

Minutes
LARGE HOUSE REVIEW STUDY COMMITTEE
Friday May 8, 2015 8:00 AM
Selectmen's Chambers, Needham Town Hall
1471 Highland Avenue

Members Present: Elizabeth Grimes, Krista McFadden, Mark Gluesing, Jeanne McKnight, Gary Lesanto, Gary Kaufman, Jeff Kristeller, Jeff Heller, Lindsay Acomb, Imogene Hatch, Jon Schneider, Marianne Cooley (via phone); and Lee Newman, David Roche, Karen Sunnarborg, Alexandra Clee, staff.

The meeting was opened by Committee Chairperson, Elizabeth Grimes, at approximately 8:00 a.m. She said that the dormer article was presented to Town Meeting and the article did pass. There are no minutes to approve. She said that hopefully everyone has been able to conduct some site visits. There was a discrepancy in the database; two lots showed up as conforming in our database were actually non-conforming relative to lot size.

Mr. Gluesing said the working group talked about what are the problems. And if we propose an FAR, what kind of houses are we impacting. The key impact areas are in undersized lots and then lots between 10,000 and 11,500 square foot lots. Some of the 12,000 square foot lots are not building out to the max. Mr. Gluesing asked the committee if they could feel a difference between the non-conforming and conforming lots.

Mr. Kristeller said that he did not find much difference in terms of the size of the lot and the size of the house. It seemed like the extra size of the lot was in the rear. It seemed like the setbacks were what made the house more or less imposing on the streetscape and the neighborhood. To some extent the architectural features ameliorated that. Mr. Heller generally agreed, but he said that some houses appeared modest from the front, but then the side was a large bland wall. Mr. Gluesing asked him if he noticed a difference between conforming and non-conforming lots. Mr. Heller said that all of the houses seemed to be sitting very tightly on the lot. Ms. McFadden said when it was a bigger discrepancy, it was more noticeable. What struck her most were the odd shaped lots. Mr. Lesanto said that whether it's a conforming or non-conforming lot, it doesn't take into account that the committee is proposing to allow bump-outs, so the architecture would change. Mr. Gluesing said that the long side walls that Mr. Heller noticed won't change if they increase setbacks, because if you increase side setbacks, you lengthen the house. If there were a chimney and bay window on a long wall, it would make it more pleasant.

Mr. Schneider said that his general reaction was that they are all big houses. The main thing that affects his impression is whether the house is the first new house on the street or one of many. Also, it makes a big difference how far apart the houses are set. Mr. Kaufman said that there's a home on Hawthorn Road that was done well, but right next door is a house that is more of a "hodge podge." Ms. Grimes said that the house looked great and fit in with the neighborhood, even though there is no yard left. This home would not be allowed under the proposal. Mr. Lesanto added that it's a lot of the architectural components that make this house feel better.

Mr. Heller said that all of the houses were built up. The front entrances were up four feet, which makes them tower over the neighborhood. Ms. McKnight said that she didn't see, in the homes she visited, that the new homes were raised. The ones that she was most unhappy about were the conforming lots that do not meet the proposed FAR standards. She doesn't know if non-conforming versus conforming were the real factor. To her, protruding garages are problematic. Houses with porches present a nice front to the street. She asked if the reason for the entry (including porch) being pushed back is because of front setback. Mr. Gluesing said that it has to do with where garage sits and then the rest of the house has to happen behind the garage. You don't want to make the entry corridor very long.

Ms. McKnight noted that the homes where the living space above the garage was not so high were not as unpleasant. Mr. Lesanto asked how you could encourage that. Mr. Kristeller said that from a builder's standpoint, if you can't build over the garage, you're going to want to put that space somewhere else and you'd end up with a bigger house. Any restriction that is added has to be simple enough for the Building Department to implement. Ms. Hatch said, in addition, garages that protruded further out from the house, bothered her. Mr. Kristeller agreed and said the solution is that the whole house has to be further back.

Ms. McKnight said that in her site visits the side setbacks did not seem out of character with the rest of the neighborhood in general. It only seemed to be a factor when there was a very large wall next to a small house. She said that privacy fencing at the lot line out to the street made it seem like everything was boxed in. Mr. Heller said that in a neighborhood with many non-conforming lots, the side setbacks seem very close when both houses on either side of a lot line are 10 feet from the lot line. Mr. Schneider said that he thinks that once the neighborhood has all newer houses, it doesn't look so bad. Mr. Kristeller said that with the approach we have with FAR, while the FAR is reduced on a larger lot, it still allows for a very large house. Ms. McFadden said her last impression was that side setbacks didn't matter as much as non-conforming versus conforming lot width. Mr. Kristeller thinks that side setbacks should be consistent across all lots. Mr. Kaufman disagreed.

Mr. Roche said that the massing of the big walls would be helped by saying that you can't have a certain length wall without breaking it up somehow. Don't restrict it to 1 or 2 feet; say you can't have a 28 foot long wall any distance from the lot line without breaking it up.

