

Acton 2020
BURNING ISSUES: Role-Playing

HOUSING WORKSHOP: DRAFT AGENDA

Where, how much, what kind, for whom?

Housing in Acton

Saturday, March 12th

2:00-4:30pm

Acton Town Hall, Room 204

PURPOSE: *To hold a public workshop with the purpose of gaining a better understanding of housing by inviting resource people and the public to discuss some of the key issues important to Acton's future. Also to further understand the variety of viewpoints and people's concerns regarding this issue*

Every new housing development built in Acton seems to generate discussion.

Some people feel that we need more housing of a certain type, e.g., affordable housing, 55+ communities, more dense housing, less dense housing. Others are of the opinion that any more housing will overtax town resources--especially the schools and water & sewer systems--and will cause more traffic. Many residents express concern that additional development has potential negative impacts on our town character (e.g. that it will gobble up open space or that it will not be designed to fit in with Acton's historic character). Help us think through what the right balance is for Acton.

- 2:00 – 2:30 Welcome and Introduction (including PowerPoint presentation)
- 2:30 – 3:30 Discussion of Hypothetical Scenario
- 3:30 – 4:15 Small Group Discussions including mapping and prioritization exercises
- 4:15 – 4:30 Reconvene as Large Group
Next Steps

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1. QUESTION FOR THE LARGE GROUP:

What is it that really upsets people most about additional housing development in Acton?

- impact on schools
- impact on other town services (water, wastewater, road travel)
- perceived impact on property values
- sense that architecture is changing the character of the community
- feeling that “other” types of people are changing the character of the community
- other?

Get some sense as to majority opinion in the room

2. Move on to ROLE PLAY

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HYPOTHETICAL SCENARIO

Purpose of Role-play: To articulate concerns surrounding housing and to have Acton “win” the role-play (as opposed to one particular point of view winning) by coming up with a list of concerns to address and some mitigating measures

The following is a hypothetical scenario that has been imagined to be somewhat extreme in order to best dramatize trade offs and positions. The role-play will consist of Committee members representing the 5 most relevant goals to the topic. Role-play guides are provided.

Let us suppose the following (this is not a real scenario and some of the facts have been stretched in order to dramatize issues):

After hearing about the success of Avalon in Acton, a developer comes to town proposing Avalanche Hill, a large multiple unit housing development which by providing rental units brings Acton to its 10% affordable housing target¹.

The complex will sit on an entirely wooded 50-acre site with 390 rental units in seven 5 story apartment buildings and six townhouse 2 story clusters with 8 units each. There is some space set aside for common uses including a main lobby, administrative office, child care center, and clubhouse and fitness center. The site of 50 acres yields a little under 7.8 units per acre and provides space for buffer and landscaped areas, other green areas, roads and walkways, parking and wastewater disposal.

Relevant dimensions of a rental housing development to bring the total affordable units in Acton up to 10%.

- A 50 acre site (that would have to be rezoned, and/or receive a special permit, and/or come in under 40B)
- 390 one and two bedroom housing units in seven five-story apartment buildings and six two-story attached townhouse buildings.
- The apartments' average size will be 1,000 sq. ft. and the town houses will be 1,400 sq. ft.
- Total project population is estimated at 975 (2.5 people/housing unit)

¹ If a city or town has less than 10% of its housing defined as affordable according to state standards, developers can override local zoning to place housing where ever they want, with the condition that they must make 20% of the units affordable. Affordability is defined as housing for households with incomes not exceeding 80% of the metropolitan area median household income and requires such housing to restrict rents or home prices for a specific period of time, generally in perpetuity. These households are designated as low and moderate income and the current affordable price range for them is \$140,000 to \$170,000

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PROJECTED HYPOTHETICAL IMPACTS

VITAL STATISTICS: Hypothetical Housing Development of 50 Acres	
Total buildings footprint	124,900 sq. ft.
Total floor area in buildings	496,900 sq. ft.
Floor area ratio ²	.23
Sq. ft. of total site land area per housing unit	5,585
Land cost	\$15,000,000 @ \$300,000/acre
Construction cost for apartment building	\$67,200,000 @ \$160/sq. ft.
Construction cost for townhouses	\$10,800,000 @ \$150/sq. ft.
Parking, landscaping, roadway and other ancillary facility costs (including clubhouse, pool and wastewater disposal system), plus contingency	\$25,000,000
Total project cost	\$118,000,000
Annual property taxes	\$2,133,440 @ \$18.08 tax rate
Traffic generated	between 3,000 and 3,500 trips/day
Water demand	73,125 gal./day
Septic demand	68,000 gal./day
Storm water	78,000 gal. for every inch that falls (on the buildings); parking and landscaping and roadways assumed to be permeable
School children generated	121 @ .31/household (a norm from the National Multi-Housing Council)
Cost of educating school children generated	\$1,452,000 @ \$12,000/student ³

Fiscal Effect. The residents of the new housing units will place pressure on the school system, demand for potable water, public safety and add significant traffic to the streets.

