

Town of Needham
MBTA Communities Act Frequently Asked Questions

For the most updated materials, please visit the October 21, 2024 Special Town Meeting website: <https://needhamma.gov/5586/October-2024-Special-Town-Meeting>.

What is the MBTA Communities Act? What is required by the Town?

1. What is the MBTA Communities Act?

Massachusetts passed a new state law ([MGL c.40A Section 3A](#)) that requires 177 cities and towns who are served by the MBTA, including Needham, to establish a zoning district within 0.5 miles from a commuter rail station, in which multi-family housing is allowed as-of-right. The Massachusetts Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities established [guidelines](#) further detailing compliance requirements.

2. What does Needham's multi-family housing district need to comply with the law?

Metric	Needham's Requirement
Minimum Land Area	50 acres
Minimum Unit Capacity (<i>15% of Needham's existing number of housing units</i>)	1,784 units
% located within 0.5 mi of commuter rail	90%
Minimum Zoning Density	15 units per acre
Deadline for Compliant Zoning	December 31, 2024

3. Does Needham need to build all of this housing?

No, the law does not require that any housing be built. It requires that Needham establish zoning that allows for multi-family housing as specified above.

What is the Town's current zoning proposal?

4. What is the proposed zoning for multi-family housing in Needham?

The Planning Board is advancing two proposals: a Base Compliance Plan and a Neighborhood Housing Plan. The zoning articles were created to build on each other. Passage of the Base Compliance Plan (Articles 8 & 9) would bring Needham into compliance with the law. The additional passage of the Neighborhood Housing Plan (Articles 10 & 11) would maintain Needham's compliance while zoning for more housing through increased height and density than would be allowed under the Base Plan. The maps and zoning parameters for each plan can be found in Addendums A-C.

	Needham Requirement	Base Compliance Plan	Neighborhood Housing Plan
Acreage (net)	50	100.3	92.5
Unit Capacity	1,784	1,870	3,296
Density (units/acre)	15	18.6	35.6
Percent near transit	90%	93%	92%

5. How does the proposed zoning differ from what is currently zoned?

Maps and charts comparing Needham's existing zoning with what is being proposed in the Base Plan and the Neighborhood Housing Plan are in the overview presentation posted on the October 21, 2024 Special Town Meeting page: <https://needhamma.gov/5586/October-2024-Special-Town-Meeting>.

Neither the Base Compliance Plan nor the Neighborhood Housing Plan makes any changes to the underlying zoning. Both proposals would establish a zoning overlay district, which would add new options for multi-family housing, in addition to the building types and uses already allowed in Needham's existing zoning bylaw. Needham's Existing Zoning Map can be [viewed here](#).

6. What are the likely and maximum number of housing units that could be built?

	Base Compliance Plan	Neighborhood Housing Plan
Likely Build Out	411 units	1,288 units
Full Build Out	1,870 units	3,296 units

A chart comparing how many housing units exist on these parcels today and how many could potentially be allowed under Needham's current zoning with what is being proposed can be found in Addendum D. The full build out totals are the maximum number of units the zoning will allow, but it is unlikely that every property owner will choose to redevelop their property.

7. What parking will be required?

The Base Compliance Plan and the Neighborhood Housing Plan both require a minimum of 1.0 parking spots per housing unit. A developer may choose to build additional parking, if they believe that a higher ratio is necessary to rent or sell each unit based on market demand.

8. Can we control the style/design of the housing?

Similar to Needham's existing zoning, multi-family housing developers would be required to get advisory input from the Design Review Board during the Planning Board's review process.

9. Will new housing built under these proposals be affordable?

The Base Compliance Plan and the Neighborhood Housing Plan both require that 12.5% of all new units in buildings with 6 or more units are set aside as deed restricted affordable housing.

What are the anticipated impacts on Town resources and infrastructure?

