



James Cote

Candidate for Ward City Councilor, Ward 3

September 2, 2021

Voters for a Vibrant Newton PAC 2021 City Council Questionnaire

Thank you for completing the 2021 Voters for a Vibrant Newton PAC candidate questionnaire. To submit your answers, email a PDF copy of this document with your answers by September 9th. Answers to this questionnaire will inform our endorsement decisions and will be posted online. Please limit each answer to 150 words.

1. What are the three most important issues for the City Council to address in the next term?

There are many issues that the Council faces in their 2-year term that require an experienced and capable Councilor to introduce, politic, and push to an agreed upon conclusion. Issues that I feel are important and need action on are:

1. Making Newton Affordable (Zoning): This is focused on zoning to ensure a varied and inclusive housing program that encourages and mandates affordable and low-income housing.

As only government can build low-income housing this is a priority. Then to ensure affordability, the Council needs to encourage businesses zoning, and growth in vital businesses that keep the cost of goods and services low in the immediate neighborhoods. I worked on Habitat for Humanity for a number of years and I have seen the excitement of a new home owner in a home they worked on to achieve.

2. Programs & Services Committee: My goal is to join the Committee to ensure a return to the goal of providing services to the community. Too often the committee has been overtaken by Councilors seeking to promote a personal goal, and thereby taking energy and focus away from goal programs. Services that need attention include, but are not limited to working with personal financial training for those in need, adult mental health care, and providing services in many areas that are currently “farmed out.”
3. Improve the traffic patterns and pedestrian flow to increase activity that will sustain businesses in the Villages. The current cost of business rental property makes long term retail and food services businesses unlikely. This will be accomplished with development focused in the centers and accommodating all levels of housing/business

2. What do you see as the key elements of a vibrant village center?

1. Affordable village business rents
2. Housing
3. Attracting all types of transportation that will bring in and accommodate business customers and visitors

3. What are the barriers to getting/keeping vibrant village centers and how would you overcome them?

1. Communication/Information: The city planning office needs to get ahead of the activity that is focused on the Village Centers and open lines of communication with realtors, developers, land use attorneys, estate lawyers, and others in the development world. The City needs to tell potential investors in property our vision and goals that would meet needs and gain acceptance.
2. The City Council reacts to development with the Land Use Committee that handles projects that comes to the city. They do not take the lead in project development, and this is a problem. I would seek to review Committee roles to see if changes are needed, and push the Council deeper into economic development and growth planning based on city goals of a diverse and affordable community.
3. People opposed for the purpose of being opposed need to be addressed and receive early information and education as to how a project will fit a city goal. Then the Council has to be firm and not cave in to pressures to stand still, and be more involved in a promoting the real dialogue and goal of projects on the table.

4. Have you been a consistent supporter or opponent of mixed-use developments that have been previously approved, including Northland, Austin Street, Trio, Dunstan East, Riverdale and Riverside? Please detail your thinking and your actions to support or oppose each.

1. Northland: Supporter early on in the project, and stayed on course even after I left the council in 2019 and assisted in approval at the special election.
2. Austin Street: My goal has been consistent and to be strong on building on existing footprints, but be careful to avoid open space projects. I was not a supporter in the final vote for Austin

Street, though I worked closely with a representative of the developer to try to get the right mix of housing with retail.

3. Trio: As a member of the Land Use Committee, I was involved in this project from the beginning and worked hard to craft a good project. I'm very pleased with the results.
4. Dunstan East: I was an early supporter and though not on the Council for the final approvals of the project I was engaged with the developers and the city to get the right project. I'm very happy with 2 aspects of the project with increased affordable housing, and money for 2 city parks in West Newton. The Park funds came directly from my efforts with all of the parties to the project.
5. Riverside: Loved the location and the details of the project, which has only gotten better over the past couple of years. I would vote to approve this project.
6. Riverdale: A project that I have not worked on but see the merits and would work to approve.

