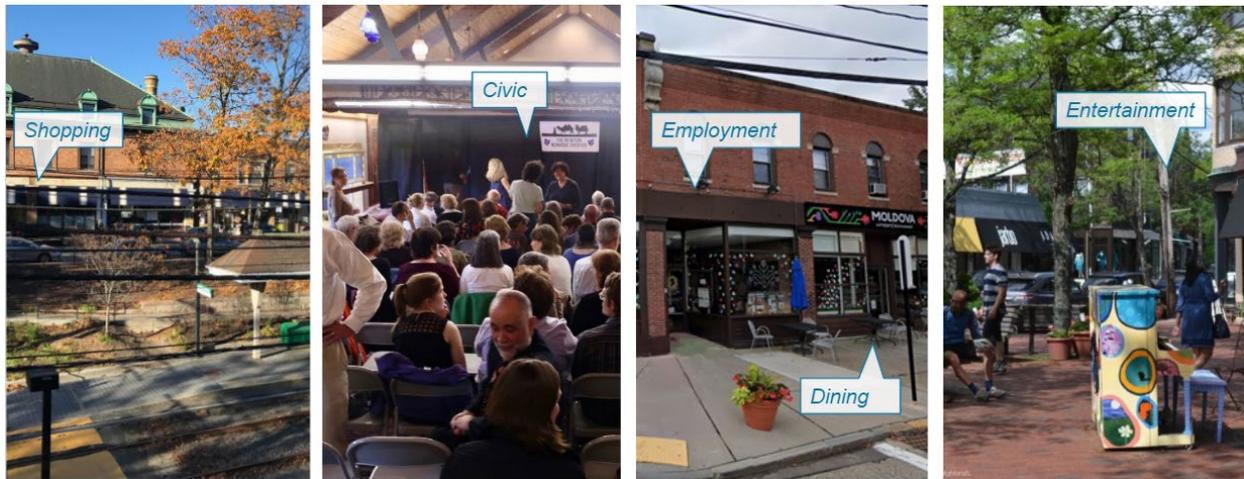


What Makes A Village Center A Village Center? Zoning Redesign: Village Centers

Figure 1: Examples of Village Centers Mix of Uses



Caption: Village centers are Newton’s original commercial and retail nodes. They are characterized by a rich mix of uses that ensures that they are busy across all hours of the day. Many are served by transit and are an easy walk from adjacent residential neighborhoods. All are pedestrian friendly and serve as places for shopping, socializing, and community gathering.

The City of Newton’s Planning Department is partnered with [Utile Architecture & Planning](#) on an initiative that is exploring ways to ensure that Newton’s diverse village centers thrive into the 21st century. In order to understand the issues from a wide variety of perspectives, we have crafted a process that combines data-driven analysis with an ambitious engagement campaign that includes city staff, City Council, and the public. We plan to learn directly from Newton residents both how they currently experience village centers today, and how they envision them evolving in the future. Feedback will be gathered through a Vision Kit, interactive forum, focus group meetings, and direct observation by a research team that includes city staff, our consultants, and summer interns. This groundwork is meant to more fully inform discussions about new zoning for the village centers, which will be tackled in the fall.

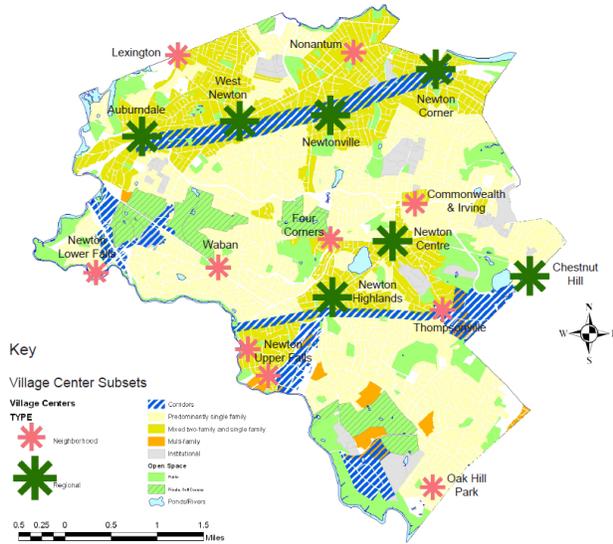
At the beginning of the initiative, we learned that even the definition of a “village center” is open to interpretation. If you ask five different people how many village centers are in Newton, you get five different answers. After doing an analysis of the mix of uses in all of the commercial areas in the City, we came to a provisional conclusion that a village center requires the mix of restaurants and/or cafes, neighborhood amenity retail, professional office space and/or medical practices, a transit stop, and housing.

