

Q2: Factors for Town Meeting to Consider when Evaluating Proposals to Increase Density

We have conceded development to the developers, with predictably mixed-to-bad results. I support land-use planning that centers neighborhood voice, public transportation, mixed-use development, and climate resilience. That will allow Brookline to preserve the elements that have historically drawn diverse residents here while providing a blueprint for growing responsibly, meeting the certainty of climate challenges, and adding housing choices especially for our disappearing middle-income families and older population. –*Rebecca Stone, P3*

I do not like seeing beautiful historic buildings being torn down to make room for higher density luxury development. It does not help affordability and destroys our character as a town rich in history. It also gives rise to quality of life problems such as vehicular and pedestrian safety and congestion. -- *Steve Laduzinski, P12*

Green space is being lost faster than the eye can follow. Developers want any and all pieces of land. So much so our animals are confused. -- *Felina Silver Robinson, Precinct 3*

Before Town Meeting can make informed choices regarding proposals to increase density of any kind, we need to have a better understanding of both what the larger community desires, and the impacts of those proposed changes. Increased density in and of itself is not a thoughtful plan or solution. Increasing residential and commercial density in a vacuum will likely create more problems than it solves (increasing pressure on schools, open space, transit, eviscerating historic and architectural gems, and driving-up the cost of housing (since developers scoop up homes in disrepair and most new housing is profitable "luxury" housing).

Development will happen; with thoughtful planning tools in place and an agreed-on plan or framework that takes into account not just aspirations, but realistic outcomes, Town Meeting can better position Town Hall to manage development that (hopefully) that supports desirable commercial growth, homes within the reach of more families/seniors/professionals, without compromising the green and historical attributes of Brookline that make it such a desirable place to live. –*Amy Hummel, P12*

Of primary importance is to evaluate each proposal based on an agreed vision for the town we want to become. As residents, this is our town and we need to establish the “guard rails” for any development. We need to align around a set of principles or even a blueprint to maintain control so that our built environment reflects our shared values.

Additionally, respect and full consideration for resident input that allows for different approaches for different parts of town is important. Town Meeting must consider the needs and desires of a diverse populace and proposals need to be evaluated with an eye towards impact on current residents, scale, sustainability, and design.

The implications that increased density may have on town financials and services is a critical consideration – schools being an obvious example, but the full range of services for elderly residents, young families, professionals, low-income, etc. need to be considered.

Lastly, it is important to preserve the architectural and historic character of Brookline. There are important reasons to increase density, but these should not come at the expense of the aesthetic and historic qualities that make Brookline unique and adds to the quality of life. – *Kevin Allen England, P5*

All development, whether residential or commercial, has consequences beyond the parcel being developed. Although the local aesthetic may be the most obvious, the Town has to be aware of the impact of increased density on, among other things, the school population, traffic, safety, climate and use of the many other resources the Town provides. The possibility of increased tax revenue must be measured against the putative demand on Town resources.

The residential density of parts of Brookline is among the highest in the state. Residential or commercial growth for the mere sake of appeasing developers is not a substitute for balancing the gains (or losses) that development may bring. Likewise, verticality or increased density for its own sake should never be a goal of the Town's land use policy.

Further, increased traffic and a lack of parking will prove to be inimical to the viability of small businesses. Simply, if people feel a trip to Coolidge Corner, Brookline Village or Washington Square will entail heavy traffic and cut-throat competition for parking then people will spend their money elsewhere.

Scale is important. "Boxes" leave the Town with neither heritage, charm nor quality of life. —**Bruce Levin, P17**

Public goods available to serve the intended population. Effects on schools already bursting at the seams. The relationship of the community to proposed businesses and other developments. Distribution of development across the Town. Finding the right balance between residential and commercial in any given area. Securing real commitments to affordable housing options mixed in with higher priced ones. Effects on students and older Town residents who wish to stay in the community but are often priced out by rising rents and rising taxes. —**Bettina Neuefeind, P1**

Current and future land-use needs. Will we need a new school? Where will we put it--not at Baldwin, one should assume! How about a new fire house to protect new buildings & increased density? There's no need to demolish existing housing to accommodate larger buildings. TM should also seek to foster stability and ways to integrate newcomers into our community. I'm a strong proponent of rent-to-own schemes that make it possible for up-coming families to own and stay in their new community. —**Jane Gilman, P3**

