Here is a detailed summary of the **Mayor’s Blue Ribbon Housing Committee Meeting – May 8, 2025**, based on the full transcript you provided:

**📝 Overview**

This meeting centered on identifying zoning barriers to housing creation in Portsmouth and crafting recommendations that can feed directly into the city’s forthcoming 2025 Master Plan process. The group explored ways to modernize zoning rules, unlock density, and make incentive structures more effective, with particular focus on parking, lot sizes, residential zoning categories, and underutilized commercial zones.

**🎯 Committee Mandate Clarification**

**Debate:** Is the committee focused only on affordable housing, or on all types?

**Consensus:** Increasing the total housing supply—regardless of type—supports affordability in the long run. Zoning reforms should broadly address density constraints that affect all housing forms.

**🔧 Zoning Barriers: Key Areas of Discussion**

**1. Parking Requirements**

**Issue:**

* Parking minimums inflate costs and limit housing feasibility, especially for multifamily units.

**Proposals:**

* Remove parking minimums from the zoning ordinance and handle parking through site plan review instead.
* Consider switching to only **parking maximums** to prevent overbuilding.

**Pros:**

* Encourages market-driven solutions.
* Supports walkability and reduces unnecessary paved areas.
* Allows greater flexibility in downtown and transit-friendly areas.

**Concerns:**

* Neighborhood backlash (“headline risk”).
* Insufficient transit in some areas still makes car ownership necessary.
* Shared parking strategies (e.g., time-of-day agreements) were cited as working examples.

**2. Residential Density and District Consolidation**

**Issue:**

* Current zoning (GRA, GRB, GRC) is overly fragmented.
* Many lots in these zones are already nonconforming due to lot size or frontage requirements.

**Proposals:**

* **Combine general residence districts** to reduce regulatory complexity and allow more density.
* Allow duplexes or triplexes in areas currently restricted to single-family homes (SRA, SRB).
* Reduce minimum lot sizes and frontage requirements to reflect existing conditions.

**Data:**

* Over 50% of parcels in some districts are non-conforming.
* ADU applications have significantly increased since the ordinance update in 2023.

**Key Quote:**

“We want the Master Plan process to look at [zoning simplification]… and hold community sessions to evaluate.”

**3. Zoning Map & Use Table Changes**

**Issue:**

* Many commercial/industrial zones (e.g., Office/Research, Business) are underutilized and not zoned for housing.

**Proposals:**

* **Convert outdated zones to Mixed Use** to allow housing, retail, and light industrial flexibility.
* Specific examples: Constitution Ave, Heritage Ave, Route 1, former industrial sites.

**Example:** The Service Credit Union parcel was rezoned to Gateway, enabling a mix of housing, childcare, and offices.

**Goal:** Reduce from 27 zoning districts to a more manageable number; eliminate “business-only” districts that don’t support community needs.

**4. Gateway Incentive Structure**

**Issue:**

* Some developers are building under by-right rules without using workforce housing incentives.

**Insight:**

* Developers are avoiding “incentives” that require extra steps (e.g., variances, public hearings) if their projects are already financially viable at by-right densities.

**Solution:**

* **Recalibrate incentives:** Reduce by-right density in Gateway zones so that developers are encouraged to opt into bonus provisions for affordability.

**Next Step:** RKG (consultant) is analyzing Gateway zoning and will present findings in a public session soon.

**💬 Focus Groups: Developer & Stakeholder Input**

**Proposal:**

* Convene **small, non-public focus groups** with developers, engineers, architects, and impacted residents to gather honest feedback on what zoning changes would actually enable housing creation.

**Purpose:**

* Understand financial and regulatory constraints from the perspective of those who build housing.
* Use findings to guide both short-term recommendations and long-term Master Plan reforms.

**📊 Data Shared**

* Graphs and charts presented on:
  + ADU applications (sharp increase post-2023 ordinance revision).
  + Workforce housing approvals by year (2019 spike linked to big projects like West End Yards).
  + Many parcels with large lot sizes (e.g., Sagamore Ave) are becoming eligible for subdivision due to new sewer access.

**🧠 Philosophical & Political Tensions**

* Some members advocated bold reforms (e.g., eliminating single-family-only zoning), citing national best practices and market logic.
* Others cautioned that neighborhood expectations and political resistance must be considered.

**Balanced View:**

* The committee can recommend **exploration and community conversation**, without committing to specific zoning changes yet.