This mix ensures that people visiting a village center to do one thing might be inspired to extend their stay because of the other amenities located there. This already happens as part of the everyday lives of Newtonians. Commuters on their way to the Green Line might stop in at a café for a cup of coffee or students at a nearby school might grab lunch at a village center restaurant during a free period and then

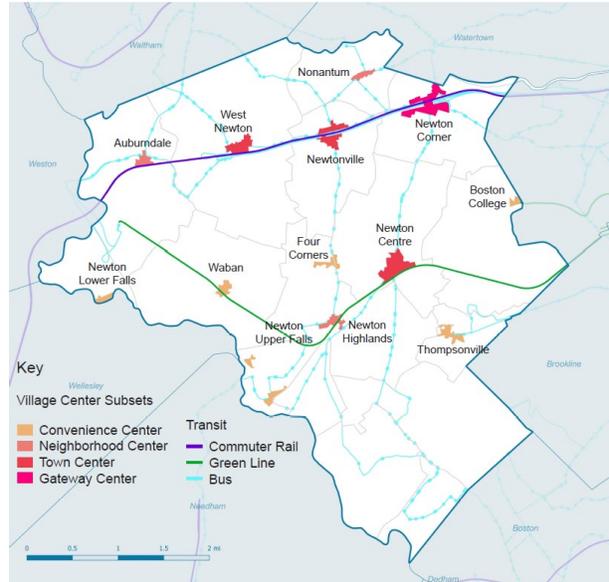
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Figure 2: Past Planning Studies Categorization of Village Centers

Comprehensive Plan, Land Use Working Group – 2004



Pattern Book, Village Center Subsets - 2018



Caption: As these side-by-side maps show, village centers are a subset of the commercial and mixed-use areas of Newton. What distinguishes them is a more diverse set of uses in a smaller area, transit access, and a pedestrian-friendly public realm, versus the more auto-dominant character of post-World War II shopping centers and office parks.

sit on a bench with friends to eat. It is this mixing of people, catalyzed by individual decisions throughout the day, that makes village centers feel vibrant. Encouraging this mixing is directly tied to their success. You can hear more about our analysis and ideas from the [May 24th, 2021](#) Zoning and Planning Committee (ZAP) meeting.

