacts, including traffic, of the proposed development.

21. What recourse does the town have against a traffic study that reveals negative impacts on residential neighborhood streets such as Noanett, Lee and Gary, if a developer chose to build by right?

Any project which involves the construction of 10,000 or more square feet gross floor area, or an increase in gross floor area by 5,000 or more square feet, or any project that results in the creation of 25 or more new off-street parking spaces requires the developer to apply for a major project site plan special permit that empowers the Planning Board to impose conditions, limitations, and safeguards to mitigate adverse impacts on the Town's resources, including the streets in this area. Those mitigation efforts may include items such as signage prohibiting turns and traffic through the neighborhoods at peak hours.

22. If a developer decides to use the by right 1.0 FAR, can the town compel them to do the traffic remediations, which look costly?

Provided the traffic study for their specific use indicates mitigation is necessary relative to current traffic, yes. See 21 above.

23. Why does the Town's traffic study focus on the immediate area?

The purpose of the Town's traffic study is to examine the traffic impacts that a development would generate at primary intersections in the immediate area. A developer will be required to conduct their own traffic impact analysis and to provide that analysis to the Planning Board as part of its application process. The Planning

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Board then engages a traffic engineering firm to conduct a peer review of the developer's analysis to validate, or not, the developer's traffic engineer's conclusions. The Planning Board has the authority to require a developer to broaden the geographic study area.

In addition, the development will be subject to review by MassDOT and MEPA (Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act), which will require preparation of a traffic study examining any intersections experiencing an increase of 100 or more vehicle trips per hour or five percent (or more) increase in traffic through the intersection as a result of the project. The Town will receive copies of the traffic study and will be allowed to comment during the MEPA review process.

24. What is the quality of traffic data? Are traffic counts only good for 5 years?

It is typically a standard in any traffic study that traffic counts are valid for a period of 5 years, as indicated by Tony Del Gaizo, because one would expect traffic to increase over the period. When the 2015 traffic counts were used in 2019, they were within the 5-year period. However, a traffic count now, or in the spring or fall of 2020, would not be valid due to the pandemic and to the ongoing Highland Avenue widening project to support bike lanes. We had data (the "2019 counts") that were collected prior to the pandemic. The Town fully appreciates that this area has been under significant construction due to the add-a-lane project, which resulted in increased traffic on Needham roads during construction (the "2015 counts"). We learned that the 2015 counts were high because of traffic avoiding Route 128, and with the completion of the add-a-lane project, traffic returned to the highway. The GPI traffic study identified that area traffic has been increasing at only 0.1% annually for nearly a decade – nevertheless, the traffic study uses the conservative projection that traffic may increase at 1.0% (10x higher than shown by studies).

It should also be noted that on May 15, 2020, MassDOT issued a directive allowing for traffic volumes collected as long ago as 2014 to be utilized to estimate 2020 Existing traffic-volume conditions.

25. Would mitigation require construction of turn lanes that would necessitate taking of private property at Gould Street and Central Ave?

The Town has itself prioritized this intersection for improvement and will study the intersection to see what is required. This year, the intersection at Highland Avenue and West Street is being rehabilitated. Next year (FY22), the intersection of Great Plain Avenue and Central Avenue has been prioritized, followed in FY23 by the intersection at

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Gould Street and Central. If there is no development at the Highway Commercial 1 site before that time, the Town anticipates studying the intersection to determine what is required to improve the intersection. If Highway Commercial 1 is redeveloped sooner, then it is possible that a developer may be required to improve the intersection.

26. Would mitigation require construction of a turn lane on Hunting that would necessitate taking of private property at Hunting Road and Highland Avenue?

At a maximum FAR buildout, the traffic impact analysis presented at the March 16, 2021 public hearing revealed mitigation at this intersection would require only onsite takings at the Highway Commercial 1 property. Based on this analysis, no takings along Hunting would be required. Actual traffic mitigation requirements will be based on a developer's proposal. The left turn from Hunting onto Highland is the lowest turning frequency which is why the cue time is longer. Any takings required by development will be an influential factor in the Planning Board's deliberation process.

