

Town of Needham, Massachusetts
Housing Needham Advisory Group (HONE)
Powers Hall, Town Hall, 1471 Highland Ave.
TOWN-WIDE COMMUNITY WORKSHOP
Minutes
January 18, 2024

Place: In-person at Powers Hall or on-line registration to participate via Zoom
Present: Co-Chair, Heidi Frail; Co-Chair, Natasha Espada; Michael Diener, Kevin Keane, Joshua Levy, William Lovett, Jeanne McKnight, Ronald Ruth
Absent: Liz Kaponya
Staff: Katie King, Deputy Town Manager; Lee Newman, Director of Planning & Community Development; Alexandra Clee, Assistant Town Planner
Guest: Eric Halvorsen, RKG Associates; Emily Innes, Innes Associates

Call to Order

At 7:00 pm, H. Frail called the meeting to order. The meeting is being video recorded.

Sign-in and Welcome

N. Espada thanked 200 participants, HONE Advisory Group volunteers, consultants, Town staff, and The Needham Channel for their efforts and expressed gratitude for their hard work.

Introductory Remarks

The MBTA Communities Law applies to 177 cities and towns that have or are adjacent to communities with MBTA transit. Municipalities must confirm they have zoning districts of reasonable size where multi-family housing of 3 or more units is zoned for by-right. Needham does not comply with this law and must design zoning to comply by December 2024.

N. Espada highlighted HONE's progress, which was built on community engagement from the Housing Plan Working Group starting in 2021 to update the Town of Needham's 2007 Housing Plan which was finalized in January 2023.

The law establishes a requirement that each of 177 MBTA Communities have zoning that provides:

1. At least one district of reasonable size in which multi-family housing is permitted as of-right
2. It cannot have age restrictions and shall be suitable for families with children
3. It must have a minimum gross density of 15 dwelling units per acre
4. Part of the district must be located within 0.5 mile of transit stations.

Needham is a Commuter Rail Community with a December 31, 2024 compliance deadline.

- We hired consultants in Fall 2023 when we held our first Community meeting.
- The next Community meeting is slated for March.
- The State needs 90 days to review the proposed zoning.
- The Planning Board needs to finalize the zoning article between July and September.
- Town Meeting members vote in October.

- The final State review will be in December 2024.

Three compliance options were created using maps to inform community choice. Staff, consultants and volunteers have worked hard to find the right fit for Needham.

The committee will gather community feedback to create a final map that aims to balance community feedback with different visions for the Town's future. This is the central question:

How do we envision Needham's future?

1. Thriving walkable streets where people can shop and socialize?
2. Economically viable streets for both employers and employees, visitors and residents?
3. Safe streets for pedestrians, cyclists, and motorists?

Participants were asked to remain openminded when considering Survey questions; visualize each option. Perspectives on the pace of change were noted as well as construction timelines and other elements beyond zoning (like parcel consolidation) that impact the likelihood of new housing being built. Town departments are being consulted for potential impact of the Scenarios (for example, school enrollment and infrastructure).

The consultant presentation includes a short survey which will remain open until January 24.

The HONE Group decided at the last meeting that a compliant district at Hersey Station would require a re-zoning of 4.5 acres of area now zoned for single-family homes to count toward a compliant map. The MBTA-owned parking lot could be zoned but would not count towards MBTA compliance. To zone it, the 4.5 acres needed would significantly alter the neighborhood as the existing Neighborhood Business zone contains less than 0.5 acres. Zoning these single-family districts may be discussed in the future, but not to comply with the MBTA Communities Law.

HONE will make recommendations to the Planning Board of changes that the Town may want to consider outside of the specific requirements of the MBTA Communities Law.

An FAQ will be available on the web site. Participants were invited to listen to HONE's 1/29/24 meeting.

Presentation & Survey

Needham MBTA Communities Process, MBTA District Scenarios, Public Meeting #2
Eric Halvorsen of RKG Associate; Emily Innes, Innes Associates

E. Halvorsen reviewed Contents:

- Meeting #1 Feedback Summary (available in meeting packet on-line)
- Three MBTA Scenarios & Maps
 - A: Base Compliance (Keep Center Business (CB) as mixed-use; no standalone multi-family)

- B: 2022 Housing Plan Scenario (Keep some Center Business as mixed-use but rezone some edges for standalone multi-family, add in some additional areas to be zoned as Apartment-1)
- C: Increased Density & General Residence Scenario
 - Incorporates the General Residence (GR) District allowing up to 4 units per parcel at a maximum height of 2.5 stories.
 - Keep some CB as mixed-use but rezones some edges for standalone multi-family
- Conduct Preference Survey question by question expounded by consultant (paper or online)
- Question and Comment Period

Questions & Comments

Bob Smart, 25 Mayo Ave.

