

BROOKLINE COMMUNITY AGING NETWORK
Livable Community Advocacy Committee
November 4, 2024

Attending: Susan Granoff (Chair), Janet Gelbart (Notetaker), Linda Olson Pehlke (Guest Presenter), Carol Caro, Susan Cohen, Leslie Friedman, Katie Hope, Carol MacBain, Maureen Mayotte, Diana McClure, Fran Perler, Yolanda Rodriguez, Jill Schiff, John Seay Ruth Seidman, Henry Winkelman

I. Developing a New Comprehensive Plan: Planning for Brookline's Future

GUEST PRESENTER: Linda Olson Pehlke (Vice-Chair, Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee)

Ms. Pehlke explained that the comprehensive planning process dates back to a 2020 warrant article which asked the Town to pledge to add 7,000 new housing units by 2030. [Note: She was referring to WA 34 in the November, 2020 Town Meeting which called for prioritizing construction of 3,330 new units by 2030. Town Meeting instead passed an amended article that called on the Town to better understand the impacts to the Town. At a subsequent Town Meeting a resolution asking the Town to establish a plan for future land use and development was passed.] Ms. Pehlke's advocacy group, Brookline by Design, gathered over 600 signatures on a petition to the Select Board which ultimately resulted in the creation of the Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee in the summer of 2024. A team of consultants has been hired to guide the 24-month process which will involve extensive outreach to community members. (Ms. Pehlke's slide presentation is attached.)

A comprehensive plan is a strategic framework to guide town policy regarding land use and the built environment over a 15-20 year period. It lays the foundation for zoning codes, which are the legal tools for its implementation. While the plan must be approved by the Planning and Select Boards, any recommended zoning changes require a two-thirds vote of Town Meeting. Although Massachusetts does not require municipalities to have a comprehensive plan, the components of plans that are created are governed by state law.

Brookline has many plans which relate to land use such as Complete Streets, Climate Action, Housing Production, Open Space, and Economic Development. However, this piecemeal approach lacks an overall vision. There is no consideration of the interrelationships between the parts and there are no clear priorities. Many of our goals are in conflict with each other, such as the desire for more housing versus preserving open space or maintaining the tree canopy versus demolition and new construction.

Ms. Pehlke believes that public input is critical to effective zoning, the most important power a municipality has. Zoning is a social contract which determines what you can do with your own property and what can happen to the neighborhood around you. It addresses housing, open space, transportation, parking, and commercial activity. (Note: To find out more about zoning, watch the October 17 webinar sponsored by the League of Women Voters and the Town Meeting Members Association at bit.ly/3QQSus4).

A comprehensive plan allows for predictable development which protects environmental resources, sets priorities for public infrastructure and facilities, creates a framework for future choices, and provides guidance to land owners, developers, and permitting authorities. It helps avoid unintended consequences of one-off decision-making by examining the trade-offs between different scenarios and arriving at compromises.

The plan sets realistic expectations of what we can achieve, leading to proposed zoning changes that are intentional, not random. It starts with an examination of existing conditions and recent trends (e.g., demographics, land use, income levels, transportation), identifies challenges and opportunities, and creates community-generated vision statements. The end result incorporates change while protecting what we want to preserve as defined by input from the community. (More information on the planning process is available at <https://brooklinecompplan.com/>).

Much of the discussion centered around the zoning proposals on the warrant for the Town Meeting that begins on November 18. WA 7 would limit the height of single and 2 family homes to 2-1/2 stories in the hope it would prevent tear downs. WA 8 would allow the Zoning Board of Appeals to waive the minimum lot size required for adding an additional unit to a property.

WA 9 would allow the addition of a third unit to two family homes by right, i.e., without requiring approval of the Zoning Board of Appeals. Ms. Pehlke explained that under the current bylaw, two-family homes are restricted to a floor area ratio of 1.0 which means if you have a 10,000 square foot lot, you can have up to 10,000 square feet of livable space. Most of the existing homes in two-family districts use only half that amount.

If WA 9 is passed, it would incentivize developers to tear down existing homes and replace them with three-family condos in structures that are twice as large as the others in the area. There is no provision for any constraints like the form-based zoning which was adopted along Harvard Street and the adjoining parcels to preserve the current streetscape. Moderately affordable rentals in existing two-family homes could be replaced by three-unit condos. If affordability is a goal, this does not help.

The Advisory Committee has recommended that Town Meeting refer these articles to the Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee to be evaluated as part of the community process. This will allow Town Meeting Members to engage with their constituents through focus groups within their precincts and get a better understanding of the tradeoffs before they vote on zoning changes.

Under current law, variances or special permit zoning waivers require approval of the Planning Board and the Zoning Board of Appeals. But the current law is subjective. There is no definable standard for relief, only that the new construction be “generally compatible” with the area or have “no major impact” on the existing neighborhood. Developers push their own agendas, and the Planning Board decides what the standards should be. Without a comprehensive plan in place, input from the community is minimal.

Seniors can best advocate for their concerns by participating in the process. Betsy Pollock, the President of the Senior Center Foundation Board of Directors, is on the Steering

Committee and Carol Caro, the designated ambassador to the senior community, has already started holding focus groups. These small group discussions will drill down into subject areas like parks and open space, transportation, housing, and economic development, and generate specific recommendations for policy going forward. The Steering Committee is still working out all the specifics but is aware that there are people who can participate in person, those who prefer to do so on-line, and those who require written materials. Linda will provide the LCAC with some information to help seniors understand the kinds of questions they should be asking (see Planning for an Aging Populations, attached).

Department Heads will be looped in as the plan progresses to incorporate their expertise in the process. The Planning Board and Select Board will be updated as goals and objectives are developed. The final report will be drafted by the consultants, edited by the Steering Committee and submitted to the Planning Board and Select Board for final approval.

II. Announcements

There has been a good response to the LCAC survey conducted in mid-September and we encourage anyone who has not responded to do so now. A reminder will be sent within the next few days.

Following up on a suggestion made at the June 10 LCAC Conversation with Amy Ingles, DPW is putting the final touches on a new website portal for reporting near miss traffic incidents. The expected debut is in late November or early December. Ms. Ingles will be returning to the LCAC in January with an update.

The initial response to the search for a new Director of the Council on Aging did not include any viable candidates. More targeted outreach to fill the position is in progress. Ruthann Dobek has agreed to stay on as a consultant to insure overlap in the transition. [Note: The Search Committee has since received additional resumes and is currently conducting interviews.]

III. Date of Next Meeting: TBD

The next meeting will be held on January 6 or 13.

The Livable Community Advocacy Committee is one of several BrooklineCAN committees. Everyone is welcome to attend, but if you do so regularly, we invite you to support BrooklineCAN with your membership. You can join using PayPal, credit card or by check. Instructions are on the right hand sidebar on the front page of brooklinecan.org
Thank you.