The mitigation that may be required at the Highland Avenue / Hunting Road / Gould Street intersection requires widening onto the development site only to provide additional turning lanes exiting Gould Street and an additional right-turn lane on Highland Avenue westbound. No widening is required along Hunting Road to return the overall intersection to a No-Build condition.

27. How accurate are GPI's traffic projections; does GPI go back post-construction and verify?

GPI's traffic engineer explained that a post-occupancy monitoring study is often required and that she has only seen one project where post-occupancy traffic was higher than projected in her 19 years of experience. Given that the traffic analysis was conducted on a 2015 base with a 1.0% annual growth in traffic (10 times the experienced rate of 0.1% for nearly the last decade), one would not expect the traffic to be higher than the presentation levels for a worst-case buildout. Depending on the scope of development, the Planning Board may require a post-construction traffic analysis. Further mitigation would be required if a post-construction analysis revealed heavier traffic than projected.

As part of permitting with MassDOT, a post-occupancy monitoring program will be required for any project estimated to generate over 2,000 vehicle trips per day. This post-monitoring study typically begins six months to a year after an occupancy permit is issued to allow traffic to normalize after opening. The study then continues on an annual basis for a period of five years. The results of this post-occupancy monitoring study are typically provided to MassDOT and the Town for review. Often these post-occupancy monitoring studies are tied to specific mitigation measures that a developer

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must implement if the actual traffic generation is determined to exceed the original traffic projections by a certain pre-established threshold.

28. Traffic – what about the impact of development of Needham Street in Newton? What about intersections that are farther away than those we studied – isn't there a "trickle effect"? What is the cost of mitigation?

Although actual annual traffic growth in the vicinity is 0.1 %, the traffic engineer modeled growth at 1.0 % growth annually and started at the higher-traffic 2015 count. This methodology accounts for anticipated traffic growth from new development, including the Northland Development project on Needham St. in Newton.

It should be noted that the traffic study prepared for the purposes of the rezoning was intended to provide a preliminary analysis of whether a development of this size (FAR of 1.35) could be reasonably mitigated. It is expected that when a developer and build-out program is identified, the developer will conduct a more comprehensive traffic impact study that will likely include collecting new traffic volumes throughout a wider study area and including traffic volumes generated by any other development projects that have been approved or are in the approvals process in the surrounding area, including such development on Needham Street in Newton.

29. Will traffic "redirect" onto side streets to avoid backups? What will the effect of allowed development be on property values? What will the impact be on Mills Field;

The Planning Board will exercise its full authority to minimize traffic impacts within area residential neighborhoods, including the installation of signage that certain streets are for local resident use only. (See signage on residential streets near the Sunita Williams School for example.) Mills Field will continue to be used for tennis and baseball facilities, as well as enjoyed by local families. As to property values, Needham expects to continue to be a highly desired residential community and all properties in town have benefited from that cachet.

30. A question was asked about the traffic impact if the site were developed under HC-1 zoning as-of-right limits, not under higher special permit limits.

GPI has estimated that if the site were fully built out under the dimensions allowed as of right, traffic would be reduced by more than 20% in a non-residential configuration, as compared with the higher-density dimensions allowed by special permit. Including multi-family residential results in a further reduction in traffic.

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31. What is the history of public meetings on Highway Commercial 1 zoning?

The following is a list of all 45 public meetings related to HC1 zoning.

