

WEST NEWBURY HOUSING OPPORTUNITIES INITIATIVE PUBLIC FORUM, JUNE 20, 2023 MEETING SUMMARY

Introduction

The Town of West Newbury held a virtual public forum on June 20, 2023 to introduce the Housing Opportunities Initiative and gather public input about the community's preferences and concerns about zoning for multi-family housing. The forum was conducted during a Planning Board meeting and was facilitated by the Town's consultants for the project, Dodson & Flinker. The meeting was attended by approximately 40 participants—not including the consultant team.

The meeting began with a presentation by Dillon Sussman of Dodson & Flinker that covered:

- The project scope and timeline
- MBTA Communities Law and Guidelines
- Demographics and Housing in West Newbury
- Relevant takeaways from previous housing planning
- Analysis of potential locations for districts
- Examples of multi-family houses

This was followed by a question and answer session. Participants were then divided into breakout groups for a facilitated discussion. The full group came back together at the end of the meeting for a brief report out from each of the facilitators. The following notes summarize comments made during the meeting.

Questions and Answers:

- Do any of the examples you showed use a septic system [as opposed to a town sewer system]?
 - No. We will continue to look for examples that use a septic system. As we mentioned, septic systems will likely be a limitation on development density, even if the zoning allows a higher density. [Note: the presentation for the Design Workshop on July 27 included examples with septic systems]
- Where does the land for these development projects come from?
 - This is about changing zoning to enable private property owners and developers to build multifamily housing if they choose to. The land would come from property owners choosing to develop housing.
- Sites do not need water and sewer to comply with law? The town doesn't need to provide the infrastructure?
 - Correct. The Compliance Guidelines say that a community is not required to provide infrastructure to make multi-family housing feasible, only to change the zoning to allow it.
- Do we have enough water to meet needs of building more housing?
 - The Town is currently working with a consultant to study drinking water supply. It will help answer that question. We will be coordinating with that study.
- Will the units be for home-ownership or rental?
 - They could be either. That is a decision the owner of a property would make—as property owners can now for properties across West Newbury



- There are two ways of thinking about this – 1. Developing on properties that don't currently have houses. 2. Developing by combining existing lots – enabling developers to look at current properties in town and deciding if it would be profitable to buy up and combine existing lots – profit-driven and would be concerning.
- Most projects will draw down water, which is precarious.
- This is a different way of reviewing housing needs – considering lots of factors. This is being shoved down our throats. It is un-American.
- Why do we need to comply? Middleborough is not complying because they decided not to comply and we can band together and sue the state.
 - The potential consequences of not complying are: not being eligible for some state grants, including MassWorks; civil enforcement action; and liability under federal and state fair housing laws. It will be up to the voters at Town Meeting to weight the pros and cons of complying with the state law.
- Do we just need to rezone a certain number of acres in order to comply? What is the timeline?
 - The Town needs to rezone enough developable land at a density that allows for 87 units at a minimum of 15 units/acre on average. For example, if the Town rezones land at 15 units per acre, it would need to rezone a minimum of 5.8 acres of developable land. The law does not require the Town to initiate housing development projects or build additional infrastructure to make multi-family housing viable.
 - West Newbury is required to have a compliant zoning district by December 31, 2025.
- Do we need to comply just not to lose funding, or is this legally required?
 - Both. A community that does not comply will lose access to some funding. Also, the Attorney General issued an Advisory in March, 2023. It says, "Importantly, MBTA Communities cannot avoid their obligations under the Law by foregoing this funding [meaning, the grants specified in the Law]. The Law requires that MBTA Communities "shall have" a compliant zoning district and does not provide any mechanism by which a town or city may opt out of this requirement."
- Why do we need to follow density requirements, why can't we do it our own way, spread out?
 - The requirement to zone for a minimum of 15 units/acre was included in the state law. In practice, any resulting developments in West Newbury may be less dense than 15/units per acre because of wastewater limitations and/or because project proponents choose to build less dense developments.
- Peter Flinker:
 - We are exploring whether there is a way to build that looks beautiful and is acceptable to the community. This will be one of the topics we will explore together at the Design Workshop being held on June 27. Please join us!
 - During the meeting tonight and the one next week, we are engaging in an experiment – is it possible to do this in a way that is beneficial for the town?
- The 2025 deadline is to designate the zone(s) – what happens if nothing is developed on that land?
 - The Town would have fulfilled its legal requirement. The Compliance Guidelines for the Law show that this is about long-term land use planning and that the State understands it may take a long time for actual housing to be built, if it ever is.