1) Do the proposals fit with the Town's strategic plans from which flow the strategic land use plans (which, is not, in my view, in a coherent state). 2) Second issue to consider is whether the proposals make sense to the neighborhoods, which is a factor that should be baked into the strategic plan. If we get these right, we get it all right—which is not to say it won't be a bumpy road—just not as rough a ride as it is now. —**Ben Birnbaum, P9**

Town Meeting should be considering the impact of the proposals (individually and collectively) on the need for town services as a result of this increased density and on the town's budget and property taxes. TM should also consider the impact of each proposal on the surrounding buildings and neighborhood in which it is located and whether it genuinely advances the town's goal of making Brookline a more affordable community in which to live. Finally, there should be consideration of whether the proposal will have a negative impact on Brookline's green spaces and beautiful architecture of the past.—**Susan Granoff, P7**

Impact on TOWN TAX REVENUE & EXPENSES should always be examined, along with impact on QUALITY of LIFE and AFFORDABLE HOUSING. We cannot afford to fully satisfy all goals, but reduction of the fractional contribution of commercial RE taxes s/b avoided.

Zoning to increase RESIDENTIAL density may work against increasing the fraction of affordable housing unless incentives or mandates for truly affordable units are built in. In any case, demolition of older buildings typically results in replacement of less expensive housing by luxury. Zoning on the basis of FAR and setbacks may result in architecturally undesirable “boxes”, whereas form-based zoning may honor and improve streetscapes.

Zoning to increase COMMERCIAL development along existing commercial corridors such as Beacon St could result in wholesale demolition of older buildings which now offer affordable rents to beloved small businesses who may leave and never return. **–Diana Spiegel, P8**

From 2010 to 2020, the town’s population increased 7.6%, from 58,732 to 63,191 residents. Continuing this trajectory over the next decade will result in substantially more construction, increased traffic congestion, and student enrollments that could exceed the capacity of even schools recently completed or still under construction.

Few would disagree that, in addition to its proximity to Boston, Brookline’s architectural charm and livability are what make it a desirable place to live. But that charm and livability comes with the price of ensuring tax revenues can comfortably support the town’s services.

If we build more housing than can be serviced by existing services, we’ll need to increase them accordingly. If we have more students than will fit in our schools, we’ll need to build or expand more schools, and so on. Much of this discussion backs up to zoning: if we relax our zoning bylaws to allow substantially more density, what will be the effect on Brookline’s ability to pay for excellent services, and ultimately, on its desirability? Comprehensive and thoughtful planning will be key. **–John Hebert, P7**

The density already existing where is the proposal.

How will we pay for residential density? It's usually revenue negative.

What are the visual and traffic impacts of commercial development. Never, ever believe the developer's traffic consultant. **–John Bassett, P6**

Ready access to public transportation, but development of same via efficient electric bus routes so that not all is tied to the green line infrastructure, which in turn will allow for more equitable spread of density. **–Tom Marton, P9**

We need consensus and what development is appropriate and where. Access to public transportation, for example, should not be the only criterion. Some of those areas contain streetscapes that are essential to Brookline's character, while other locations would not feel detrimental effects. An example is making the principal cross streets of Coolidge Corner and Washington Square into 3 or 5 story edifices of mixed use commercial and subsidized housing would enhance their character rather than detract from it. I also propose to consider increasing density in areas that do not have public transportation - for example allowing and encouraging the Cabot Estates model for large acreages. Luxury condos or townhouses would not need public transportation for the foreseeable future. **–Don Leka, P3**

Consider school capacity, impact in traffic and pedestrian safety. **–Ana Otero, P6**

I would like to see the town create a comprehensive plan and not approve spot zoning. Affordability is important but we should be realistic and thoughtful about what we may be giving up at the expense of adding a few more apartments, which become permanent and irrevocable. We need to consider green space and make certain we have adequate field space for sports (already limited in our town). We also need to consider parking and access to transportation and town services that may be necessary to support the growth. Finally, I would like to make certain we have proximity to vibrant commercial areas to support the growth.—*Joanne Liataud, P3*

There are multiple competing priorities when it comes to how we utilize space. First, we have built heavily in North Brookline. We cannot continue to add housing density without consideration of how services (primarily the schools) can consume the increased number of families. We must have zoning rules that prevent the destruction of one or two single-family homes into 8 multi-million dollar townhouses, e.g., 21 Crowinshield.

We must consider the impact on the environment and consumption of our natural resources. Increased density translates to increased use of water, an increase in the garbage that must be collected trucks, and an increase in the number of passenger vehicles.

