



## **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 9<sup>th</sup>. 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?**

1. Recovery and revitalization of our village centers: To enable our village centers to reach their full potential as commercial, residential, cultural, and civic hubs, the Council should review/update our zoning, permitting, licensing, and parking policies.
2. Wide-ranging infrastructure improvements: The Council should approve overdue upgrades to roads, schools, municipal buildings, and parks to maintain our quality of life, to ensure that our municipal buildings are less reliant on fossil fuels, and to create a Newton that is walkable, bike-able, and accessible for all.
3. Supporting seniors and vulnerable residents: The Council must ensure that we have sufficient resources to fund vital services for our growing senior population, take steps to increase our stock of affordable housing so that people of diverse backgrounds and income levels can live here, and implement policies to support our most vulnerable residents.

*...And do all of this with an eye toward meeting our climate action goals!*

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

A vibrant village center has a mix of engaging storefront, retail businesses; diverse housing opportunities; well-designed public/green spaces where people can gather, eat, hear music, and enjoy public art; accessible sidewalks, roads, curb cuts, and ramps; safe bike infrastructure; proximity to public transportation. Vibrant village centers prioritize infrastructure improvements that foster lively street life such as shade trees, plantings, and chairs and benches. Additionally, vibrant villages may include a mix of architectural styles, including historic buildings and multistory new construction.

Vibrant villages (particularly in the time of big box stores and growing online retail) usually don't arise by happenstance; they are generally the product of governmental leadership and thoughtful, forward-looking policies. These might include zoning that permits residential and mixed-use development, public-private partnerships that provide resources and community benefit; streamlined licensing and permitting processes for local businesses; grants programs to encourage new businesses; and partnering with arts and culture organizations.

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

Newton is a city of villages. And yet our villages are currently zoned to create and maintain unsustainable 1950s one-story strip mall monocultures. Key barriers to getting/keeping vibrant village centers include: Outdated zoning that prohibits or discourages housing and mixed-use projects; streets and sidewalks that are not pedestrian-friendly, accessible, or bikeable; excessive parking minimums for local businesses (and for housing) that create seas of asphalt or overbuilt parking structures, adding unnecessary cost and wasted materials to new construction; and overly complicated permitting and licensing procedures that deter new businesses. The City Council should take action to rewrite our zoning and other ordinances to remove or reduce these impediments to maintaining and creating vibrant villages.

**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.**

I have long been a supporter of mixed-use development in Newton because this type of development—especially on underutilized sites in our villages and/or sites that are currently zoned for obsolete uses—offers the best opportunity to diversify the City's housing stock (especially by creating smaller universally accessible, and more affordable homes), create a pool of permanently affordable housing (through the City's inclusionary zoning ordinance), and build in an environmentally sustainable way. Such development can also offer significant community benefits in the form of open space, infrastructure and utility improvements, transportation subsidies and support, and increased property tax revenues.

I was an active supporter of Northland (phone banked, sent emails, held signs, recorded a promotional video for the "Yes" campaign, and was listed as a supporter). I also supported Dunstan East (wrote letter to ZBA in strong support, with one suggestion for modification), Austin Street, Trio, Riverdale, and Riverside.

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

To encourage more diverse and locally owned businesses, I would support:

- Revising zoning and land use policies, e.g., zoning for smaller footprints in certain commercial areas, requiring large developments to lease some portion of their commercial space at a below-market rate as incubators for locally-owned, start-up businesses (“inclusionary zoning for retail”); broadening and expanding permitted uses to non-traditional uses such as “maker” and live-work spaces; and reducing parking minimums or allowing shared parking;
- Streamlining permitting processes to remove impediments to small businesses (for example, allowing uses under special permit to be changed administratively if the change is *de minimis* and meets certain criteria; simplifying permitting for temporary businesses, pop-ups, food trucks, one-day events);
- Devoting more resources in City Hall to identify, support, recruit, and promote small and/or minority- and women-owned businesses;
- Pursuing an affirmative marketing policy for City contracts aimed at minority- and women-owned businesses; and
- Funding small business grants.

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

The first step must be accurately identifying the major impediments to economic and racial equity in housing. As I wrote in an email to the City Council last April in support of the commendation to the Fair Housing Committee (FHC), the WestMetroHOME’s Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing Choice is essential for identifying such impediments. Many housing tools that could advance economic and racial equity are mentioned in that document, including:

- Reviewing/revising zoning ordinances for discriminatory effect;
- Assessing impact of local preference on affirmatively furthering fair housing (and revising as necessary);
- Budgeting resources for fair housing testing and identifying discriminatory practices in the private real estate market; and
- Providing education to landlords and brokers surrounding discriminatory rental practices.

