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Common Ground

An Urban Planning Report by Beautiful Newtonville

Background

Common Ground is based on surveys of Newtonville stakeholders conducted by *Beautiful Newtonville* ("BN"), a Massachusetts nonprofit organization with pending 501(c)3 status. The organization is committed to uniting local stakeholders, government agencies, and elected officials to revitalize downtown Newtonville. To identify community consensus surrounding an urban plan, BN developed and administered two surveys: One polling residents, and the other polling storefront establishments and property owners in the village's main commercial districts.

Methodology

The Residents Survey was administered via Survey Monkey from September through December, 2012. Approximately 6% of Newtonville's population age 14 and older (561 respondents) completed the survey.¹ Roughly 240 more residents answered only the "open response" section, which contained questions with no multiple choice options, bringing total participation to approximately 800 Newtonville residents, just under 10% of the estimated population.

The Business Survey was administered by phone and in person from April through December 2012. 86% of targeted ground floor establishments (69 respondents) completed the survey. Comprised mainly of businesses, the pool also included nine property owners and six nonprofit organizations. The establishments were located primarily on Washington Street between Lowell Ave and Harvard St., on Walnut St. between Washington Park and Washington St., including one block of Walnut St. on the other (north) side of Washington St., and on Austin St./Newtonville Ave.

¹ Newtonville has approximately 9,200 residents age 15 and older (no data was available for the population of 14-year old Newtonville residents). The estimate for the Newtonville population age 15 and older was based on the following data: Newton total population: 84,061. Newton population age 15+: 74,038. see: <http://www.newtonma.gov/gov/planning/demog/default.asp> Assumes Newton's eight wards have roughly equal populations, a theoretical assumption designed to create a rough approximation of the population. Newton population age 15+ of (74,038)/8 wards = approximately 9,255 Newtonville residents aged 15+.

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Executive Summary

Residents and Businesses both favor...

- A stronger sense of community and a more vibrant street life with outdoor dining and benches.
- A study to explore widening sidewalks, optimizing parking, and ensuring business loading.
- Unifying the village by renovating facades and coordinating with awnings and signs.
- Maintaining or expanding current parking capacity.
- More diverse mix of retail and dining, especially independent shops, including a bookstore.
- No more banks and nail salons, and less service sector businesses.

Residents additionally strongly favor...

- Attractive, effective street lamps.²
- More shade trees.
- More attractive business signs without neon, florescent, or backlit features.³
- Increased rail service and improved street-to-platform access.

² Businesses were not asked about street lamps.

³ Businesses were not asked about signage.

Vision

Residents and businesses were asked in an open response format to describe how they would change Newtonville if they could “wave a magic wand.”

Vision – Summary

Both groups share a similar vision for the ideal Newtonville.⁴ The single word respondents most commonly chose for their ideal village was “quaint.” The village would offer a strong sense of community, through more green spaces, trees and landscaping and more retail shops, buttressed by a moratorium on new banks and nail salons. Public parking on Walnut Street would be ample and spaces would not be subject to elimination. Restaurants would have outdoor seating, and benches would adorn the village so that people could sit outside with a beverage or a meal, chatting, and taking advantage of the good weather months. More small local businesses would spring up to make Newtonville a worthwhile destination instead of an errand spot. A more unified look to building facades and awnings would create a more cohesive village feel. Infrastructure, such as a town square or transportation hub, would unify the commercial districts of Walnut and Washington Streets. Signs made of either wood, “synthetic” wood, or metal would replace neon, backlit, and plastic signage. Signs would hang over the sidewalks as “blade signs,” positioned not parallel to the store fronts, but perpendicularly, so that the names of businesses would appear directly in the field of vision of pedestrians as they walk on the sidewalks.

Table 1
If you could wave a magic wand, what would be your overall vision for the village?