10. What are the fiscal impacts (revenue and expenses) on the Town and Schools?

The Town's consultants, RKG Associates, constructed a fiscal impact model to understand the potential tax revenues from new housing developments compared to the municipal and school operating costs to support those housing units. The analysis concludes that on a per unit basis, newly built multifamily units will generate more tax revenue than operating costs for the Town. A presentation on this analysis is available on the October 21, 2024 Special Town Meeting page: <https://needhamma.gov/5586/October-2024-Special-Town-Meeting>.

11. What is the anticipated impact on school enrollment?

The estimated number of school aged-children projected from the housing scenarios appear in the chart below. This analysis assumes varying ratios of students per unit, based on the bedroom count and income level of the household.

	Base Compliance Plan	Neighborhood Housing Plan
Likely Build Out	55 students	164 students
Full Build Out	236 students	415 students

These projections are consistent with the student generation rates that Needham has experienced over the last five years from Charles River Landing, Hamilton Highlands, the Kendrick, Modera, Rosemary Lake Apartments, and Rosemary Ridge. The Needham Public Schools monitors enrollment trends and engages a consultant for annual enrollment forecasts. Any student projections related to this zoning will be incorporated into that work.

Compared to current school capacity, the Base likely build would exceed elementary capacity by 49 students (2%) and the Neighborhood likely build by 158 students (6%). Current middle school capacity accommodates both the Base and the Neighborhood plans. The School Department has developed a master plan for updating aging school facilities and creating enrollment capacity, district-wide. The School Committee's preferred master plan scenario would renovate the Pollard for grades 6-8, repurpose the High Rock as a 6th elementary school, and renovate the Mitchell as a 3 or 4 section school. Under the School Master plan/Pollard MSBA project, elementary capacity can accommodate both the Base and the Neighborhood plans. Projected enrollment would exceed middle school capacity by 34 students (2.5%) under the Base and by 74 students (5.5%) under the Neighborhood Plan. Projected enrollment of the Neighborhood Plan exceeds Needham High School capacity by 7 students (< 1%).

12. What are the potential capital impacts for the Town of Needham due to this zoning?

The Department of Public Works, Needham Public Schools, Finance Department, Building Department, Police Department, and Fire Department reviewed the zoning proposals. Staff compared the growth projections with Town capital infrastructure systems, known needs and proposed improvement projects informed by their expertise and source documents. Major conclusions are listed below and a detailed memo is available on the October 21, 2024 Special Town Meeting page: <https://needhamma.gov/5586/October-2024-Special-Town-Meeting>.

Police, Fire/EMS: No anticipated capital impacts due to recent investments in the Public Safety Building and Fire Station 2. The Fire Department's current apparatus can serve the height and density of the buildings that would be allowed.

Water & Sewer: The Town believes it has enough water capacity to support housing that may result from the proposed zoning. DPW does not anticipate that the proposed zoning will result in a need for new capital projects to expand existing water or sewer capacity due to the following considerations:

- The proposed areas for rezoning are already developed.
- The main factors that will drive the need for Town capital investments are the age and condition of the existing infrastructure.
- All proposed developments must show there is adequate water, sewer, and utility service.

- The Town is not required to shoulder any capital investment needed to make a project viable.
- At some sites, new housing development may reduce pressure on the Town's water, sewer, and drain systems compared to the current use or age of the existing building.

DPW may adjust the scope of projects needed due to current conditions to factor in population growth. DPW provides a thorough review of all projects that go through the Planning Board to ensure that projects comply with local requirements related to water, sewer, and stormwater. EOHLG guidelines state that "compliance with Section 3A does not require a municipality to install new water or wastewater infrastructure, or add to the capacity of existing infrastructure, to accommodate future multi-family housing production within the multi-family zoning district."

Stormwater: Addressing stormwater quality and capacity will be a Town priority for the foreseeable future. DPW received funding in 2024 for a Stormwater Master Plan to identify and prioritize stormwater capital projects townwide. There has been flooding throughout Needham, including in some areas proposed for rezoning. Proposed developments will be subject to the Town's Stormwater Bylaw, stormwater utility fee, flood plain requirements, and wetlands regulations. The Select Board has established a Stormwater Bylaw Working Group to make recommendations for revisions to the Town's bylaw to strengthen requirements related to stormwater capacity.