Impact on School System. Due to the projected increase in the number of children estimated to live in Avalanche Hill, Acton schools are making plans to accommodate an increase in class sizes and adding a lunch shift because the cafeterias will not be able to seat all the children; this will result in the first lunch shift starting at 10:30 am (and in children returning home starving at 3:00 in the afternoon).

Impact on Town's Visual Character. The seven apartment buildings will be about 50 – 55 feet high, keeping them under the height of tall trees. As many of the on-site trees as possible will be kept to maintain the wooded character of the area. The project will be kept back from its public road direct access point to provide a planting screening. However, the architecture in the renderings is not in any way compatible or reflective of Acton's character.

² The ratio between sq. ft. in a building (counting all floors) and the sq. ft. in the lot containing the building

³ This is an average cost between the Acton School District and the Acton-Boxborough School District. The fiscal impact study done around 2000 used marginal costs and showed much less impact.

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Environmental Impact. The project will be located within walking distance (1/4 mile) of an elementary school and some shops thereby providing residents with an opportunity to reduce their driving. Additionally, the development will seek LEED® certification and in doing so will use as much of the stormwater on site as possible for irrigation and for the on-site package treatment plant for wastewater treatment. The rest will be discharged underground. Unfortunately, all this disruption of the ecosystem may impact the habitat of the blue-spotted salamander.

Impact on Social Fabric. Providing a variety of housing types supports the ability of people in different stages in the life cycle as well as different socio-economic levels to live in Acton.

Impact on Town's Future Policy and Ability to Address Affordable Housing. The development will significantly add to the ability of several portions of the town's population to live/continue living in Acton and will provide temporary immunity to 40Bs, "breathing room" and a chance to develop a pro-active strategy to keep Acton ahead of the 10% threshold in the future.

ROLE-PLAYING PERSPECTIVES

Instructions: *Read through the blurb describing the issue and then think about how you might respond to this if you were to represent your assigned goal. In other words think about what your position would be if you only had this goal in mind when making decisions regarding housing in Acton. It's OK to make extreme arguments in order to exaggerate your points. The purpose here is to illustrate the diversity in points of view and the potential trade offs of decisions in order to get the discussion off to a "burning" start!*

1. Playing your role, comment on what pleases you and what concerns you about this proposal? Can you think of ways to mitigate some of your concerns?

2. Use the questions as a guide to ask questions of the resource people and of the public.

Goal viewpoints for the role-playing will be:

Town Character (con)
Inclusion and Diversity (pro)
Financial (con)
Environmental Sustainability (pro)
Town-owned Assets (pro)

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ROLE: Preserve Town Character

GOAL: We feel strongly about preserving and enhancing what makes Acton special and unique, including its rural characteristics, historic buildings and landscapes, and its village centers.

Objective 1: Preserve rural characteristics and open space

Objective 2: Preserve historic buildings and landscapes

Objective 3: Foster an understanding and appreciation for what makes Acton unique, including its history.

Objective 4: Preserve and enhance village centers

SCRIPT GUIDE:

Housing, in its various aspects, is a key contributor to existing neighborhood character and its preservation and /or enhancement. Population attributes such as income, age and ethnic/racial diversity also contribute to neighborhood character.

POSITION: Con

“Building multi-family housing goes completely against the rural character of the town”

Additional Concerns:

- If we must build more housing, what can we do to make it more compatible with Acton’s character? (e.g. Design Guidelines, design review, cluster zoning, planned conservation residential communities)
 - What are possible measures to consider which could encourage or discourage certain housing types or impose higher design review standards?
- What are some good examples from other communities of successfully guiding housing siting and design and by which mechanisms?
- What are some good examples (from other places) of ways of slowing down residential development (and thus preserving open space)?

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ROLE: Support Inclusion and Diversity

GOAL: We value our diversity in all its forms, reflecting a range of ages and socio-economic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. We wish to foster respect, promote interaction and actively encourage a wide variety of individuals to live, work, and play in our community.

