

BROCKTON PLANNING BOARD MINUTES
Tuesday November 19th - 6:00 PM

Chair Toni Goncalves opened up the meeting with a Roll Call...

Members present are

- Toni Goncalves - Planning Board Chair
- Iolando Spinola - Planning Board Vice-Chair
- James Sweeney - Planning Board Member
- Marty Crowell - Planning Board Member
- Matthew Gallagher - Planning Board Member
- Rob May - Director of Planning & Economic Development
- Evan Sears - Planner II
- Durreshewar Ali -Planner I
- Emily Innes - Innes Associates
- Isaiah Thelwell - Administrative Assistant

Proposed Zoning Change

Brockton MBTA Communities Act and Form-Based-Code Zoning Amendment

The Brockton Planning Board will be holding a public hearing Tuesday, November 19th, 2024 at 6 PM to consider the adoption of a new section of the Brockton MA Zoning Code. Please be advised that the following was referred to the Planning Board:

1. Ordinance: Be it ordained by the City Council of the City of Brockton to adopt a new section of the Zoning Code as follows: MBTA Communities and Form-Based Code Zoning Amendment (Full Version is available for viewing on the City of Brockton Planning Department website)

Director of Planning & Economic Development Rob May, presented the process and status of implementing a new Form Based Code Zoning ordinance to comply with the MBTA Communities Act. When amendments are introduced in the city council, they are reviewed by both the Planning Board and Ordinance Committee, requiring favorable recommendations from both before proceeding to two city council readings. Upon approval, the ordinance becomes law. The meeting introduced the form-based code currently under city council review.

In response to the MBTA Communities Act, which mandates multi-unit housing zoning near transit areas by the end of 2024, The City Planning Department reviewed its zoning and found it non-compliant. A compliance plan was developed and approved, followed by extensive public engagement, including workshops, community events, and consultations to align zoning changes with community vision. The proposed Form-Based Code introduces new districts and regulations, initially focusing on Downtown, Trout Brook, and Campello station areas. May highlighted innovative community engagement tools, such as box models that allowed residents to visualize neighborhood characteristics, building heights, and densities.

Emily Innes from Innes Associates, consultant for the new zoning, emphasized the collaborative effort in updating zoning to align with community visions for Brockton's downtown and Campello areas. She highlighted the transition from traditional Euclidean zoning—focused on segregating uses—to form-based codes that prioritize the physical form of development. This approach provides clarity and predictability, benefiting developers, city boards, and residents alike. Form-based codes support mixed-use environments, walkability, diverse housing types, and climate resilience. Unlike broad zoning categories, this method allows for precise tailoring to neighborhood-specific needs and community values. Examples of form-based zoning were showcased for downtown Trout Brook and Campello, illustrating distinct yet adaptable district layouts. Innes also noted the growing adoption of form-based codes in Massachusetts cities and towns, such as Lowell, Somerville, and Cape Cod communities, reflecting a broader trend towards fostering vibrant, sustainable urban and suburban areas. The approach includes flexible districts and sub-districts, enabling modifications to reflect the unique character of each neighborhood. Work is ongoing to expand these principles to areas like Montello and Lovett Brook, ensuring cohesive planning aligned with community input.

Director Rob May explains that the previous zoning framework broadly applied uniform restrictions without considering the existing conditions or community vision, resulting in most properties being nonconforming. The new Form-Based Code focuses on "aspirational zoning," aligning future development with the community's desired character. This system incorporates specific building types and forms into zoning districts, ensuring that every parcel is buildable while setting clear parameters for lot size, building height, and density. The presentation highlights examples of residential and mixed-use districts, distinguishing between less dense "neighborhood residential" areas and "urban residential" zones accommodating larger structures and multifamily housing. Emphasis is placed on preserving historic structures by enabling adaptive reuse and encouraging sustainable development near transit hubs, such as MBTA stations. The updated zoning map and detailed diagrams aim to simplify regulations, making them more accessible to residents and builders. The mixed-use districts are tailored to enhance density and functionality near downtown and transit corridors, supporting a gradual increase in urban density while maintaining alignment with the city's overall vision for growth and preservation.