Break Out Group 1, Jack Sweeney-Taylor, Facilitator

Say your name, how you are connected to West Newbury, and in just a few words, what brought you to tonight's meeting.

- Ted – live here and got a flyer in the mail
- John – been in W. Newbury for a while, on Conservation Commission
- Erik – Young millennial misfit, been in W. Newbury for 3 years, saw flyer and got excited about development



- Andrew – been here for about 3 years, have kids, do development
- Ray Cook – been in W. Newbury since 1995, on planning board
- Patricia – On open space committee,
- Andrea – Just moved to W. Newbury – interested in development
- Pam – In town since 1983, on Affordable Housing Trust, here to take notes

How has the community changed over the past decades?

- Lost agricultural land – concerning since we lose rural character
- Concerning that our kids can't afford to live in town (teachers, firefighters, town employees) – pricey
- Concerned that this law will not alleviate affordable housing needs – just produce expensive multifamily
- Prices have gone up – 20% affordability would be nice for this project
- Don't see community having changed that much in some ways – continue to build large lots, expensive
- Easy lots to build on have already been built on – now need to deal with wetlands and trickier lots
- Number of children in town is decreasing – nice to have children in town
- Feel like W. Newbury isn't well-built for young families – goes beyond price of housing – but schools are decreasing everywhere
- Probably most noticeable change since 1989 is disappearance of open fields/views
 - Sullivan Farm on Wetstone Street
 - Middle Street development – recent, large houses that replace field or forest
- Those are legitimate changes if they are approved through Planning Board process, but town often preserves land

What changes are you hopeful for, or worried about, related to housing and who lives in West Newbury?

- Concerned that this law will not alleviate affordable housing needs – just produce expensive multifamily (ex: Newburyport)
- Developers could build luxury apartments that do not meet affordability
- Worried that number of children in town is decreasing – it would be nice to have children in town
- Hopeful for development/community to have public amenities that are open to all – example, playground, food mart, that allows people to enjoy public spaces, rather than gated community
- Hope there is a way to do this project while increasing benefits to all
- Hopeful we can increase young families while preserving historic, cultural, and open space value of town – need cooperation between people of both mindsets
- I've been on Open Space Committee for a long time, and have felt that that is most important thing for town, but this push for MF is changing my thoughts some – a crushing need for inexpensive housing – trying to look at intent of law in positive light
- But this initiative won't do that – will be expensive
- Hard to say what will actually get built – could be all high end – but [also could not]

Is there a need for types of housing that are different from the housing that currently exist in West Newbury?

- Architecturally, you don't want a big break from existing architecture in town, want to be architecturally consistent
- Could be done through site plan review, but can't mandate it
- Seen Amesbury developments – Cider Hill to Powwow Hill development with 2-3 unit buildings and some single family
- Oleo Woods on Story Ave next to CVS in Newburyport packed and blooming with young families and kids – like that sense of community that comes with density
- N. Andover – half looks like W. Newbury, half looks more dense – would be small area of town,



What barriers are there to multi-family housing now?

- Zoning allows it, but through Special Permit
- Geographically difficult – high water table
- More traffic in town – there are workarounds but may be difficult
- Water system is on the brink – old water mains that [...]
- Well fields aren't sufficient for summer – need to buy water
- No sewer, need to allow soils to drain properly
- Old development property on Coffin St that went from 150 units to 90 units, got stalled by septic needs, then people got together and formed LLC to stop project all together
- Coffin St - tough area
- NIMBYism and political opposition – a real challenge to come with a plan that people can see will benefit town as whole – good chance that it won't go through
- Delicate balance with property rights – public benefits vs. right for people to do what they want with their land – Open Space bylaw
- But MF Zoning district could make it harder to preserve open space – viewsapes

What opportunities are there for multi-family housing now?

