

Project Background

This study was initiated by Newton's Planning Department to review the effects of the city's demolition delay ordinance and assess the potential impacts of the great number of post-World War II houses, now reaching the 50-year threshold for demolition review. Neil Larson & Associates, Inc began work on the project in late January 2001. Both principals of the firm were involved in the study—Neil Larson, an architectural historian, evaluated the significance of the historic resources in question, and Jill Fisher, an urban planner, analyzed the effectiveness of the regulation and administrative and procedural issues it raised.

Visitors to Newton cannot help but be impressed by the sheer magnitude of historic properties and architectural richness of this second-ring suburb's urban fabric. Newton is certainly ahead of most communities in the state when it comes to embracing historic preservation, through past survey work and implementing protective measures for its resources. Still, the onslaught of new demolition permits now having to be reviewed—increasing from 20 in 1987 to 146 in 2000 (730% over 14 years)—has raised legitimate questions about the efficacy of the ordinance and the need for protecting the much greater numbers of post-World War residences that meet the age threshold for review. It is these challenges that this study endeavors to address.

Study Process

During the first phase of the study, all available demolition files from 1987 to the present—approximately 575—were reviewed. (An additional 67 demolition delay applications that had been missing were reviewed during the final phase of the study.) Of the initial 575 applications, approximately 80 properties were field checked to determine the results of the NHC's review—whether historic properties remain, design directives were followed or unintended consequences occurred. This was done to determine whether imposition of a delay actually resulted in saving these buildings, or whether it did indeed simply delay the inevitable destruction of historic properties. Collating addresses of properties coming under review indicated certain streets were being greatly altered by demolition requests. A number of these were viewed to ascertain the extent of the impact on neighborhood character. From the 80 samples, 21 were selected as illustrative of both positive and negative results and discussed, so as to provide the NHC objective feedback the implementation of the demolition delay ordinance. See Appendix A for pertinent sections from the Phase I report.

The second phase of the study involved three parts. The first included an overall architectural analysis of houses built in Newton between 1945 and 1960, and their significance in terms of warranting preservation. The second focused on demolition ordinances and preservation practices in other communities; three in particular, from which lessons could be learned. Finally, section three contained a discussion about whether Newton's demolition delay provisions are achieving the City's preservation purposes, how the age of Newton's housing stock could be expected to impact the number and type of reviews by the Newton Historical

Commission and listed a variety of options to improve the results achieved with the demolition review process. See Appendix B for pertinent sections from the Phase II report.

This third and final phase of demolition delay ordinance and post-World War II Housing Study, has involved a second review of all the material collected to date, interviews with members of the NHC, as well as several Aldermen, the City Attorney and the City Assessor, and researching models for recommended actions. One observation arising from these interviews is that the demolition delay ordinance is viewed differently by different people, depending on their roles. In general, the NHC members view it much more positively than do the elected officials, probably because they see the full range of issues it addresses, whereas the City Aldermen tend to get involved in only its most controversial applications.

This work has led to three basic findings by the consultant, noted previously in the Executive Summary. The basis for each of these is explored in Chapter II. Chapter III focuses on the significance of post-World War II housing in Newton, and references the significance of other mid-20th housing in need of attention. Both of these chapters serve as a prelude to the final recommendations for action strategies found in Chapter IV. Appendices include additional background information as well as models and illustrations of the types of tools and approaches indicated in the recommendations.

Newton is to be commended for pursuing further information about its historic housing stock—especially buildings that have just recently triggered the 50-year-age eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places. While there is not yet community consensus on the historic value of these buildings, there is a growing recognition that maintaining the physical fabric of the city is important to the community's welfare and that these post-World War II neighborhoods serve the community in a number of ways, making them worthy of preservation.

While the challenges are great, there are steps that can be taken to strengthen Newton's quality of life through preserving examples of the full range of its historic resources.