5. What steps would you take to encourage more diverse and locally owned businesses in our City?

I'm living this and have learned a lot: Over 40 years ago, my wife Albie was a young immigrant arriving from Argentina with her family. She's a graduate of Newton North and over time has been very successful in family owned businesses. In the past 2 years Albie has worked to open and build an Empanada business that would promote her culture and be locally owned. She opened in Worcester in December of 2020 and has had great success, to the point that she has taken out a lease in Newton. The cost of doing business in Newton prevented her from opening her first store in Newton, there are things that can be done here.

1. As I did in the Trio project, work with the developers to offer "affordable" business rents to local businesses.

2. Albie found Worcester amazingly simple and quick to open in as they embraced an Hispanic women owned business and had her open in less than a week from permitting. Newton can do this.
3. Budget money to ensure expensive opening aspects such as facades, and equipment, can be dealt with by city grants.
4. Build business mentorship teams to assist local businesses

6. How would you use housing tools to further economic and racial equity in Newton, specifically for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color)?

My wife and I see this daily, as my Hispanic step-children, graduates of Newton schools feel there are racial issues in front of them at each turn. We encourage them to seek out answers to their goals and to not let obstacles keep them down. I would work on the lessons I've learned at home and use to work City wide on programs.

1. City planning needs to focus on these goals and research and promote state and federal laws that can be employed to engage developers.
2. Require developers to adhere to Fair Housing standards and tell the city how they are working to increase diversity in the housing applicants for rentals, and programs for buyers.
3. Federal Loan programs focused on veterans, and first-time home buyers need to be promoted and communicated to eligible groups

7. What percentage of local preference in affordable housing lotteries do you support?

Setting a certain percentage may not be fair as it would work against our goals of diversity in the community. I would like to set a program that could accommodate all of our eligible candidates for housing meeting criteria of income, and diversity. Should there be a

negotiation and a need to put in preference I would want a small percentage until we reach diversity goals.

8. What actions or measures beyond increasing affordable housing would you take to advance racial equity and promote an inclusive Newton?

1. Diverse businesses that assist buyers of all income levels
2. Business leadership diversity: Work with employers in the city to promote a diverse and inclusive work force. This would go to my committee reviews and changes in committee responsibilities.
3. Police/Fire: Recruit to fill roles with women and applicants of all backgrounds.
4. Many more heritage and ethnic fairs/days to bring in people outside of Newton and encourage Newton residents to expand their knowledge of different cultures.

9. What actions/changes would you support on the City Council to implement the recommendations of the Climate Action Plan?

The city has developed a Climate Action Plan that needs to be constantly reviewed and updated as technology changes. The city needs to address this plan while keeping the eye on the ball that some changes could negatively impact efforts to diversify the city. Actions that would increase housing costs, lesson transportation for lower wage workers, and make new business ownership out of reach need careful scrutiny. This can all be accomplished with careful planning and a Council that works within the parameters of diversity goals.

10. Do you support the current role of the City Council in issuing special permits? If not, what changes would you propose?

The City Council spends an inordinate amount of time on Special Permits and in many cases handling the minutia that creates neighborhood hysteria. Taking many of the tasks from the Council may make projects easier to move forward, while at the same time lessening the stress on neighborhoods. Many projects that become lightning rods wouldn't be if the Council wasn't involved in maintaining its influence in the political process. The Council can stay involved through actions with the administration and the budget to ensure proper scrutiny is given to a project but without stirring up neighborhood anxieties. The Council needs to move on from Special Permits in most cases. Probably be best to wean the Council off of this over time rather than at once.

11. Use this space to add anything you have not mentioned and that you would like us to know about your experience, vision for Newton, etc. (150 words or fewer)

My return to the Newton City Council will facilitate the goals of Vibrant Village Centers. My experience on Land Use and Finance provides me with the knowledge necessary to engage in negotiations on new projects. Known as the "common sense" Councilor, I'm able to assist the Council in working together and reaching the goals of good projects for the community. I have the background and family structure that provides viewpoints on all aspects of the questions in this survey. I have empathy and compassion for those that need leaders to assist them. I'm able to engage others in the discussions and using personal examples and experiences to gain approval. I desire to be a City Council for the reason that I add great value to those that especially need representation.

Thank you and sincerely,

James R. Cote