Residents	No.
1. More diverse mix of retail shops	60
2. Wider sidewalks or outdoor dining	56
3. More restaurants/cafes/food to go	55
4. More trees, landscaping	45
5. More public space/benches	45
6. Less banks, more small businesses	39
7. More attractive building facades	33
8. Book store	30
9. More small/independent establishments	24
10. More pedestrian friendly	24
11. More or better planned parking	21
12. More unified feel to village (awnings, facades, infrastructure)	13
13. Bike locks or lanes	5
14. Old Fashioned street lamps	4
Businesses	
1. More green space	14
2. Improved parking	7
3. Outdoor seating	6
4. More small businesses	6
5. No more banks	6
6. Improved sidewalks	5
7. Unified building facades	5

⁴ 244 residents answered this open-response question. Since residents could give more than one answer, percentages may not total 100%. Since respondents gave their own answers without multiple choice prompting, the most commonly submitted responses represent a significant proportion of community sentiment (see Appendix I for additional open response results on Newtonville’s perceived “Advantages and Disadvantages”).

Desired Ambience

Residents and businesses rated ten possible features concerning desired ambience in Newtonville.

Desired Ambience – Summary

A strong majority of residents and businesses desire both a greater sense of community and a way to transform the village from an errand spot to a destination. “Family destination” also ranks high for residents and businesses, as does creating an atmosphere of “old world charm, but modern conveniences.” Three quarters of residents would like more sit-down restaurants, and nearly as many favor a cultural center.

Popular Take-Out Establishments

Over half (60%) of residents favored more take-out eateries/cafes, with the majority of sentiment in the “somewhat important” category. (20%: “very important,” 40%: “somewhat important”).

Residents chose one of five possible types of desired take-out establishments, or added their own wish.

The two most desired eateries were *Middle Eastern* (fresh made falafel, etc.) and *Tex-Mex/Latin American* (burritos, tamales...).

1. Middle Eastern/Falafel (29%)
2. Tex-Mex/Latin American (27%)
3. Bagel (19%)
4. Sandwich Deli (19%)
5. Asian (6%)

Table 2
What ambience do you want for Newtonville?

	Residents	Businesses
1. Community	94%	88%
<i>Very important</i>	(63)	(67)
<i>Somewhat important</i>	(31)	(21)
2. Destination not errand spot	85%	72%
<i>Very important</i>	(53)	(52)
<i>Somewhat important</i>	(32)	(20)
3. More sit-down restaurants	75%	(NA)
<i>Very important</i>	(33)	
<i>Somewhat important</i>	(42)	
4. Cultural center	73%	66%
<i>Very important</i>	(34)	(34)
<i>Somewhat important</i>	(39)	(32)
5. Family destination	72%	70%
<i>Very important</i>	(34)	(53)
<i>Somewhat important</i>	(38)	(17)
6. Historic/New England style	69%	47%
<i>Very important</i>	(32)	(33)
<i>Somewhat important</i>	(37)	(14)
7. Old world charm, modern conveniences	67%	70%
<i>Very important</i>	(28)	(45)
<i>Somewhat important</i>	(39)	(25)
8. More take-out restaurants	60%	(NA)
<i>Very important</i>	(20)	
<i>Somewhat important</i>	(40)	
9. Student destination	48%	48%
<i>Very important</i>	(18)	(37)
<i>Somewhat important</i>	(30)	(11)
10. Chic	38%	25%
<i>Very important</i>	(11)	(19)
<i>Somewhat important</i>	(27)	(6)

Walnut St. vs. Washington St.

Residents and businesses value improving the village’s pedestrian and commercial appeal, especially along Walnut St. from Newtonville Ave. to Washington Park. Several residents also propose a sound barrier along Washington St. and new trees along the rail road tracks.

Table 3
How important is improving the pedestrian/commercial appeal of these areas?

	Walnut St. (Newtonville Ave – Washington Park)	Washington St. (Lowell Ave – Harvard St.)
Important	88%	75%
<i>Very important</i>	(64)	(42)
<i>Fairly important</i>	(24)	(33)
Neutral	9.2%	19.6%
Unimportant	2.5%	5.6%
<i>Fairly unimportant</i>	(2.1)	(5)
<i>Completely unimportant</i>	(0.4)	(0.6)

Improving Curb Appeal

Residents and businesses rated eight possible features to improve Newtonville curb appeal.