Objective 1: Support all ages

Objective 2: Support households of all income levels

Objective 3: Embrace cultural diversity

Objective 4: Support citizens with disabilities in participating fully in the life of the community

SCRIPT GUIDE:

The price of housing is critical in creating and maintaining affordable housing. Use of 40B provisions to create such housing is possible, as is new local zoning bylaws that would require “inclusionary⁴” housing in new developments. 40B is the state law that allows developers to obtain a comprehensive permit to create housing over-riding local zoning provisions, provided that 20% of the new units are “affordable” according to state and federal guidelines. Creation of more rental housing would also contribute to the goal of creating more affordable housing. Mixes of housing types in terms of architectural styles, square footage of homes and lots, numbers of bedrooms, and types of structure (single- or multi-family) would better enable diversity in population (ages, income, and household size).

POSITION: Pro

“Providing different types of housing allows different types of people to live in our town, including our elders, our children, our town staff and teachers.”

Additional Concerns:

- How can we ensure that at least some of these housing units will go to Acton residents and/or Town staff and teachers?
- Housing that is affordable versus 'affordable housing'. The state defines 'affordable housing' in one way, and households deciding if they can afford to live in Acton define it a different way.
 - a. How should the town view its various housing obligations: legal ones to the state, moral ones to the people of Acton, and a self-interested view of what mix of housing will create the diversity of residents that would make the town a more workable and interesting and varied place to live?

⁴ Negotiated payments from the developer for the purpose of creating affordable housing.

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ROLE: Maintain and Improve Financial Well-being of the Town

GOAL: We believe it is critical for us to sustain and strengthen our town's financial well-being. This includes commercial and economic development that reflects the long-term goals of both businesses and residents of the community.

Objective 1: Improve existing commercial areas

Objective 2: Promote economic development that supports our other goals

Objective 3: Achieve a balance of services and taxes

Objective 4: Support the ability of all residents to stay in Acton for a lifetime

SCRIPT GUIDE:

Population and housing are the major factors driving the overall need for Town services and facilities, and consequently the biggest determinant of the financial equation.

POSITION: Con

"We can't afford to place anymore pressure on our schools and other town services and given our past experience with these types of developments, these units will generate many children. We cannot afford to expand/renovate our schools."

"Providing housing with a fewer number of bedrooms tends to attract smaller families and/or families without children which place less pressure on the schools than larger single-family housing units with many bedrooms. "

"Additionally studies have shown that the higher the income of the occupants of apartment buildings, the fewer children they generate. So let's go for luxury condos."

Additional Concerns:

- How does additional housing development affect real estate values of existing housing (e.g. increase/decrease)?
- What would it take to make existing housing affordable, by the state's definition, rather than building a lot of new housing (legal technicalities as well as in terms of having these homes be in good condition and well located such that the cost to maintain them, pay for utilities, commute to work, etc. is affordable, too)?
 - What techniques if any, have worked in Mass. To provide affordable housing via reuse and deed restrictions rather than new development (or other such ideas that avoid building new housing)?

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ROLE: Ensure Environmental Sustainability

As Acton residents, we recognize that our health and well-being depend on protecting the web of life of which we are a part. Therefore, it is vital that we live and work here in a manner that supports that web and the well-being of people everywhere, including future Acton citizens.

Objective 1: To protect the quality and quantity of the water that cycles through our ground water, surface water, drinking water, waste water, and storm water systems.

Objective 2: To reduce waste and the accumulation of toxins in our environment.

Objective 3: To reduce emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases from residential, commercial, industrial, and municipal uses.

Objective 4: To move toward patterns of land use and land protection that support broad biodiversity, soil preservation, and healthy local agriculture.

SCRIPT GUIDE:

The energy efficiency of housing is becoming increasingly important as communities, the nation and the world are increasingly concerned about critical environmental issues such as climate change and use of sustainable energy resources. Housing is especially important because typically over fifty percent (50%) of energy used in all buildings is used in homes.

POSITION: Pro

“Smaller homes use less energy, we should be promoting this in the interest of being more energy conscious”.

- How can we ensure that such large housing developments do not negatively impact the eco system? (for example, I especially concerned about the habitat of the blue-spotted salamander).