In addition, other tools to explore could include: establishing an Affordable Housing Trust Fund; imposing a high-value real estate transfer tax to fund affordable housing; and creating a robust first-time homebuyers program.

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

I applaud the work of the FHC, Newton Housing Partnership, and City Council in evaluating whether to reduce or eliminate Newton’s local preference (currently 70%). Their analysis makes a compelling case that our current local-preference system disproportionately favors white applicants; however, I also worry about the impact on people with disabilities of dramatically reducing the local preference. Low-income people with disabilities face significant challenges finding accessible, affordable housing, and older adults with disabilities are the most cost-

burdened households. Our local preference policy should strike a balance between making affordable housing lotteries better tools for bringing diverse households into our community and assuring that people with disabilities already living here are able to secure the accessible, affordable housing they need. While I favor reduction of the local preference, I would like to see additional data on the likely impact on people with disabilities before specifying a new percentage.

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

Advancing racial equity and promoting inclusivity in Newton is an important goal that requires a mix of “hard” and “soft” actions to be successful, including:

- Streamlining of business permitting, small-business-friendly zoning, and more resources and programs aimed at minority-owned businesses (see response #5);
- New approaches to public safety, including those recommended by the Police Reform Task Force (e.g., creating a Newton Police Commission to build community dialogue and accountability, improving diversity in hiring and promotion, developing non-police response strategies for behavioral health crises and nuisance complaints, and improving overall training and communication);
- Promoting Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the City government through more diverse hiring, enhanced trainings, and creating a position of DEI Coordinator who would work across departments;
- Providing arts and culture programming that showcases the diverse backgrounds and experiences of Newton residents; and
- Elevating the voices of BIPOC and other minority residents and groups that support them (like FORJ).

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

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s recent report makes clear the urgent need to move rapidly away from our reliance on fossil fuels. Newton’s Climate Action Plan is an excellent blueprint for reducing the City’s carbon footprint, and continued implementation and codification of the plan should be a priority for the Council. The City has already adopted a number of the Plan’s recommendations. Some additional important measures include:

- Requiring electrification of new home construction and substantial renovations;
- Opting into the new net-zero Stretch Code when it is finalized;
- Zoning to promote transit-oriented, sustainably constructed multifamily development in/near commercial areas;
- Advocating to improve MBTA service on both commuter and T lines;
- Expanding first- and last-mile transportation options like NewMo 2.0;
- Providing more EV chargers and preferential parking in municipal and school lots;
- Approving additional solar installations on municipal buildings and parking lots; and

- Incentivizing reductions to the residential solid waste stream.

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

There's room for improvement in the current special permit (SP) process:

- First, SP outcomes often feel arbitrary to homeowners. Clarifying the criteria (with examples) or increasing the proportion of residential development applications that can be approved as-of-right could address this problem.
- The Council spends considerable time hearing SP applications, especially for small-scale residential projects. To free up the Council's docket for weightier matters, SP applications for small projects could be heard by the ZBA or Planning Board (which usually function as the SP granting authority elsewhere).
- Third, the SP process for large-scale development is often *de facto* a negotiation between the City Council and developers. This is not a straightforward or guaranteed method of ensuring that these projects reflect City goals. A more effective approach would be for the Council to proactively set clear development rules (including the preconditions from developers we desire), rather than relying on an open-ended, multiparty negotiation.

**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)**

Over my 26 years living here, I have been an active community volunteer and leader, working to strengthen our community and contribute to its vibrancy:

- From co-founding the Halloween Window Painting Contest in 1999...to (twice) serving on the board of Newton Community Pride...to chairing Newton Out Doors this past spring, I've led the way on activating our villages through engaging public art programs;
- I've supported our students through my work on the Peirce PTO and NNHS School Council;
- I worked to make educational opportunities more equitable as a founding member of the Global Education Leadership Fund;
- And I have helped guide the City's solid waste management as a member of the Sustainable Materials Management Commission.

I am also a lawyer and non-profit leader who has devoted much of my career to improving civic engagement, most recently as Executive Director of the League of Women Voter of Massachusetts.

I am committed to ensuring that Newton has a vibrant future.