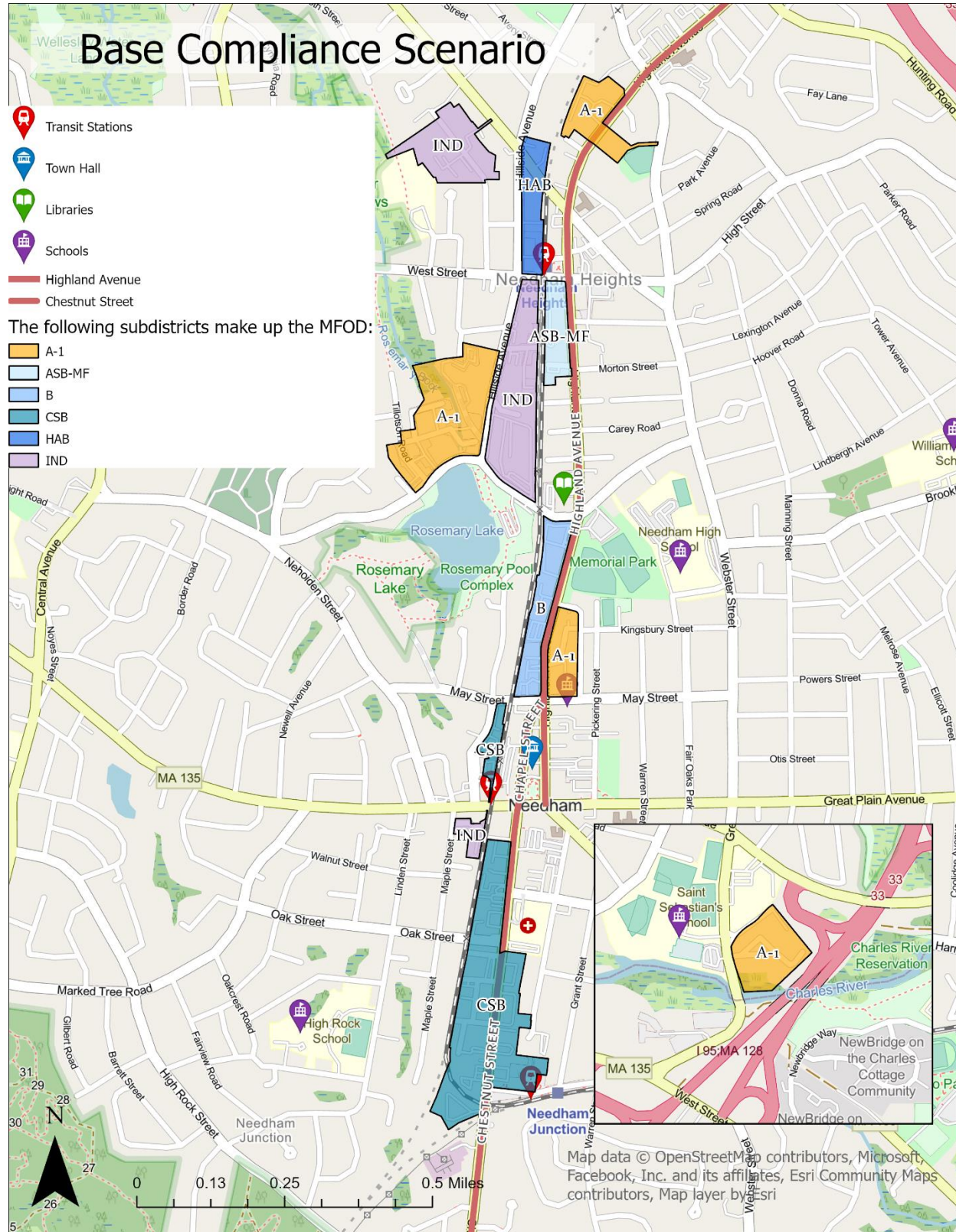
Environmental: Compliance with the MBTA Communities Act is a stated action in Needham's Climate Action Plan to work towards the goal that "Needham has low-carbon mobility options accessible to all." All housing built under this zoning must comply with the Opt-In Specialized Energy Code. Any new multi-family housing over 12,000 square feet will need to meet Passive House standards and any new multi-family housing under 12,000 square feet will need to be all-electric or, if using fossil fuel combustion systems, will need to provide pre-wiring for future appliances and HVAC electrification and install solar to offset energy usage.