Three Scenarios suggest an average of 15 units per acre. All Scenarios require more than 50 acres under the law. If you select 30 units per acre, the rezoning process may yield similar results. Has HONE considered how much housing production is likely to occur at different density levels? You may get little action at 15 units per acre but a lot of action at 30 units per acre. If you increase density, what would be the effect on the cost of development and the cost of the units?

Jan Soma, 106 Marked Tree Rd.

She read a letter containing statistics for the number of young Needham residents between the ages of 25 - 34 who cannot afford to live in Needham, noting that Scenario C affords the most housing units.

Nordo Yusi, 450 Chestnut St.

In districts considered for development, flooding should be prioritized with storm drain and water flow improvements to minimize runoff. Scenario C's issue is excessive water-storage-land development. The Hartney Greymont parcel would require significant infrastructure changes. He supports inclusion of the Center Business district but commercial should be maintained to include active, downtown space.

Rachel Krimlisk, Seabeds Way

She suggests zoning to include a walkable downtown, incorporating diverse commercial properties, and promoting a more artsy, music town, fostering a pedestrian-friendly community. Consider first floor commercial other than coffee shops. Zone a diverse commercial downtown.

Steve Snitzer, 112 Greendale Ave.

What are the ramifications of including those residence districts in the MBTA count?

Jeff Handler, 100 Valley Road

He owns an office building at 257 Hillside Ave. He supports Needham's progressive housing development approach advocating for standalone residential units to stimulate commercial

space and make it more desirable. He warned against requiring first floor commercial space which may discourage developers. He acknowledged the gradual nature of development and the increasing costs of construction and stabilizing housing.

Jane Volden, 133 Brookside Rd.

She chose Scenario A as a conservative approach to expanding housing in Needham, starting small and considering the financial impact on taxpayers. Creating dense housing will increase the number of students which adds expense. She hopes that expanding zoning will create housing for young people though affordable housing is not affordable to people in their 20's and 30's.

Irene Berlinsky, 96 Gay St.

She thanked HONE members for their time to consider the Town center. How can it be more walkable, vibrant, and bring more foot traffic? I've heard ideas for pedestrian only streets.

Since we're voting on options that may require rezoning in the Town center for residential only, how will you go about making changes as this will impact us for many years? It would be good to have this information within the six day Survey window so we can make an informed decision.

Joe Leghorn, 40 Linden St.

As a Town Meeting member, he supports low income housing and is concerned about flooding in the lower Maple St., Linden St. area. He favors redevelopment of the Needham Housing Authority (NHA) property but has concerns about the inclusion of the General Residence district south of Maple and Oak Streets. The Town should address all issues rather than one at a time. He currently supports Scenario B but has reservations on Scenario C unless other issues like flooding and traffic are addressed.

Paula Dickerman, 20 Burnside Rd.

The Housing Plan research indicated the housing shortage is exacerbated by high housing costs, low production, limited housing diversity, and large upfront cash requirements for homeownership and rentals. Without major interventions, the Town will lose ground in providing affordable housing for individuals and families across various economic and social strata. The committee should draft zoning that requires a maximum feasible percentage of affordable units beyond the current 12.5% benefiting professionals and local workers. The committee should address flooding and significant issues to ensure housing needs are met.

Kunal Randery, 217 Hillside Ave.

He seeks clarification on the distinction between future Business and Industrial zoning based on his observations of existing zoning and the presence of businesses in certain areas.

HONE clarification by Lee Newman

Business uses generally allow retail, office, restaurant uses, and consumer service. Industrial districts open up uses in wholesale distribution, industrial services, auto body processing, and

laboratory space. Rezoning those districts for housing requires determination of how much housing should be there. This is a decision for HONE.

Jeff Heller, 1092 Central Ave.

He owns a non-conforming multi-family property and supports the proposal that Needham have a Brookline Village feel. Details are crucial in creating a desirable housing stock for families. He disagrees with Scenario C which lacks specific unit sizes, units per lot, and parking restrictions. The goal should be to create affordable housing without creating a loop-hole for builders to cash in.

Eric Bailey, 64 Hillside Ave.

I agree with the vast majority of what's been said. I voted for Option C. I love hearing the passion for an affordable, walkable Needham. I think the Needham Heights area is right for development. I indicated on the survey to increase for the number of units. I'm really appreciative and excited.

Susan Herman, 13 Carrie Rd.

She needs a 3-D map model to view options. She would like to see parking in various districts. She is comparing districts and MBTA Act compliance zones to see if they are being equitably cast throughout town. The hospital and fire station are color coded on the map. Very little is being zoned in the downtown area. Can the 10% housing the MBTA Act allows be beyond 0.5 mi. of a commuter rail station be spread out in different lots throughout town? This might help alleviate the water problems in town.

Laura Dorfman, 66 Jarvis Circle

She is a Town Meeting member, CPC co-chair, and Historical Commission member. Current Demo Delay bylaws allow ranches and multi-family homes to be demolished and rebuilt unless on a historic registry then replaced with huge 4,000 square foot homes which low income people cannot afford. Can requests for Demo Delays within MBTA zones be reviewed before demolition as part of the overall approach to affordable housing and not just within MBTA Communities?