Mr. Gluesing said that one of the things that they are thinking of doing is allowing projections into the side yard that would break up the wall. He showed examples of homes that have it and homes that would benefit from something like that. Mr. Kristeller said there should be some number. If it's less than 1 or 2 feet, it won't show as different. He noted on one of the examples, there are some random bump-outs that don't really work.

Mr. Gluesing said the consensus he's hearing is that people are looking at these from the front, from the street view. Some thought the current 12.5 setback isn't so bad. Mr. Gluesing noted two of the examples: Dogwood and Fair Oaks. They are both almost right on the front setback. One has other things happening and one doesn't. Mr. Kaufman said you could drive around the neighborhood and not like some of the things about the older houses; the group is trying to regulate people's personal choice. Ms. Newman said Fair Oaks has a deeper setback, which is

why it felt more comfortable. (Mr. Gluesing said it wasn't the example he was looking for.) Mr. Kaufman said it also has nice landscaping which makes people like it. Ms. McFadden said it aligns with other houses on the street. Mr. Gluesing said in these two examples you can compare the length of the façade and whether there's anything else happening.

Mr. Gluesing said we're trying to get a sense about whether if the group proposed an FAR that it would be an improvement. He asked the group whether when the group looked at examples, not taking in consideration of the architectural detail, did it make a difference. Ms. McKnight said with the conforming lots, she did notice a difference; those that met the FAR standard were better than those that didn't. In the small sample size the group looked at, she didn't notice a difference in the non-conforming lots. Mr. Lesanto said that he agreed with Ms. McKnight and that if you don't count for architectural features, he still feels like it makes a difference. Ms. McKnight said that maybe with non-conforming lots, since builders often cannot use cookie cutter approach and have to design for the lot, it might help. Mr. Kristeller said that on the non-conforming lots that did not meet the FAR, if they changed the FAR, the house would have to be smaller. He asked if they want to have the size of house be smaller on smaller lots. Mr. Heller said he thinks that is what they are trying to do. Mr. Kaufman said that the new house won't be built because the economics won't work.

Ms. Grimes said that the next item on the agenda was to have Mr. Kaufman address the committee. Mr. Kaufman went back and looked at all of the ages of the prior owners of a house that sold the property to a builder. He feels they are a primary stakeholder. He also looked at the people who sold the smaller lots over the last 24 lots and the people who sold lots over 10,000 over the last 12 months. The average age was 74.5 years old for houses that the group visited that would not meet the proposed FAR. The average age of the last 12 months of the sellers of lots for 52 new construction house that were spec built was 64. He also looked at the stakeholders. The Town is also a stakeholder. The assessments lower; the town gets less tax revenue with same number of kids in the school system. The other stakeholder is the sellers who are selling their nest egg. The third stakeholders are the businesses in town. Several years ago, the restaurants were not in Needham. Higher end homes support the businesses. He thinks the committee needs to take a look at all of the stakeholders who will be affected. He is concerned about the direction of the committee.

Ms. Hatch said there are a couple of stakeholders who were left out. Two are realtors and developers. Mr. Kaufman said developers will adapt. Realtors will adapt also. Mr. Heller said long term economics are cyclical. Another stakeholder is the people who buy the expensive homes, whose homes might lose value in a cycle. Mr. Kaufman said in the recent real estate cycle, Needham has stayed flat, while other towns went down. Ms. McFadden said they should also be talking about the people who are moving into town. A variety of housing sizes is important for those who want to get into town when they have kids, and then they may save for the big house.

Mr. Kaufman said he is for regulations that promote more architectural features. Ms. McKnight said that she respects Mr. Kaufman's experience, but thinks that he may be exaggerating the impact of a reasonable FAR. She said that the architects on the committee have shown us that by just tweaking the house a little bit on the conforming lots, they can make the house conform. She thinks that if there is a person that really needs to build the larger house, there could be a process

for the review of that. For the houses on non-conforming lots that do not meet the proposed FAR standard, every one of these is far above the proposed standard. They would go through a special permit process. That process would result in changes that make the homes fit the neighborhood better. Mr. Kaufman said a 6 month delay is unrealistic. Mr. Kristeller said that what is being proposed is not onerous and would minimally affect what a builder would pay for the lot. Ms. Acomb said Needham is desirable regardless of house size; people will still buy them. Mr. Roche agrees; smaller lot, smaller house. He said Needham regulations are so relaxed compared to other towns.

Ms. Grimes said that others will have the same opinion as Mr. Kaufman at Town Meeting and in town, so it's important to take it into consideration.

Ms. Newman said the working group will continue to look at the projections, front yard setbacks and similar issues. It is too early to do a public workshop. The Committee decided to postpone.

Mr. Kaufman asked why more builders were not on the committee and if they could join now. Ms. Grimes explained that the Planning Board decided on the committee makeup to find a balance, received applications and thoughtfully reviewed them and considered the members. Mr. Heller said builders can attend the public meetings. Ms. Newman said that the current committee is fixed. In order to change it the Planning Board would have to decide to do so.

Wrap up – The next meeting was not determined. The working group will work on some of the issues discussed. The meeting adjourned at approximately 9:45 a.m.