13. What is the anticipated impact on traffic? Is this rezoning coordinated with efforts to expand bike lanes in Needham or other roadway improvement projects?

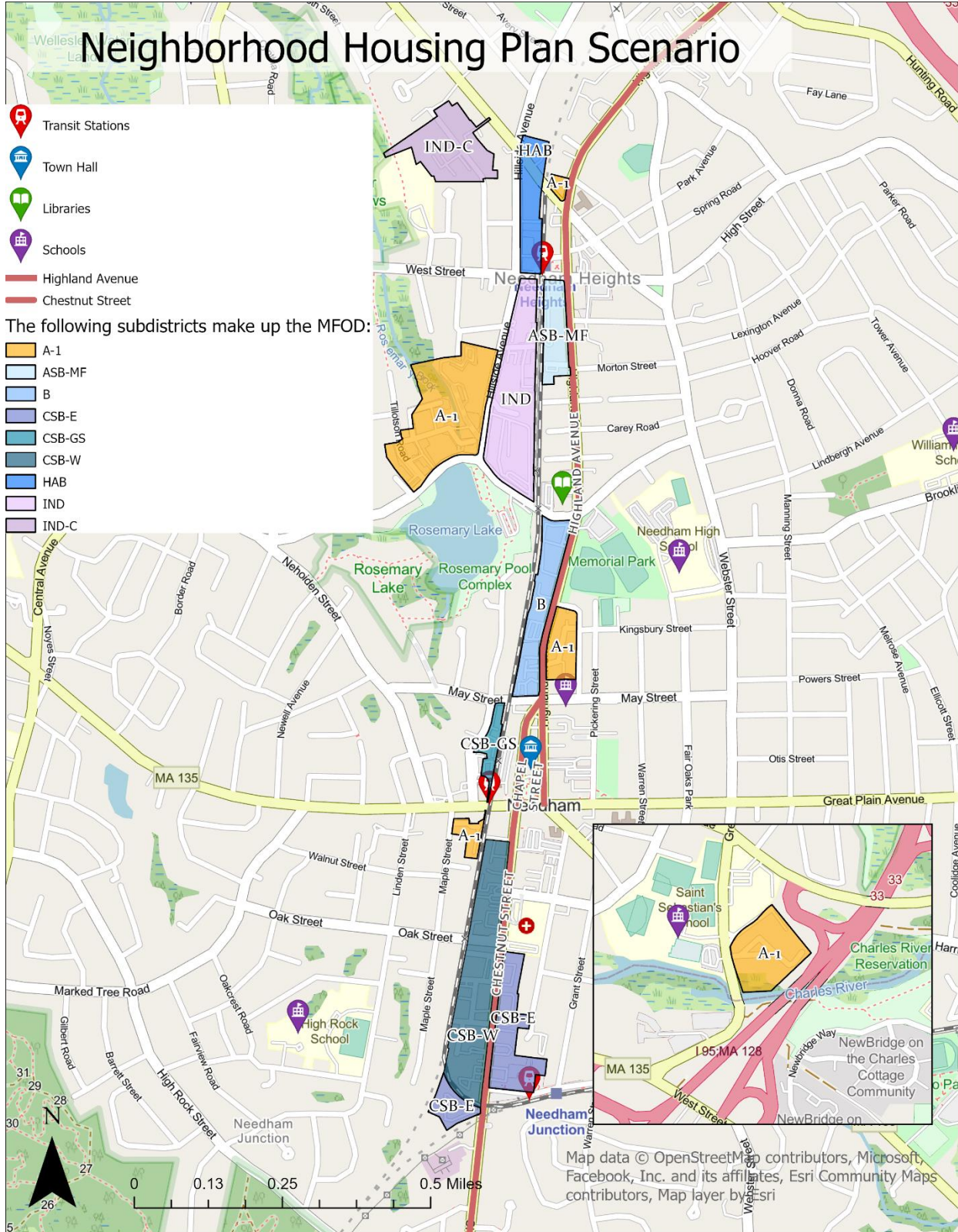
The Town hired GPI to conduct a traffic analysis to assess the impacts of the likely build out of the Base Plan and the Neighborhood Housing Plan, which can be found [here](#). GPI analyzed 15 key intersections in the area proposed for rezoning and compared anticipated traffic volumes in 2034 with and without new zoning for multi-family housing. GPI concluded that, with recommended mitigation measures, the traffic system will maintain acceptable levels of service under the likely build out of both the Base Plan and the Neighborhood Plan.