The meeting exposed a deeper ideological and strategic divide within the committee that reflects broader public debates about housing reform: **How far, how fast, and with what level of public buy-in should Portsmouth pursue zoning changes that would significantly alter neighborhood form and housing types?**

**1. Supply-Side vs. Community-Control Perspectives**

Some committee members, including John O’Leary and several planners, argued that increasing the **overall housing supply**—regardless of income level or ownership type—is essential to rebalancing the city’s extreme housing scarcity. They emphasized that Portsmouth currently has **a sub-1% rental vacancy rate**, and that until more units are built, prices and rents will continue to rise sharply.

From this **supply-side viewpoint**, zoning reforms such as:

* eliminating single-family-only restrictions,
* reducing minimum lot sizes,
* legalizing duplexes and triplexes citywide,
* and removing parking minimums,

are seen as **essential levers** to unlock housing production and affordability. The logic follows that “if you don’t increase the housing stock, you won’t get affordable housing.” This aligns with emerging best practices in cities nationwide that are dismantling exclusionary zoning rules to promote “gentle density” and more diverse housing types.

“We as city officials don’t build housing—we have to induce others to do it,” said one member, emphasizing the city’s role as an enabler, not a builder.

**2. Concerns About Character, Expectations, and Backlash**

Other members expressed caution about **moving too quickly** toward changes that could be perceived by residents as undermining neighborhood character, aesthetics, or property expectations—particularly in long-established single-family districts.

* One speaker noted that people often **choose to buy in certain neighborhoods based on current zoning**, and sudden changes—like legalizing multifamily housing or removing parking requirements—could trigger community backlash.
* Others warned of **the “headline risk”** if the city is perceived as rushing into reforms without engaging residents. (“Housing committee wants to eliminate parking in homes” was floated as an example of a politically volatile narrative.)
* Several members explicitly stated that while **they support bold reform in principle**, they believe **public process and community buy-in** are essential before pursuing structural changes.

This represents a more **cautious, incrementalist approach**, rooted in:

* political realism,
* the potential for “NIMBY” organizing,
* and concerns over overreach without a mandate.

“People buy houses based on what they feel is important to them. If you like single-family homes and buy in a single-family zone, that’s your expectation,” one member said. “Change will bring opposition.”

**3. Bridging the Divide: A Strategy of Exploration, Not Imposition**

What emerged was a middle path: a consensus that **discussion is not endorsement**, and that the Master Plan process is the appropriate venue to **pose difficult questions** and **test public sentiment**.

* Members agreed that **raising the idea of eliminating single-family zoning**, for example, does not commit the city to doing so, but allows for **public debate** on its merits and tradeoffs.
* There was a shared desire to move from **binary debates** to **iterative design**, where form-based solutions, neighborhood-specific templates, and architectural compatibility can soften the cultural resistance to infill housing.
* A form-based zoning strategy was mentioned as one way to preserve **visual consistency and neighborhood “feel”**, even if unit count increases.

“This is an iterative process… it’s not just about eliminating single-family zoning. It’s about identifying where we want to go and walking the public there over time.”

**4. Summary: Tensions and Alignments**

| **Perspective** | **Main Argument** | **Key Concern** | **Policy Stance** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Supply-Side Reformer** | Scarcity is driving unaffordability; only more units will fix it | Political resistance | Supports upzoning, ADUs, parking reform now |
| **Community-Centric Cautioneer** | Residents value neighborhood expectations | Zoning changes could provoke backlash | Supports reforms, but only after thorough public process |
| **Middle-Ground Strategist** | Ask the questions, build the case, and trust the process | Public needs to see benefits | Leverage Master Plan to guide gradual reform |

**✅ Committee Recommendations for Master Plan Process**

1. Evaluate **eliminating parking minimums** (or move to site plan process).
2. **Combine residential districts** (e.g., GRA/GRB/GRC into two zones).
3. Allow **two-family units in current single-family zones**.
4. Analyze **lot frontage and area minimums** as barriers to infill housing.
5. Convert **Office/Research and Business zones to Mixed Use**.
6. **Recalibrate Gateway zoning incentives** to spur workforce housing.
7. Convene **developer focus groups** to identify practical zoning solutions.
8. Examine **Pease Tradeport** as a future site for co-living or residential infill, despite lease complications.
9. Revisit the logic of 27 separate zoning districts and consider consolidation.