



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?

COVID response

Unfortunately, we must remain alert to the course of the pandemic, and respond nimbly to keep Newton families and businesses safe and secure in every way possible. We may need more CPA-funded rental assistance, more small business grants, and rules allowing continued outdoor dining and events throughout the city.

Infrastructure: Fortunately, ARPA funds allow us to reboot our capital plans: rehabilitating roads, sidewalks, schools, parks, water systems, a new senior center ... to improve quality, build capacity, and assure reliability/resiliency as we combat climate change. We must carefully prioritize and rigorously monitor all projects.

Zoning ReDesign: Laying the groundwork for a better future:

- Secure local economic health: the right balance
- Encourage compact housing close to transit in village centers
- Control building massing, scale and proportion
- Advance reasonable development standards:
 - Reduce parking requirements near public transit

- Increase building performance, solar/EV requirements, storm water controls

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

A village center becomes “vibrant” when people want to engage in the place. To foster that, we must allow for and incentivize a mix of uses that can be self-sustaining in large measure. Getting “feet on the street” – supports the local economy, which in turn must supply the goods, services and activities that serve the people. The city must allow, plan for and provide the essential infrastructure that can create inviting and accommodating **communal gathering spaces**. Generous, accessible, well-furnished sidewalks, outdoor dining and bistro cafes, street trees, landscaped plazas, pocket parks, public art, a venue for entertainment are things that make folks want to linger, build a sense of community. Accommodations for accessible parking and bike racks are necessary. More compact housing walkable to village centers served by public transit is key to getting the right mix.

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

e-commerce threatens village(VC) economies, current zoning inhibits development needed nearby to help patronize businesses, and although the city has been more assertive in the past ten years rehabilitating infrastructure, there is much work ahead. By zoning limiting building to only one story by-right in VCs, the natural progression of development up through the turn of the century has been undone, leaving strip malls where grand 3&4 story buildings once stood.

Solutions include: Allow 3-4 story buildings housing the uses we want in villages by-right, create public/private partnerships to foster and negotiate the development we want, advance rebuilding public ways accessible to all people, require active uses on ground floors and allow outdoor activity, including dining. Encourage shared work environments and organize shared parking, to make living/working convenient and walkable. Develop master plans, including gracious outdoor gathering spaces, landscaped sidewalks and plazas. Write clear rules for developers to design/build to.

- 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 voted for all projects listed that require special permits, each of which improved in important ways via discretionary review and robust public processes. Serving on the Land Use committee since 2010, I consistently advocated for superior building energy efficiency, durability, careful transit planning (TDM), accessibility/ good site circulation, commitments to improving city water systems and public amenities, and clear Council Orders. No project moves ahead without a thorough vetting.

All of the projects you list supply needed housing including deed restricted affordable units, exist in transit-accessible locations, provided public outdoor spaces and improve upon existing. Each of them helps to activate and revitalize a village economy. Each improves upon the last regarding quality, durability, energy efficiency and clean energy. Both completed projects in Newtonville, Austin Street and Trio, illustrate successful outcomes, despite contrary concerns. In particular, I proudly supported the outstanding Northland project.

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

I served on the Land Use committee when we grappled with this question. First for Trio, then Northland, we conditioned the developer to set aside a percentage of retail square footage for non-franchise local business. Trio complied and also provided space for a beloved local business, The Barn, enabling them to locate in this prime location at an affordable rent. The market determines this citywide, but Council can require mitigation when it has Special Permit granting authority. In addition, Council can explore creating rules to require floor area be made available to local businesses proportional to the development size, much like the inclusionary ordinance requires a percent of housing be affordable to a certain income levels. Finally, allowing temporary leases for “pop-ups” in vacant storefronts helps

to activate the street, provides some income for the building owner and can help new companies get started. Win-win.

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

Amending local zoning rules to facilitate more, various housing options affordable to a much wider spectrum of income earners, is key to furthering socio-economic diversity. We need both subsidized units to attain deeper affordability as well as more “missing middle” income housing, to accommodate next generations. Since 1953 Newton prohibits both multi-family (3+ units) housing and more than one story in village center districts/commercial corridors, except by Special Permit. This impedes development that may increase opportunity for more socio-economically diverse families to access housing. 2019 amendments require 20% deed-restricted units affordable at 50-80% AMI in larger developments; consider a higher rate. Lowering the local preference percentage may help diversify the pool, but there are other more serious barriers to address (see below). We must also require accessible affordable units, and find ways to subsidize units for low/ very low income families using local, state, federal HOME and ARPA funds.

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

I will support a much lowered percentage to the degree that it can make the applicant pools more equitable, perhaps to the level recommended by NHP, but am looking for more detailed information to understand what else needs to be done. I have concerns that this alone will not achieve the diversity we seek. I believe we should continue to provide affordable housing opportunity to folks who work and/or send their children to Newton schools. In addition, through the Zoning & Planning committee Council will investigate how the lease-up process, including credit and rental history reviews, impact the difference between the number of minority households accepted into the original pool versus how many are offered a unit. This information can be used to help determine whether and how Council can guide a more successful outcome by imposing oversight on this process.

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

Our city must not only be accessible financially to a range of income earners, but also welcoming in every respect. To me, this is about living the golden rule – treating everyone equally well. To a greater or lesser degree, most of us are unaware of biases we harbor toward others for superficial characteristics they may embody or the beliefs they embrace. Inclusivity means we all must work on understanding our own biases. We can educate ourselves on unconscious bias, take seminars offered to city employees who interact with the public (currently offered to staff and elected officials!) ... and make sure everyone has equal and unfettered access to all city programs and services. We can identify and expose discriminatory lending practices, hateful actions in our schools and places of work – and not tolerate mean-spirited discourse in the public realm.

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

We must carefully prioritize, set and meet interim goals, continually advance our understanding of viable technologies, strategies and funding, and move as quickly as we can be effective to implement all CAP actions. This is the greatest challenge of our time. Both as former chair of Public Facilities and current chair of Zoning & Planning, I have been deeply involved in developing/implementing the CAP.

The essence of the plan is twofold: to first reduce energy demand (reduce waste/ increase efficiency), then increasingly supply clean renewable energy to meet that (lowered) demand. This requires building new to the highest performance standards, improving existing building performance, electrification of buildings, vehicles and infrastructure to the greatest degree possible, using gas only for back-up power. It requires creating compact living units close to transit, reducing our dependence on single use vehicles. The toxic methane gas escaping nGrid's system under our feet needs urgent repair.

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

No. Although I see that the process has improved in some ways over the last decade, for example, by engaging quasi-professional entities like the Urban Design Commission to scrutinize design standards for larger projects, I would make some changes so that Council focus is on the larger projects that significantly impact the city, and not burden homeowners as much with protracted public review. I would draw distinctions between large and small projects and require only an administrative review for the latter. Our ordinances can set specific criteria for determining compliance according to policy goals that support only the development we want to encourage. More projects could then be approved “by-right” or with administrative review, by meeting certain well-defined criteria.

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)

I feel we are privileged and fortunate to live in a place like Newton. Even today, with C19, climate disasters wreaking havoc throughout our country and world, and some politicians seemingly oblivious to these realities, Newton – and much of New England, stand apart as havens of relative safety, sanity and security. We still have the ability and strength while mindful of these global issues, to continue improving our community and plan wisely for the future. I’m all in - sleeves rolled up - to continue our necessary work to repair, retrofit, restore, rebuild - and maintain - to keep the people’s place in shape, and to work hard to bring our community to consensus so that we can plan wisely and strategically for a brighter future for everyone.