The Department of Public Works is currently working on a redesign of Great Plain Avenue from Linden Street to Warren Street. A roadway improvement project for Highland Avenue between Webster Street and Great Plain Avenue is also planned to slow car speeds, better accommodate bicycles and pedestrians, and improve traffic flow by having signalized intersections "talk" to signals further north on Highland Avenue to Needham Street in Newton. These two roadway projects are planned, regardless of the zoning proposals, and will address 7 of the 9 intersections where GPI recommended mitigation strategies to ensure efficient traffic flow.

ADDENDUM A – Base Compliance Plan Map



ADDENDUM B – Neighborhood Housing Plan Map



ADDENDUM C – Zoning Parameters

BASE COMPLIANCE PLAN						
	Apartment A1	Business	Avery Square Business	Chestnut St. Business	Hillside Ave. Business	Industrial
Minimum Lot Size (Sq. feet)	20,000	10,000	10,000	10,000	10,000	10,000
Height (Stories)	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0
Floor Area Ratio (FAR)	0.50		1.30	0.70	0.70	0.50
Max Lot Coverage		25%				
Max Dwelling Units Per Acre	18		44	18		
Parking per Unit	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0
			4 stories and an FAR of 1.7 allowed by Special Permit.			

NEIGHBORHOOD HOUSING PLAN								
	Apt A1	Business	Avery Sq Business	Chestnut St. Business		Hillside Ave. Business	Industrial	
				West	East & Garden St.		Crescent	Hillside
Minimum Lot Size (sq. feet)	20,000	10,000	10,000	10,000	10,000	10,000	10,000	10,000
Height (Stories)	4.0	4.0	3.0	4.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0
Floor Area Ratio (FAR)	1.00	2.00	1.30	2.00	2.00	1.00	0.75	1.00
Max Dwelling Units Per Acre	36	48	44			24	24	24
Parking per Unit	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0
Note		4.5 stories allowed if: (1) commercial space on first floor and/or (2) 7.5% of units are workforce housing (for those between 80-120% AMI).	4 stories and an FAR of 1.7 allowed by Special Permit.	4.5 stories allowed if: (1) commercial space on first floor and/or (2) 7.5% of units are workforce housing (for those between 80-120% AMI).	3.5 stories allowed if: (1) commercial space on first floor and/or (2) 7.5% of units are workforce housing (for those between 80-120% AMI).			

ADDENDUM D – Unit Capacity Comparison

Zoning District	Scenario Name: Unit Capacity				
	Existing Units	Existing Zoning Unit Capacity	Existing Zoning with Overlay Special Permit Unit Capacity	Base Compliance Plan Unit Capacity	Neighborhood Housing Plan Unit Capacity
Apartment A1	588	526	526	526	877
Business	4	N/A	N/A	210	305
Avery Square Business	72	77	77	189	189
Chestnut St. East	46	370	987	370	547
Chestnut St. West					732
Chestnut St./Garden St.					75
Hillside Ave Business	44	46	46	80	62
Industrial – Crescent	21	N/A	N/A	495	184
Industrial – Hillside					325
TOTAL UNITS	775	1,019	1,636	1,870	3,296