



TEAR-DOWNS AND BIG NEW HOUSES: WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT "MANSIONIZATION?"

Wellesley residents are concerned about the impact of new or expanded houses that are out of character with the surrounding neighborhood. The Town has been dealing with this issue for nearly 10 years, beginning in 1996 with an amended zoning bylaw.

ZONING CHANGES IN 1996

A zoning amendment in 1996 constrained the size, bulk, and siting of new residential construction. The amendment (1) established maximum lot coverage percentages for all single family residential lots; (2) reduced the maximum height to three stories or 36 feet from 45 feet; and (3) established wider frontage and setback regulations for new lots created after January 16, 1997.

At the same time, the new regulations did not affect certain siting and design choices - for example, "side-ways" houses, "snout" houses with big garages in front, and side garages built up to the setback line. In general, setback regulations for existing lots remained unchanged. Despite the tightening of dimensional constraints, it was still possible to build large replacement houses that many find to be out of character with neighborhood houses.



PROPOSED ZONING CHANGES FAIL TO PASS IN 2002

The Wellesley Planning Board, in 2002, proposed a series of additional zoning amendments designed to constrain further the impact of large home redevelopment in existing neighborhoods. The amendments included:

- Restrictions on the height of roof soffits and the effect of dormers

- Reduction in the allowed maximum building coverage
- Requirement for a landscape plan for houses with a footprint of 3,000 square feet or more
- Restrictions on placement of HVAC and similar equipment in setbacks as well as visual and acoustical screening if required by the building inspector
- Requirement for a 30-foot minimum setback for garages when the entrance faces the side lot line.

With the exception of the last two, these amendments did not pass Town Meeting. Many people did not want additional constraints on building, and others thought that further dimensional changes would not solve the problem - which they believe is really one of design more than of size.

INITIAL STRATEGIES FOR THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

With this history as background, the Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee looked at ways in which the Plan could help the Town achieve its goal of "maintaining the physical form of Wellesley's residential neighborhoods to balance community standards with individual interests."

Working with the consulting team, the Committee is considering new ways to preserve or enhance neighborhood character when new building occurs.

Option 1: Define, promote, and/or protect neighborhood identity and character

- Explore the potential for additional Local Historic Districts, a Historic Landmarks Bylaw, and Historic Easements
- Consider a series of neighborhood studies to analyze and define neighborhood character
- Explore authorizing the establishment of Neighborhood Conservation Districts
- Develop voluntary guidelines and educational materials for developers and property owners

The last item benefited from the experience of Naperville, IL, a community similar in many ways to Wellesley. There, a group of citizens established a grass roots initiative - "Community First" - to educate developers and residents about the challenges of building in established neighborhoods and to ensure that new projects are blended with the defined characteristics of the neighborhood, the block, adjacent homes, and the site. In the four years since its inception, Community First has offered advice and review for over 200 residential projects; although independent

of the city, the citizens' group and city staff work closely together.

Option 2: Site Plan Review for Large Houses

- Establish streamlined Large House Site Plan Review for replacement houses three or more times the size of the houses they replace, using design performance standards as the review framework. "Replacement house" can be defined to include additions and large garages.



NEXT STEPS

The issues of mansionization, neighborhood character, and affordable housing will be further explored during the public meeting scheduled for February 10, 2005.

WELLESLEY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN 2004-2005 UPDATE STEERING COMMITTEE:

Planning Board Members

Thomas Frisardi	James C. Meade	Edward Chazen
Rose Mary Donahue	Sue Wright	Frank DeMasi

Town Meeting Representatives

Gerald C. Hume, Precinct A	Henry Lysaght, Precinct E
Richard McGhee, Precinct B	Barbara McMahon, Precinct F
Jacqueline Hatch, Precinct C	Judith Hull, Precinct G
Joellen Toussaint, Precinct D	

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Information and documents related to the Comp Plan Update are posted on: www.ci.wellesley.ma.us
-look for the Comprehensive Plan button.