- Mixed-use development could be a good opportunity for town and development – village center
- Develop sewage treatment plant near downtown – allow businesses to tap into, but expensive and difficult

Are there particular locations that make more sense for multi-family housing? Why?

- Mullen property – reviewed already, and smaller effect on viewscape of W. Newbury
- Old Nursery – Dunn property – way it is located, most of open land is past a rise, so doesn't affect viewscape
- My inclination is that if you zone both of those, you could create walkable communities
- Knapp greenhouse property has a deep lot

Are there particular locations that do not make sense for multi-family housing?

- Like private property rezoning for this and saving town-owned land for more affordable development
- I.e., 40R rezoning

Break Out Group 2. Dillon Sussman, Facilitator

Introductions: What is your name and what brought you to tonight's meeting?

- Brendan Murphy, Maple Street resident. I have kids in town so I'm interested in the long-term future. I've attended a few meetings in the past so I was interested in this one.
- Diane Teed. I've lived in town for over 36 years. I love the Town's structure. With the proposed ADU bylaw and this, it is a lot. I want to get as informed as possible.
- Graham Bacheller, Chair of the Open Space Committee. This is a hot topic so I want to know more. A lot of people are going to be talking about this.
- Ann Bardeen, Planning Board
- Angus Jenning, Town Manager

How has the community changed over the past decades?

- I was born in the early 80's. There was a lot of development in the 1980's and 90's. Lots of the original, long-time land owners sold. There was a lot of pushback on recent development. There's been a big shift



toward conserving open space. I'm one of a handful of people [of my generation] who grew up in the town and still live here.

- I've lived here since the late 1980's, 35 years. The cost of housing skyrocketed. From the 1980's-90's subdivisions were added. The multi-generational ownership declined. The silver lining of this is the focus on density. WE can get the same number of units with less land. Need smaller housing—for people who want to downsize or who are just starting out.
- One of the issues is the potential loss of control for the Town. I'm concerned about rental properties, enforcement, setbacks. [The participant clarified that they were referring to both the ADU bylaw and the MBTA Communities requirements]
- Need to pay attention to ratio of affordable housing, roads and traffic—infrastructure
- What is the best way to do this? Can we zone small Main St properties? What is the disposition process?
 - Angus Jennings explained the typical RFP or RPQ process. The town would reserve the right to reject any proposals if they don't meet the town's specifications.
- Would we be compliant if it is not viable to build 15 units per acre on a site? For example, because the soils do not allow for that level of density on that site due to septic.

Are there particular locations that make more sense for multi-family housing? Why?

- The best locations are large parcels that can be buffered. For example, Mullen
- This zoning will go to Town Meeting. It needs to be palatable. Need a plan that works for everybody.
- Should do it in a location where it can be tied into town water.
- Ideally in a place where there is a connection to open space, trail connections
- Try to lessen the impacts. Put it close to Newburyport to minimize traffic flow through town. Utilize existing infrastructure.

Can you imagine a future where multi-family housing is beneficial for West Newbury? What benefits could it have? How can zoning changes make those benefits become real?

- If we got more diverse housing, it could help stop the bleeding on population loss. Stop loss of older adults with long term connections to the community and lots of knowledge. Could also allow younger people to settle in town.
- I agree. Also could increase the vibrancy of the town.
- We need a varied population. Us older people like to see children, young people.

Break Out Group 3, Peter Flinker, Facilitator

One word that describes West Newbury:

- Quiet
- Friendly
- Family-friendly
- Friendly
- Peaceful
- Idyllic
- Green and wanting to remain so.

How has the community changed in recent years, and how has that affected the demand for housing?

- There is a need for housing; this proposal will help.
- There's a dramatic shortage of housing, but 15 units per acre will require a very expensive, high-end wastewater system. Doesn't see any areas that can support 15 units/acre.