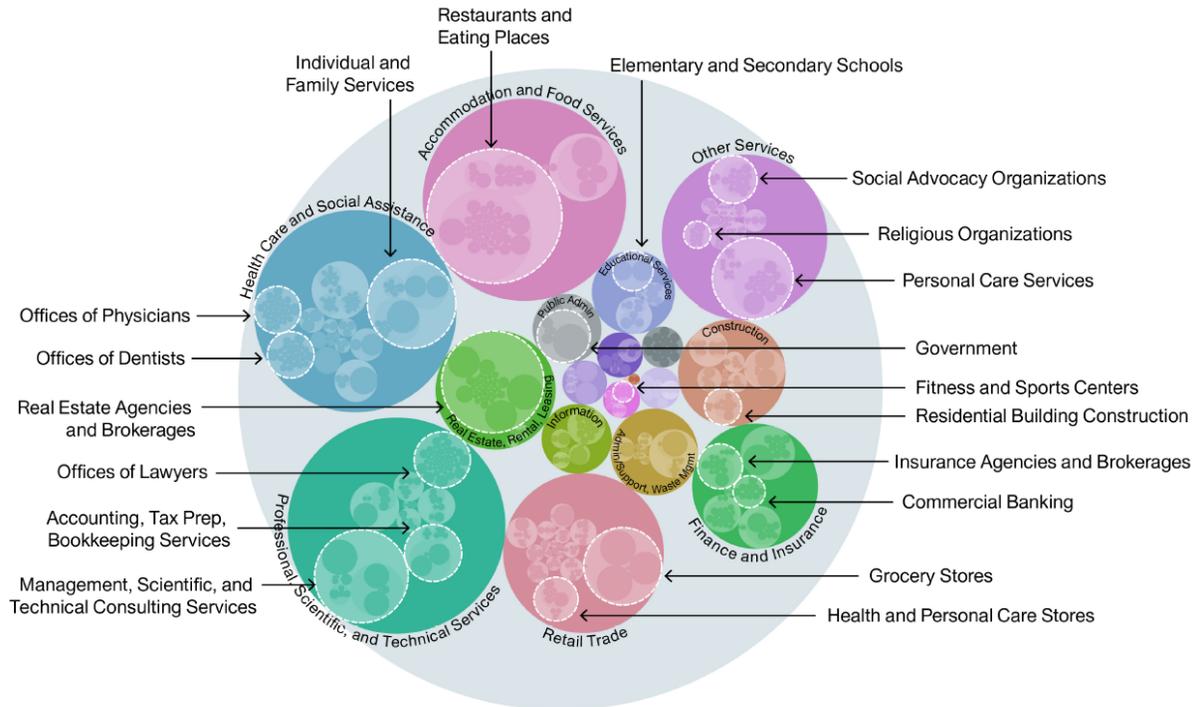
Given Newton’s unique history, a dozen or so village centers, rather than a single downtown characterizes the City’s layout, and commuting and shopping pattern. This makes Newton unique. Importantly, Newton’s growth in the late 19th and early 20th century was directly tied to increasing convenient connections to Boston via transit. Businesses located at the stations,

realizing that they were occupying a “third place” between home and work. Most of the village centers evolved organically around those transit stops and most now exist either as commuter rail stations or stops on the Green Line. You can trace this evolution by looking at an online historic map resource that allows you to look at the same area through time: [Atlas Scope](#). Click on the village center nearest you to see how transit catalyzed the growth and evolution of the businesses around it.

Despite the rich history of Newton’s village centers and the important role they still play today, they are vulnerable to change and should not be taken for granted. Across the region and country, auto-dominant uses have pushed out or

What Makes A Village Center A Village Center? Zoning Redesign: Village Centers

Figure 3: Existing Mix of Uses Diagram



Caption: Each small bubble represents a single business in Newton, whose size represents its number of employees. Those individual businesses are grouped into successive bubbles representing the various sectors and sub-sectors of Newton’s economy, and their sizes are based on the aggregate sizes of the smaller bubbles. Citywide, we can see a healthy mix of economic activity across many different sectors, with plenty of room for more diversification.

competed with historic village centers. The good news is that Newton’s village centers are resilient and well-positioned to adapt to changing lifestyles and the ongoing evolution of retail, given the competing pressures of ecommerce.

Do you agree that a diverse mix of uses defines village centers? What other elements are necessary to call something a village center, like public transit or civic space? What uses and amenities do village centers need to meet the needs of the 21st century user?

To develop zoning recommendations, we need to hear from you! The Vision Kit

([print](#) or [mobile](#)) allows you to go out to your village center, take photos of what you like or do not like, and share them with us and the broader community. Or you can share your ideas, and vote on others’ ideas, in the [Polis interactive community forum](#), which allows you to see the [results in real time](#).

So far, the statement on the Polis poll that has the broadest consensus supports our hypothesis that a mix of uses is the key ingredient, “Village Center should have places to do errands, get a bite to eat, go to an event and also to ‘just hang out’ and talk and people watch.” Join the conversation and tell us what you think!