Residents and businesses overwhelmingly support *more outdoor cafes and a more vibrant street* life. Residents also strongly favor more shade trees, as does a smaller majority of businesses. Residents voice strong support for better, more attractive street lamps, as do businesses in anecdotal responses (though businesses were not asked specifically about this feature). Three quarters of residents value *attractive business signs without neon or florescent lettering* and nearly the same proportion value *upgrading building facades*.

Table 4
How important are the following features for Newtonville?

	Residents	Businesses
1. Outdoor cafes, benches, a more vibrant atmosphere	91%	78%
<i>Very important</i>	(61)	(57)
<i>Somewhat important</i>	(30)	(21)
2. More shade trees without obstructing businesses	92%	62%
<i>Very important</i>	(43)	(46)
<i>Somewhat important</i>	(39)	(16)
3. Attractive, effective street lamps	80%	NA⁵
<i>Very important</i>	(41)	
<i>Somewhat important</i>	(39)	
4. Attractive signs with no neon/florescent	75%	NA
<i>Very important</i>	(40)	
<i>Somewhat important</i>	(35)	
5. Upgrading building facades	73%	53%
<i>Very important</i>	(36)	(36)
<i>Somewhat important</i>	(37)	(17)
6. Nightlife	59%	NA
<i>Very important</i>	(22)	
<i>Somewhat important</i>	(17)	
7. Live music	60%	NA
<i>Very important</i>	(21)	
<i>Somewhat important</i>	(39)	
8. Adding brick features to sidewalks	49%	40%
<i>Very important</i>	(15)	(25)
<i>Somewhat important</i>	(34)	(15)

⁵ “NA” means the question was not posed to businesses.

Parking

Parking – Summary

Nearly all Newtonville residents and businesses strongly support adequate public parking, and strongly oppose parking reductions. Many express frustration at the removal of parking on Walnut St. and concern over reduction of parking in the Austin St. lot by a potential Austin St. Development.

Businesses and residents overwhelmingly support conducting a study of Newtonville’s downtown to explore the feasibility of widening the sidewalks, especially on Walnut St., while optimizing parking, business loading zones, and traffic control. This interest supports many features residents volunteered in the survey’s open response sections: more outdoor dining, cafes, and public seating, more pedestrian appeal on Walnut, St. and wider, upgraded sidewalks.

Table 5
Parking – Residents vs. Business Responses

	Residents	Businesses
1. How important is adequate parking?	92%	89%
<i>Very important</i>	(65)	(81)
<i>Somewhat important</i>	(27)	(8)
2. Maintain or expand public parking	96%	98%
<i>Very important</i>	(32)	(46)
<i>Somewhat important</i>	(64)	(52)
3. Do you favor a parking study for Newtonville?⁶	82%	77%

Public Transportation

Residents and businesses rated several categories involving public transportation.

Public transportation – Summary

Public transportation plays an important role in residents’ vision for Newtonville, with support averaging roughly 70% for the most favored public transportation improvements. Residents most favor increasing commuter rail service, and improving street-to-platform access. Business interest in public transportation improvements is more muted, nevertheless, with over half of businesses in favor renovating the commuter rail street access, and nearly two thirds for making bus stop kiosks more attractive and protective.

Table 6
What public transportation changes would you like to see?

	Residents	Businesses
1. More commuter rail service	71%	47%
<i>Very important</i>	(40)	(35)
<i>Somewhat important</i>	(31)	(12)
2. Renovate the commuter rail platform and street connection	70%	56%
<i>Very important</i>	(41)	(37)
<i>Somewhat important</i>	(29)	(19)
3. Establish service to Newton Center	63%	42%
<i>Very important</i>	(29)	(26)
<i>Somewhat important</i>	(34)	(16)
4. More attractive, protective bus stops	63%	64%
<i>Very important</i>	(28)	(41)
<i>Somewhat important</i>	(35)	(23)
5. More service of current buses	53%	NA
<i>Very important</i>	(27)	
<i>Somewhat important</i>	(26)	

⁶ Sixty-eight percent of businesses “strongly favored” a study of sidewalks, traffic, parking, and loading, while 9% “somewhat favored” such a study. Residents were not asked to specify this level of detail.