Emily Innes highlights the inclusion of administrative review, site plan review, and special permit processes, tailored by project scale and type. This ensures proportionate oversight while minimizing delays, particularly for residential or commercial projects under specific thresholds. Nonconformities, common due to the city's historic development, are addressed with pathways allowing property investment without repetitive variance requests. Incentive zoning offers developers benefits like increased building heights in exchange for public amenities, with a point system rewarding contributions such as affordable housing, environmental resilience, and community-enhancing infrastructure like green spaces and brook restoration. Director May outlines the legislative timeline, with plans to adopt the new zoning code by December 31 to comply with the MBTA Communities Act. The presentation concludes with acknowledgment of the detailed planning effort, focusing on sustainability, green space, and historic preservation.

Chair Goncalves inquired about considerations for lighting, traffic studies, and parking within the zoning framework. Rob May clarifies that the plan includes detailed standards for lighting, mobility (incorporating both cars and bicycles), and parking. While these topics were not extensively covered in the presentation due to time constraints, they are thoroughly addressed in the zoning code. He outlines a flexible approach to parking requirements, starting with a baseline recommendation of two parking spaces per unit, with options for reduction. Reductions can be achieved through proximity to transit stations, implementing shared parking, providing car-share programs (e.g., Zipcar), or increasing bike parking spaces. This structure ensures that any relief from parking requirements is balanced by contributions to community mobility or sustainability, replacing the previous practice of outright waivers from the zoning board. The approach promotes a give-and-take strategy to balance developer benefits with community enhancements. Board Member Sweeney raised several questions about sidewalk standards, signage uniformity, usage rights, and incentivized zoning. May explained that sidewalk widths are determined based on street classifications, ranging from 15 feet on primary streets to 6 feet on residential streets. He elaborated on setbacks that expand sidewalks into private property in exchange for increased density and mixed-use development rights. Regarding signage, Rob detailed specific guidelines for placement and types, such as sign bars and blade signs, tailored to different building features. For rooftop and sidewalk usage, he mentioned that many of these elements are integrated into the zoning framework, encouraging green roofs and defining sidewalk zones for landscaping, seating, and retail displays. Incentive zoning allows developers to contribute to community projects, such as parks or libraries, through payments into a fund. Sweeney also sought clarification on prioritizing new projects, such as schools, and May assured flexibility in civic building allowances across all districts. Finally, Matthew Gallagher and Marty Crowell inquired about the review process for incentive zoning, and May advocated for the planning board to be the special permit granting authority, arguing it would streamline approvals compared to the traditional Zoning Board of Appeals process. He noted some resistance to this change but emphasized its potential to reduce delays and improve efficiency.

Public Comment

Veronica Stephens expressed deep appreciation for the work undertaken in developing the zoning ordinances, acknowledging the effort and time it has taken. She noted that if such measures had been implemented 5-10 years earlier, many issues could have been avoided. Stephens praised the clarity of the ordinances and their potential to provide a cohesive framework for development in Brockton. She inquired specifically about how the ordinances might apply to the fairgrounds, suggesting that their availability could have mitigated resistance to prior plans. Director May clarified that while the current iteration covers downtown Trout Brook and the Campello neighborhood, the ordinance was designed with enough flexibility to extend to other city areas, including the fairgrounds, potentially incorporating mixed-use and commercial-industrial zones through special permits.

A motion to recommend favorably that this Zoning Ordinance aligns with the Blueprint for Brockton, Citywide Comprehensive Plan and The downtown action strategy in the Campello neighborhood was properly made by James Sweeney and seconded by Matthew Gallagher, and unanimously approved (5-0).