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City of Newton Zoning Reform Project

NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION

The City of Newton, Massachusetts seeks a qualified consultant(s) to provide expertise and assistance to the City of Newton Planning and Development Department and Board of Aldermen in developing a context-based zoning ordinance. The selected consultant(s) must have expertise in the theory and practice of urban/suburban design and zoning.

Project Context

A city of approximately 85,000 people adjacent to Boston, Newton benefits from a prime location with good transportation access to the region's job centers in Boston, Cambridge, and the Route 128 corridor and an excellent public school system. The City also represents an ideal mixture of good community design with a number of historic walkable and transit-oriented village centers, attractive neighborhoods, and beautiful parks. These amenities have made Newton a highly desirable community and, coupled with the strong regional economy, there is a high demand for new residential and business development. The fact that the community is changing under these influences, and will continue to do so as the City's demographics, transportation choices, and businesses evolve over time, has led to the understanding that the City needs a detailed planning effort, beyond that of the 2007 Comprehensive Plan, that prepares the City for these changes and results in a new context-based zoning ordinance that provides fair and predictable control to protect Newton's essential character and quality of life.

A context-based zoning ordinance is understood as one that recognizes the current built environment of the City, embodies that in Newton's code, and provides guidance and rules for development, redevelopment, and expansion that is consistent with that existing context, or with the desired context in those areas where more significant change is necessary. Newton's current ordinance is based on a 1953 model and has little relationship to the existing built environment of the City, resulting in development out of context with surrounding neighborhoods and a community that is estimated at being 80% nonconforming. Across the City, large "monster" homes dwarf neighboring homes; large two-family homes are awkwardly squeezed onto narrow lots; hard transitions between areas of different densities or intensities of use mar the quality of neighborhoods, especially where commercial areas meet residential; commercial redevelopment projects present inconsistent design quality; and the decision-making process presents uncertainties and significant expenses for small businesses and residents.

The City has already completed Phase 1 of the Zoning Reform project which was to modernize, clarify, and reorganize the existing Newton Zoning Ordinance. Information on this project can be found at <http://www.newtonma.gov/gov/planning/lrplan/zoning/zoningref.asp>.

Project Description

The City envisions a four part process for the completion of Newton's Zoning Ordinance. Ultimately, there will be two major deliverables, a Newton Pattern Book describing the existing patterns of development and building types in the City that make up its urban fabric and the Zoning Ordinance itself, based on the findings of the pattern book.

1. Project Initiation. This project will be led jointly by the Board of Aldermen and Planning Department. Initial meetings will be necessary to identify the specifics of the scope of work, with a particular emphasis on a community engagement program that includes robust online tools, community workshops, and other tools for collecting input. This scope of work and community engagement program will be presented to the Board of Aldermen.
 - a. While the City anticipates this process to move forward expeditiously, there are a number of issues that require immediate attention. The consultant will work with the Board to identify those issues and develop short term strategies to address them. These strategies may be subject to change as the process unfolds and a coherent and consistent new zoning ordinance is developed.
2. Newton Pattern Book. The pattern book serves as the foundation of the context-based zoning ordinance as well as a guide for property owners on appropriate design considerations for Newton's diverse neighborhoods and village centers.

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- a. Beginning at the city-wide scale, it should look at development patterns embodied in land uses (village scales, commercial corridors, neighborhoods with similar lot and building characteristics, etc). The areas identified would form the basis for zoning districts in the ordinance. A transect-based approach may be appropriate.
 - b. The pattern book should also inventory building types present in Newton, describing common characteristics in lot and building dimensions and other pertinent features. This information would form the basis for dimensional regulations assigned to building types in the zoning ordinance. Additional building types potentially appropriate for Newton but not currently present should also be considered.
 - c. This work should include a multi-day workshop or charrette that shares with the community these design ideas and creates an opportunity to explore variations on the City's development patterns. Identifying areas where change to the existing context might be desired should be part of this exercise.
3. Draft Zoning Ordinance. The primary task in this part is to codify the results of the pattern book into a context-based zoning ordinance, incorporating ideas and approaches from Form-Based Codes. Some of the particular issues that will need to be addressed include updating and consolidating the use table, updating the sign regulations, incorporating landscape standards, updating parking requirements, better management of institutional uses as allowed under Massachusetts law, creating better transitions between districts, clarification of review processes, and improved site development and environmental regulations.
 4. Final Zoning Ordinance. The selected consultant will participate in the final adoption process after the draft zoning ordinance is submitted. This process will include a series of meetings with the Zoning and Planning Committee of the Board of Aldermen, a public hearing, and a presentation of the final ordinance to the entire Board of Aldermen.

Timeline

Subject to negotiation, the City anticipates the Newton Pattern Book to be completed within six months of project initiation. The draft zoning ordinance should be complete within 18 months of project initiation.