- October 13, 2013 – Council of Economic Advisors (CEA) meeting – they decide to start a subcommittee to review Industrial / Industrial 1 zones for potential rezoning. *All CEA meetings after this time contained some brief update on the zoning.*
- April 29, 2014 & April 30, 2014 – **Public Participation** - CEA hosted meeting with landowners, business owners, neighbors, town officials discussing zoning in Industrial zone.
- September 15, 2014 - – **Public Participation** - presentation by Economic Development Director to Needham Heights Neighborhood Association
- June 6, 2017 & June 8, 2017 – **Public Participation** - – CEA hosted meeting with landowners, business owners, neighbors, town officials discussing zoning in Industrial zone.
- July 11, 2017 – Planning Board meeting - presentation by Economic Development Director on proposed zoning in Industrial/Industrial 1 zoning.
- September 17, 2017 – – **Public Participation** - presentation by Economic Development Director to Needham Heights Neighborhood Association
- November 28, 2017 – Select Board / Planning Board joint meeting - to hear presentation by CEA on proposed zoning in Industrial District.
- December 7, 2017 – Planning Board, brief discussion.
- January 9, 2018 – – **Public Participation** - Select Board public hearing on possible Industrial/Highway Commercial Zoning
- January 24, 2018 – Select Board and Planning Board joint meeting – discussion of various zoning initiatives.
- February 7, 2018 – Council of Economic Advisors – discussion of Select Board’s 1/9/18 hearing and next steps.
- July 10, 2018 - Planning Board - brief conversation
- October 4, 2018 – Planning Board meeting – discussion between Planning Board and Economic Development Director on the proposed Highway Commercial zoning initiative.
- October 18, 2018 – Planning Board meeting – discussion on the proposed Highway Commercial zoning initiative.
- December 4, 2018 – Planning Board meeting – discussion on the proposed Highway Commercial zoning.
- December 18, 2018 – Planning Board meeting – discussion and vote to transmit for hearing.
- January 29, 2019 – – **Public Participation** - Planning Board Public Hearing on zoning
- February 19, 2019 – Planning Board discussion of Zoning Articles for May 2019 Town Meeting
- March 5, 2019 – Planning Board discussion of Zoning Articles for May 2019 Town Meeting
- March 11, 2019 – Planning Board discussion of Zoning Articles for May 2019 Town Meeting
- March 19, 2019 – Planning Board discussion of Zoning Articles for May 2019 Town Meeting
- April 23, 2019 – Planning Board meeting – discussion of next steps on Highway Commercial 1 zoning.

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- July 2, 2019 – Joint meeting Select Board / Planning Board – Workshop on Highway Commercial 1 zoning
- July 16, 2019 – Planning Board discussion of Highway Commercial Zoning
- July 30, 2019 – Planning Board meeting - Economic Development Director present for discussion on zoning.
- August 6, 2019 – Planning Board meeting – discussion and vote to transmit for hearing.
- September 17, 2019 – – **Public Participation** - Planning Board Public Hearing on zoning
- October 28, 2019 – – **Public Participation** - Fall Special Town Meeting, zoning was defeated by Town Meeting
- December 3, 2019 – Planning Board discussion of Highway Commercial Zoning
- January 7, 2020 – discussion of next steps, a couple FinCom members present
- January 27, 2020 – – **Public Participation – Needham Heights Neighborhood Association** Community Meeting
- May 20, 2020 – Planning Board brief discussion of next steps
- November 18, 2020 – joint meeting with Planning Board, Select Board and Finance Committee to discuss zoning, particularly traffic
- December 15, 2020 – Planning Board discussion of next steps on zoning
- January 4, 2021 – Planning Board update and next steps
- January 14, 2021 – Design Plan review with Planning Board
- January 19, 2021 – Planning Board preparation for Community meeting
- January 21, 2021 – Planning Board Update, next steps
- February 2, 2021 – Planning Board Community Meeting preparation
- February 3, 2021 – – **Public Participation – Planning Board** Community Meeting
- February 16, 2021 – Planning Board vote to transmit zoning for hearing
- March 2, 2021 – Planning Board project update
- March 16, 2021 – – **Public Participation** - Planning Board public hearing

Please continue to refer back here as we will continue to provide updated information.