Additional Concerns:

- What can we do to change economic incentives and regulatory requirements so that developers are motivated to do in-fill development and not sprawl development in Acton (concentrations of people and activity facilitates more human interaction and decreases the use of energy and land and cars. Additionally low density housing takes up more of our open space)?
- Is the Planned Conservation Residential Communities tool the best we can use to protect open space in housing developments?
- Are there models for funding renovation of older stock to improve its energy efficiency and make it more attractive to low income families that can benefit from the lower utility costs?

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ROLE: Preserve and Enhance Town-owned Assets

We value our Town assets and wish to preserve and enhance them. These include our open spaces, schools, municipal properties and facilities.

Objective 1: Protect Town-owned open space

Objective 2: Support excellence in schools

Objective 3: Maintain municipal properties and facilities

SCRIPT GUIDE:

Managing and expanding publically owned housing in Acton is an important part of maintaining town assets. Currently the Acton Housing Authority owns and operates 158 units of public housing, and is responsible for managing the placement of subsidy-eligible residents in 170* units of privately owned housing. Keeping these publically and privately owned units up to nationally recognized standards is important. It is also important for the Town to maintain and increase its capacity to oversee the development of new affordable housing developments, and to monitor and maintain the affordability restrictions on privately owned affordable homeownership and rental units.

* Note: these numbers change frequently as people move in and out of the privately-owned homes

POSITION: Pro

“We need to maintain our existing supply of “affordable housing” and have the responsibility to continue to find ways of providing more both in order to provide housing for lower income individuals as well as to increase our 40B percentage so that we may have more control over development in our town.”

Additional Concerns:

- What is the fiscal impact of new housing (market and affordable) on schools, town facilities and services, traffic, and the tax rate? Also, at what point (if any) would the school budget actually decrease?
- What is the impact of new housing on water and wastewater disposal (and how should we plan, e.g. is there a “not to exceed threshold”)?
- Can/should the Town agree on a formal affordable housing plan that would allow us to limit 40B developments to the areas that work best for the town?

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DISCUSSION with Resource People & Public

BRIEF SUMMARY OF INPUT AND DISCUSSION UNTIL THIS POINT

ENDING QUESTION (no longer in role-play)

Based on previous discussion and list of pros, cons, and mitigating measures we compiled together, if there were to be more housing in Acton, what would be the most important aspects to review:

- Siting (including preservation of open space)
- Design
- Number of school children
- Location
- Impact on water, sewer, traffic and other town services
- “Affordability”
- Other?

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SMALL GROUP EXERCISE (45 minutes)

Brief Introduction and description of small group exercises (10 minutes)

You will be asked a couple of questions, next you will be invited to participate in a mapping exercise and finally you will be asked to prioritize action steps.

Questions

1. Based on those you know, who do you think would like to live in Acton/stay in Acton but have a hard time doing so? *(e.g. seniors, low and moderate income, town staff, teachers, fire fighters, children who grew up in Acton)*
2. What would you say are the characteristics of the kind of housing these people would like/meet their needs?
 - Physical form (small, single family, apartment)
 - Location (access to public transportation, access to personal services)
 - Price point ("affordable", market)
3. Does this kind of housing exist in Acton? If yes, is there enough of it? Is it located well?

Mapping (15 minutes)

USE MAP (indicate locations of existing large housing complexes on map)---
Please use color-coded legos to indicate desired locations for:

- Single-family attached*
- Single-family detached (e.g. townhouses)*
- Multi-family complex*
- Apartment building (e.g. garden apartments)*
- Mixed Use (e.g. housing over retail)*
- Other?*

Prioritizing Action Steps (5 minutes)

If you could do one thing to address housing issues in Acton, what would it be? PRIORITIZE WITH DOTS: After all participants have added their thoughts to the list, give each participant 5 dots. They may not use more than 3 on any one item.

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RELEVANT REFERENCES

Maps

Commercial and Industrial Areas in Acton (Figure 2.7 in Inventory)
Housing Opportunities Identified in the 2006 Community Development Plan (Figure 1.6)
Acton Open Space (Figure 5.1)
Existing Zoning (Figure 8.2)
Acton Sidewalk Locations (Figure 6.2)
Acton Multimodal Transportation Network (Figure 6.1)
Acton Recreational Resources (Figure 5.2)
Historic Resources (Figure 4.6)

Copy of inventory

Other Relevant Reports?

To Live In Acton
Wrestling with Growth in Acton

PROPS

Maps with developable lots, landmarks, etc. with existing large housing developments indicated

Color-coded legos representing different kinds of housing (e.g. single – family, condo, apartments, etc)