We must also work on a plan to attract and retain businesses. We can do this by ensuring that new buildings or adapted existing buildings are put up in a way that makes them attractive to a variety of businesses.

Finally, we must always keep in mind our green spaces. We must make sure that when we are adding density that either new green spaces are carved out to support the increased population or that the existing parks have the capacity for all to enjoy. —*Richard Snyder, P2*

There is a seemingly insatiable demand to develop high-rise (4+ stories with elevator) luxury housing in Brookline. Sterile boxes are not what make Brookline a great place to live. Not only are they located on Beacon and Harvard Streets, but they are spreading to residential streets as well. I live on Centre Street which has been development ground-zero for the last 50 years. We have lost 20 houses to unsightly buildings. If you haven't walked down Centre Street to see what bad development looks like, you should do so. It speaks for itself. Paul Warren of Brookline By Design had what I would call a look of shock on his face when he came to Centre Street last week. The drive to increase density in Brookline should not come at the expense of long-existing residential neighborhoods by eliminating green space and building taller structures. Pedestrian safety is also a big consideration when we talk about large buildings with more traffic and private garbage pick-ups. Density comes at a high price for Brookline. —*Ernie Adams, P9*

I believe that the Town Meeting must thoroughly evaluate those proposals to determine if they embrace all the principles of smart growth such as walkable neighborhoods connected to the T and parks, preservation of open spaces and natural beauty; mix land uses; compact building design; and range of housing opportunities and choices to attract families with different socio-economic background. Without embracing a smart growth approach Brookline is likely to change its historic character and beauty. Also, not having smart growth principles incorporated in those proposals will accelerate the negative impact of climate change in Brookline. To that end, smart growth principles must be the essential characteristics of these proposals. — *Wadner Oge, P15*

Equity is an important consideration when increasing density. As mentioned in the other question, density is currently inequitable. It is concentrated in certain parts of town. We should instead try to spread density around more. It's a benefit, in the right measure. Living in the right level of density creates social, economic, and environmental benefits. A hurdle is that even in the densest parts of town residents are reliant on automobiles for work, shopping, and other activities. Density equals traffic, under current conditions. Insufficient public transportation is a regional issue we are not going to solve in Brookline alone, but perhaps with planning at the regional level we can make progress with our neighboring communities. We are already ahead of many parts of the country with excellent sidewalks and at least some public transportation. There is probably research available to guide us to create the conditions under which many residents would not require a car. Finally, given a choice between putting up a few high-rise buildings and more low-rise buildings, I would advocate for the low-rise buildings. High-rises create an unpleasant street environment especially in winter, in comparison with low-rise buildings, in addition to concentrating vehicle traffic. – **Brenda Hochberg, P2**

We need to ensure that our town members' receive the basics they need to survive, which is reasonable and affordable shelter. Also, to have stipulations in place where when developments come into town to build, that they consider employing some of the locals, so they can give back to the community from day one. – **Karen Ambrose, P4**

Real versus formulaic impact of adding FAR to existing residential structures. Impacts on pedestrians first; cyclists/other second; automobiles third. – **Jerry Navarette, P7**

First a long-term strategic plan. Then, we need to be intentional about equity. We need to be smart and disciplined about our commercial spaces. Walkability, bike safety and traffic calming measures are important, as is balancing the needs of our aging population and our families with children. Housing absolutely should be added near public transportation to create dense, lively, walkable neighborhoods with a mix of race and income levels. Climate change, moving away from fossil fuel dependence, access to healthy food and green space are all important. We need to have more say in the design and the development of our town. – **Katherine Florio, P10**

Residential and commercial density should mainly occur in urban corridors, such as Beacon St., Washington St., Harvard St., Route 9, and Commonwealth Avenue. Size and scale should be appropriate to the neighborhood and transportation infrastructure. To the extent possible, commercial density should be prioritized over residential because commercial taxes have the capacity to produce significantly higher tax revenue for the town with a less acute impact on town resources as compared to residential development. However, appropriately scaled new residential development can also be beneficial as part of a mixed-use project as it creates a natural customer base for the commercial businesses in the same or adjacent structures. Other considerations should include the impact on our tree canopy, parks, woodlands, and emissions. I do not support our current tendency to always think of parks or wooded areas when exploring where to build a new municipal structure (e.g. a school, a skating rink). We should be identifying already paved areas (e.g. underutilized parking lots and traditionally underutilized commercial lots) for such developments. We should place most amenities where the greatest number of people can access them on foot and via public transit. Financial cost is also, of course, critical to understand. – **David Pearlman, P15**