



Office of the
SELECT BOARD

TOWN OF NEEDHAM

TOWN HALL
Needham, MA 02492-2669

TEL: (781) 455-7500
FAX: (781) 449-4569

Articles 5 and 6 2021 Annual Town Meeting HC1 Zoning

The discussion regarding re-zoning of Highway Commercial 1 has extended over seven years, with input from Town residents and changes incorporated based on that feedback along the way. When a larger proposal came before Town Meeting in October 2019, it received 55% of the vote, but not the required 2/3's. The current zoning has been in place for more than 50 years and is significantly out of date relative to modern uses. As a matter of good governance, if nothing else, the Town would be well-served by updating the zoning. Ultimately, the community will decide whether this is the right framework or if it prefers to retain the current zoning and uses.

The Select Board views zoning articles, such as this one, from a long-term perspective. Re-zoning can play a key role in the creation of economic benefits so that the various needs of the Town may be met without undue burden on taxpayers. Redevelopment of this site *will* bring economic benefits to the town – the question of how much and when depends on the proposal of an actual project. At that time, the Planning Board will conduct a public process to understand any proposed development. The impact on the closest neighbors to the development and on the town as a whole will be carefully considered.

In a general re-zoning such as this one, there is no specific project in front of the Planning Board or Town residents. Without an actual project, the Planning Board was asked to report to Town Meeting the maximum impact of the zoning. The Planning Board has done so, and some citizens have expressed their concerns. In addressing these concerns, is instructive to look at how zoning has played out with some of our more recent development projects.

Consider, for example, the rezoning of Needham Crossing. In that case, the FAR for the district is 1.75 – that was the original FAR proposed in October 2019 for Highway Commercial 1. However, the approved FAR in the portion of the site with TripAdvisor and Boston Children's Hospital is 1.39. In the portion of the site with NBC Universal and Shark Ninja, the approved FAR is .59. Both of these real project FARs are well below the potential maximum. The Town consistently finds, in commercial locations, that the approved FARs are typically lower.

All residents are concerned about traffic. And that was the most challenging part of this project – because we all know what happened to traffic in the pandemic. Traffic, over time, will return and grow, absent other changes, due to gradual increases in the general population in this area and south and west of Town. Therefore, regional transportation continues to be a very high priority of the Select Board. In this case, the greatest amount of traffic from a re-developed site will be between the site and the highway – not in the neighborhoods. We have learned that the

forecasted traffic may be mitigated. That is a benefit of the site's location. Additionally, the Planning Board may require additional traffic mitigation as a condition of a proposed development.

Others have expressed concerns about the impact of development on existing infrastructure. The Town has already upgraded public safety infrastructure to support the growth in Needham Heights and Needham Crossing. In the Needham 2025 report, there was one interceptor sewer on Route 128 between Kendrick Street and Highland Avenue that was identified as a potentially limiting factor for future growth. With any new development, that would be re-examined.

The Select Board thinks about the long term – how do we meet the needs and desires of our citizens without undue burdens? Needham has worked carefully and methodically to renew our Town's infrastructure over the last 20 years – rebuilding schools, Town Hall, the Center at the Heights, the Pools at Rosemary, Memorial Park Field House, and others. We still have two schools left to renew – Pollard and Mitchell – as well as the Emery Grover Building. The Schools Master Plan calls for \$330 million of additional investment. And, while the Town takes tremendous pride in our schools, it is clear that amount cannot be afforded all at once. It would double the Town's debt burden. We will work this summer to determine what a financing plan can look like. One thing is for certain, just as the growth from Needham Crossing means that the Town has not needed an operating override since 2014 or capital overrides for anything except the Sunita Williams School and Public Safety Buildings, a re-zoning of Highway Commercial 1 could contribute significantly to reducing the cost to taxpayers for the next major capital projects – rebuilding Mitchell and Pollard. New revenue will be part of the answer to paying for these projects.

This is a carefully considered piece of work. The Select Board asks for your adoption of these articles.