Austin St. Development

Austin St. Development – Summary

Residents and businesses view the Austin St. Development project primarily as a chance for more green public gathering spots and community space. Both groups also value maintaining or improving traffic conditions on and near Austin St. A smaller majority of both groups feels that a development could enhance the village with a greater variety of retail shops. In open response comments, respondents and businesses express concern about the reduction in public parking that such a development could cause.

Table 7
What are desirable features of an Austin St. development?

	Residents	Businesses
1. Good traffic design	84%	83%
<i>Very important</i>	(59)	(64)
<i>Somewhat important</i>	(25)	(19)
2. Green public space	86%	75%
<i>Very important</i>	(48)	(53)
<i>Somewhat important</i>	(38)	(22)
3. More retail shops	64%	50%
<i>Very important</i>	(28)	(35)
<i>Somewhat important</i>	(36)	(15)
4. Workforce housing	45%	41%
<i>Very important</i>	(17)	(22)
<i>Somewhat important</i>	(28)	(19)
5. Housing at below market price	34%	26%
<i>Very important</i>	(14)	(18)
<i>Somewhat important</i>	(20)	(8)
6. Housing at market price	29%	36%
<i>Very important</i>	(11)	(20)
<i>Somewhat important</i>	(18)	(16)

Keeping Newtonville Clean

Residents were asked in a multiple choice format about who was responsible for keeping Newtonville clean.

Keeping Newtonville Clean – Summary

Nearly all residents (82%) feel that keeping the village clean is the collective responsibility of the City, residents, businesses, and property owners.

Table 8
Who do you think should keep our downtown clean of litter?

1. The City	13%
2. Businesses	2%
3. Property owners	2%
4. Residents	1%
5. All of the above	82%

Appendix I – Newtonville’s Advantages and Disadvantages

Advantages and Disadvantages – Summary

Many of the below results confirm other sections of the survey. Since respondents were asked below to volunteer their own sense of Newtonville’s advantages and disadvantages (an “open response” format as opposed to “multiple choice”), the most frequently sighted responses reflect a significant proportion of community sentiment. Advantages and Disadvantages must be factored together: What respondents like about Newtonville often reflects what they also want to further enhance.

Newtonville’s Advantages

Advantages – Summary

Residents and businesses value Newtonville’s retail variety, quality restaurants, the village’s compactness, parking facilities, and its sense of community.

Table 9
What do you like about Newtonville?

Residents		
1. Variety of shops	105	47%
2. Good restaurants/cafes	106	48%
3. Compact, can walk from home	68	31%
4. Parking	26	12%
5. Community	12	5%
Businesses		
1. Community	19	31%
2. Student- and family-friendly	14	23%
3. Variety of restaurants	12	21%
4. Quaint	8	12%
5. Retail diversity	6	10%

Newtonville’s Disadvantages

Residents and businesses were asked in an open response format to describe what they disliked about Newtonville.

Newtonville’s Disadvantages – Summary

Newtonville residents and businesses dislike the abundance of banks, inadequate parking, the lack of retail variety as well as the shabby appearance of building facades and storefronts. Residents’ wish for a bookstore emerges again in this section.

Responses suggest that factors contributing to the image of a rundown village include inadequate lighting on Walnut St. and Washington St., the of lack coordinated colors, textures, or a common architectural theme for building façades, problems with trash and snow removal, as well as lack of green space, flowers, trees, and plantings, and deteriorated sidewalks. Inadequate sidewalks concern many businesses – too narrow, inconsistent, not in the right locations, etc. Finally, respondents feel that the village is not pedestrian-friendly, reflected by poorly located cross walks and speeding cars.

Table 10
What do you dislike about Newtonville?

Residents		
1. Too many banks	107	44%
2. No bookstore	34	14%
3. Inadequate parking	28	12%
4. Run down	28	12%
5. Want more retail	29	12%
Businesses		
1. Not pedestrian-friendly	40	68%
2. Inadequate parking	14	24%
3. Too many banks	9	15%
4. Run down	7	12%
5. Shabby sidewalks	4	7%