Gary, Ajamian, 47 Meetinghouse Circle

Why are plans protecting the Hersey MBTA neighborhood but penalizing residents at other MBTA stations and heavily impacting the Junction and the Heights? Why has Hersey Station been excluded? The Open Space next to Hersey Station could easily be used. The Open Space portion of the Needham-owned golf course could be used.

HONE response - Heidi Frail - Town land is not eligible to count towards MBTA Communities compliance.

Plans are to have the MBTA Communities Act and affordable housing issues merge, but people often misunderstand that the Act is a zoning issue. A true minimum Scenario A is suggested, but the 10% allowance for units outside MBTA districts is not included.

HONE response - Joshua Levy - The offset is included in Scenario A.

Ann Fox, 238 Edgewater Dr.

Does the State have constitutional authority to determine Town zoning?

Artie Crocker

He supports Scenario B suggesting to add multi-family homes to the triangle toward the intersection of Warren St. heading back to Dedham Ave. He envisions the Hersey Station area as a village for the future. He suggested a plan that includes Hersey Station and one without it. Creating affordable housing will take time. He emphasized the need for a planning vision.

James Goldstein, 40 Coolidge Ave.

Maximize housing in Scenario C. Consider Needham Heights within districts so people can get a sense of 3.5 or four-story buildings along Highland Avenue. The existing affordability requirement for 6 more units at 12.5% highlights a significant affordability gap in the Housing Plan.

Jonathan Traub, 299 Central Ave.

We are here to comply with a Massachusetts law by writing new bylaws requiring State approval in a condensed timeline. Let's focus on the compliance deadline. Scenarios A and B meet minimum compliance of 900 or 1,900 units and Scenario C is a wider option. A study was conducted for 50 future years of housing needs which doesn't have to be solved by vote this year.

Cynthia Landau, 57 Pine St.

The MBTA Communities Act is not intended to be an affordable housing initiative. Build multi-family homes in specific districts and smaller affordable housing units alongside larger ones rather than building mansions. This will occur one parcel at a time as they become available. Changing zoning to allow multi-family housing doesn't guarantee builders will comply. Can we mandate building multi-family housing especially when houses are demolished? Studies are needed to predict the proportion of multi-family homes to be built over the next five to ten years and their impact on infrastructure and services. Promote resident involvement.

Doug Fox, 43 Marked Tree Rd.

He thanked the committee for their hard work on a crucial topic. He voted for Scenario C. He urged residents to spread the word about the importance of public input in determining the right housing choice for this community. Respond to the survey. Attend the next meeting.

Dina Creiger, 7 Utica Rd.

She advocates for increasing housing. She desires her 25-year old son to live in Needham. She suggests complying with the law and then thoughtful consideration of aspirational changes the Town wants as well as evaluating the Town's control over as of right housing.

Lois Sokol, 611 Greendale Ave.

She thanked the committee for the excellent job to inform the public. A comment was made earlier that the law requires 90% of housing be within a 0.5 mile radius of transit. Can the remaining 10% be outside the district and comply? What does this mean to homeowners?

HONE clarification by Lee Newman - To be compliant, 90% of Needham's district must be within 0.5 miles of a transit station. 10% of the district can be outside but they still need to meet other criteria, in terms of the size of the sub-district, if it is not contiguous to the rest of the district.

Barbara Ridge, 83 Fair Oaks Park

Where can these three maps be accessed after the meeting? When one of these three Scenarios has been approved, is the color coded area going to be a new zoning area or is it something else?

Maps can be found at:

<https://needhamma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/45157/2024-01-18-Public-Meeting-Maps-for-Survey>

Wrap-up & Next Steps

For general information about the work of the HONE Committee and the MBTA Communities Law:

<https://www.needhamma.gov/5402/MBTA-Communities-Law-the-Housing-Needham>

<https://www.needhamma.gov/5480/HONE-Meeting-Agendas-Presentations-and-M>

- The survey can be completed online until January 24.
- Drop off your Survey at the Town Manager's Office at Town Hall, or at the Planning Department in the Public Services Administration Building.
- Email inquiries to **Planning@needhamma.gov** which goes to Lee Newman and Alex Clee.
- Online and in-person comments will be answered in the FAQs.
- A recording of this presentation will be available online.

Next HONE meeting - March 7

The public is welcome to watch HONE meetings: <https://www.youtube.com/user/TownofNeedhamMA>

Informational - The Meeting Packet is available at: <https://www.needhamma.gov/Archive.aspx>

- Agenda 1/18/24

Respectfully submitted,

Dale Michaud
Recording Secretary

To learn more and subscribe to updates on the multi-family zoning initiative in Needham, please **visit the project page on the Town's website**