



Restore Needham

Memorandum

To: Town of Needham Planning Board, Jean McKnight, Chair
Large House Review Study Committee, Elizabeth Grimes, Chair
Lee Newman, Director of Planning and Development, Town of Needham

From: Paul Dawson, Founding Member, Restore Needham

Copy: Sam Bass Warner, Founding Member, Restore Needham
Stephanie Cowley, Founding Member, Restore Needham

Subject: Large House Review Study Committee's (LHRSC) April 5, 2016 (revised)
"Overview of Regulatory Strategies under Consideration"

Date: April 21, 2016

“Restore Needham” is a small group of Needham citizens that was formed in the wake of the League of Women Voters’ February 12 forum on teardowns in Needham. Its mission is simple: to promote and, as necessary, seek timely and effective Zoning By-law reforms requiring that new home construction in Needham’s single-family zoning districts be compatible with existing neighborhoods and protect the value of immediately adjoining properties.

To that end, Restore Needham has reviewed the Large House Review Study Committee's (LHRSC) April 5, 2016 (revised) "Overview of Regulatory Strategies under Consideration" and would like to offer the following comments.

1. We support the LHRSC’s proposal to increase the minimum front yard setback from 20' to 25' (and up to 35' where neighboring properties have even greater setbacks). We agree that the proposed change will help maintain consistency in Needham's streetscapes and represents a vast improvement over current Zoning By-law requirements. We suggest making clear in the proposed language that setback reference properties must be located on the same street as the property being developed so as to achieve the LHRSC's goal of maintaining consistent setbacks, by street.
2. We are in support of LHRSC’s proposed increased side yard setbacks. We agree that that the proposed changes will help reduce crowding and increase light and air for new and

abutting homes alike. Increased setbacks for portions of facades exceeding 32' in length together with setback relief for certain design features, e.g., bay windows, chimneys, etc., will limit unbroken wall planes to a reasonable size and incentivize construction of homes having architecturally appealing features.

3. We must add our voices to those strongly dissenting from the LHRSC's proposal to reduce rear yard setbacks from 20' to 15'. This is because reducing rear yard space would, in our view, exacerbate crowding of land that has given rise to numerous complaints about new house construction in Needham. Moreover, maintaining rear yards that are at least 20' deep enables use for much-needed outdoor play spaces that are physically separated from incompatible and potentially dangerous vehicular traffic. Finally, by requiring sufficient space for back yard play areas, front yards may remain clutter-free, landscaped spaces that will continue to enhance individual houses and their neighborhoods alike.
4. We believe that the LHRSC is missing an important opportunity to codify changes that would keep the height of new homes more in-line with historical norms in Needham. Generally, most town residents believe that older houses in town have a pleasant scale and appropriate massing for their sites. After studying a number of homes around Needham, we have observed that most of the existing 2-1/2 story houses in-town have average heights of 28'-31'. This average height usually comprises a first floor that is 2 to 3 feet above grade plus two additional floor levels (i.e., the 2nd floor and attic level) that are each approximately 9 feet above the floor directly below plus an additional 9 or 10 feet for a sloping roof.

Reducing the average allowable height of new houses in Needham's SRA and SRB districts to be more in keeping with historical norms in Needham would directly address resident objections to the scale and massiveness of new homes now being built.

Our proposal is to reduce maximum allowable height from an average of 35' to an average of 32', with measurements taken from the lower of existing and proposed grades. We propose including a provision that would allow houses up to 35' in cases where required side and rear yard setbacks are increased by 50%. We believe that our proposed change accommodates those who wish to build a taller home while preserving the value of existing adjacent properties by protecting them from overcrowding, loss of sun and air, etc.

5. We seek to add to the Zoning By-law a provision that would limit to 37' the maximum above-grade height of any single-family structure at any point around the building as measured from new and existing grades. (Chimneys and other similar appurtenant building elements would be excepted from this height restriction.) Our proposed change would help spare those living on the downward side of a sloping property from having to face an excessively tall facade; it would also close the "stacked basement" loophole that was exploited by the developer of 49 Wachusett Road.
6. We believe that Needham's Zoning By-laws should be amended so as to discourage the rental of single-family homes via vacation, short-term rental, and co-housing rental websites, e.g., AirBNB, VRBO, Homeaway and others. (The latter item, internet-marketed

co-housing, is a recent housing trend being described by its promoters as "the Uber of housing" as marketed on websites such as www.ollie.co, www.welive.com, and www.hicommon.com.)

Most Needham residents would agree that such transient uses of single-family homes are incompatible with the town's thriving, stable family-oriented neighborhoods.

We are, therefore, proposing to reduce the maximum number of unrelated people who may reside in a single-family residence from five to three (the same number as allowed by Wellesley). Additional numbers of unrelated people could reside in a single-family residence by Special Permit for, say, a foster family or other less common living situation. Finally, we are proposing that the town prohibit the rental of single-family houses for any term shorter than thirty (30) days.

We are very concerned about the length of time it has taken to formulate new, common sense Zoning By-laws that respond to resident anger and concerns over the excessive scale and massiveness of some new single-family homes being constructed in town. We hope that the above help lead to prompt changes in the Zoning By-law that finally address resident concerns, ideally at this November's town meeting.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss these issues with the Planning Board, its Large House Review Study Committee, and/or members of the Town of Needham Planning Department. I may be reached at 617-335-2395 or by email at paul_e_dawson@yahoo.com.