To: Alderman Ted Hess-Mahan

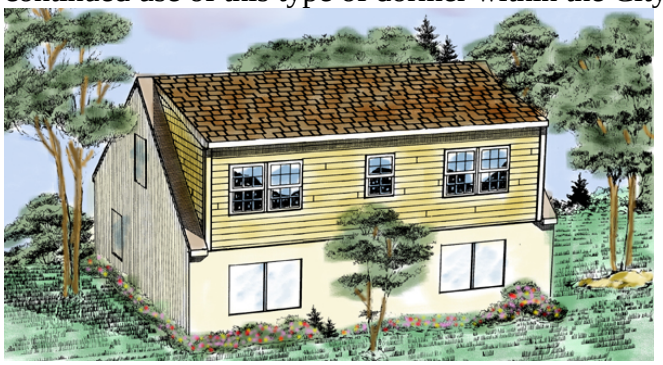
From: Members of the Zoning Task Force; Half Story/Dormer Subcommittee

Date: July 20, 2006

Re: Draft Summary of Half Story/Dormer Subcommittee Recommendations

Statement of Purpose

The City of Newton desires to retain and enhance the unique character of the housing stock while simultaneously providing for existing and future residents to best utilize their homes. Conversion of attic space into a livable half story may be facilitated through the use of dormers. The "shed" dormer has been the primary cause of the limited number of dormer complaints received by the Planning Department. Due to the comparatively low cost and comparatively high functionality of the shed dormer, the Subcommittee assumes continued use of this type of dormer within the City of Newton.



Shed Dormer

The purpose of the recommendations of this Subcommittee is to facilitate a simpler review process through which owners may work to expand their residences while still preserving the character of the City of Newton for existing and future members of the community. The immediate suggestions include a prescriptive criteria for dormers and an optional design review process for dormer issues that fall outside the explicit criteria but which might retain or augment the "character of Newton."

History:

As part of the subcommittee's review of this issue, various members reviewed many of the dormer styles employed throughout the neighborhoods of Newton. The analysis leads to the following conclusions about dormers on the existing housing stock:

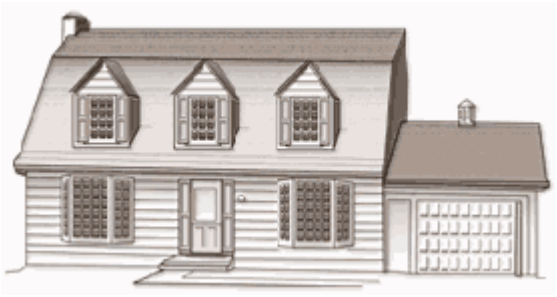
1. dormers are widely used at the third level;
2. dormers vary significantly in both in number/frequency, size, and style;
3. more complex roofs often combine several styles, sizes, and numbers, often in an appealing way…or at least a familiar vocabulary;
4. there are many good examples of large dormers that "fit" a house; there are also many examples of dormers that look "out-of-place";

5. many houses have large main roof systems that accomplish many of the objectives of dormers, but often at a larger scale;
6. in situations with large or multiple dormers and/or in large main roof systems with or without dormers, it is not clear whether the space created within the structure would be constrained by the current "story, half" definition;
7. more study of the existing housing stock is needed to determine the parameters for limiting dormers, specifically the relationship between dormer length and the area at the half-story level that might be habitable

Draft Recommendations of the Half Story/Dormer Subcommittee

- **Retain existing "Story, half" definition, as follows:** A story directly under a sloping roof where the area with a ceiling height of 7'3" or greater is less than 2/3rds the area of the story directly below.
- **Retain 50 percent rule or expand it to 60 percent:** There is a current "unwritten" dormer rule within the Inspectional Services Department that permits a dormer to be no wider than 50 percent of the width of the wall directly below it. This "rule" needs more study. The size of the dormer must accomplish both aesthetic and functional goals. For example, a dormer may need to absorb a staircase and landing that utilizes 8-10' of dormer length. A dormer is also limited by the type of roof construction and the "story, half" definition noted above. Some members of the committee feel that more latitude above 50 percent, perhaps 60-70 percent, may give owners the ability to add access stairwells and the like, while still retaining a reasonable aesthetic.Other members believe less than 50% is appropriate.
- **Require roof line overhang:** When a dormer is built, a roof line overhang should be continued between the dormer on the third/half story and the second story. Rather than dictating the length of the overhang, it should be consistent with the roofline of the larger residence. There is support among the committee for the zoning provision to allow for the wall of the dormer to align with the wall below, albeit visually separated by the continuation of the roof overhang or other architectural feature that differentiates the story levels. (see image below)

- **The vertical plane of the side wall of any dormer shall not be closer than 2' (or 3') from the vertical plane of the main building wall below the main roof.** The below drawing illustrates this concept with an approximate 5' distance between the side wall of the main building and the side wall of the outside dormer.



- **No dormer roof above the main ridgeline of the building:** This is self explanatory, but complicated by unique (and generally expensive) architectural designs (an example of a Victorian-style residence below). While we believe there should be a provision for allowing some portion of the structure to fall above the existing main ridge line, it should be in the context of a design review process discussed later in this report.

- **Maximum building height of 30 feet should be retained but definition should be clarified to reference "Main Building" and exclude "Dormer".** Presently there is confusion about what points are measured to arrive at total building height. We believe it should be the "vertical distance between the elevations of the following: (a) the average grade plane and the (b) midpoint between the highest point of the ridge of the main building roof and the line formed by the intersection of the top of the main building wall plane and the main roof plane."

- **Expressly state in Zoning Code that there are no dormer restrictions on the second floor:** One and one-half story (Bungalow or Cape Cod) residences in Newton should be expressly exempt from controls of the dormer length as it relates to the length of the first level. For example, if a bungalow-style home has a 30 foot front length, a 25 +/- foot dormer above and along that front length should be permitted provided roof overhangs (soffits of 8 to 24 inches for example) and vertical plane setbacks from side roof lines (2 to 3 feet for example are retained. (See image below).

Design Review Process Alternative

Design Review Committee (DRC):
To allow for dormer situations that are not expressly permitted under the prescriptive criteria noted above, a petitioner may present his/her design proposal to the DRC for prompt review. A set of overriding principles and guidelines (to be developed) would provide the framework for the DRC assessment of submittals. Petitioners not satisfied with the opinions of the DRC might appeal to the Board of Alderman for further review.

The DRC would be made up of design professionals and might include some City of Newton staff as well.

Additional Recommendations

- **Re-examine FAR**: Residents of Newton have expressed concern that expansions to existing half stories through the use of dormers have been too large, and have also expressed concern that new developments or major renovations have included a use of the half story that is too intense in terms of building mass. We believe review of the total above ground building mass in context of FAR could allay some of those concerns.
    - The committee is divided as to whether a recast FAR should include all above ground building area (including visible basement and garage space)

or whether any revised view of FAR should only include the first, second, and half story.

- There was an initial convergence on a “volume” method of FAR, whereby all above grade building area, regardless of height, finished nature, etc. be counted as the way to best level the playing field.
- FAR could also be considered in the context of lot size, not solely underlying zoning.