- As a nation we're 6 million units behind in terms of needed housing. The millennial generation is larger than the baby boom.
- Sticker shock is significant – if we want to have housing for youth and older people we need to build it – 87 units will be a good start.
- We need young people to support the town; housing for teachers and public servants.
- Diversity can mean a lot of things – age, background, etc – but it's clear we need units that are under the median price – which is in the 700,000s right now.
- We need housing in general – the town could change the zoning for its own land and put out an rfp for developers.
- Even with 87 units, there may be no resulting benefit in terms of creating affordable housing.

Where are the best locations for housing, and what issues arise in different areas?

- There's a lot of yellow on the map [prepared by the consultants indicating parcels that could accommodate additional housing] but people are NIMBY. It makes sense to locate housing on Main Street, within walking distance to services. Anywhere in West Newbury people will still need a car.
- Just rezoning a single property could possibly accommodate all of the required units.
- Question: is there a restriction of some kind on the Knapp property?
- The town shot down a solar developer, and when another property came forward for development the neighbors got together to purchase and protect it. We need housing, but also need trees.
- People have vehicles – what will be the impact of hundreds of additional cars?
- Likes the idea of larger structures divided into multiple units – but need examples of multifamily projects in rural areas that were served by septic.
- There is a multifamily project in Salisbury with shared septic where one participant lived for a time – it experienced some issues when everyone was home with their kids during Covid, but otherwise has worked well.
- The properties along 113 are relatively flat and accessible, and therefore most appropriate for multifamily housing.
- A 40B project proposed for Coffin Street ran into a lot of problems and is a good example of the difficulty of developing in the Town's more wet and hilly areas.
- There is a big area next to I-95 that could fit a lot of housing.
- Need to look at housing sites in conjunction with water supply.

Takeaways

- There is a critical need for housing suitable for smaller households – young people and older folks.
- Housing needs to be balanced with environmental protection.
- General agreement that housing should be located in areas with the best transportation access, public water and within walking distance to businesses and public services.
- Should take advantage of town-owned land, especially the Mullen property.
- Need examples of multi-family housing projects on septic.

Break Out Group 4, Eli Bloch, Facilitator

Name and why you are here.

- Brian Murphy, Chair of the Planning Board
- Deborah Hamilton Planning Board Member
- Gini Mazman, resident of West Newbury for five years, wants more affordable housing in town.
- Judy Cronin, Wife of Planning Board member. Interested in housing.
- James McCarthy, 23-year resident of West Newbury



- Claudia Ester, 5-year resident of West Newbury, is interested in how West Newbury can keep its rural character.
- Karan Lane, 36-year resident of West Newbury, concerned about lack of input in MBTA Communities Act and lack of affordable housing.
- Wendy Reed, Select Board and Affordable Housing Trust Member.

What Has Changed About West Newbury, what are you worried about, what are you hopeful for?

- Not a lot has changed.
- Hopeful that we can have more multigenerational housing, and more younger people moving in. Accessory Dwelling Units could help with that.
- Concerned about West Newbury losing its sense of place if it grows too much.
- Concerned about growing just for the sake of growing.
- Worried about having enough people to work in important jobs, specifically the Fire Department, teachers, and nurses.
- Shocked by population decline projections.

Is there a need for types of housing that are different from the housing that currently exists in West Newbury? Who needs housing and what characteristics might they want their housing to have?

- Cottage housing
- Apartments and places that kids who grew up in West Newbury can afford.
- Farm estates and apartments that look like large single-family homes.

Are there particular locations that make more sense for multi-family housing? Why?

- Mullen property is everyone's favorite, a good development was proposed there. Package plant needed to serve apartments.
- Dunn property generally agreed to be the second-best option.
- Knapp property is also popular as an option and currently for sale.
- Ipswich (1970's homes) and Newburyport recent developments are good examples of dense affordable housing projects that have a variety of building and unit types.
- Large houses that can be broken up into apartments.

