



Newton City Council

Committee of the Whole Report

Wednesday, March 27, 2024

Present: Councilors Albright, Baker, Bixby, Block, Downs, Danberg, Farrell, Gentile, Getz, Greenberg, Grossman, Humphrey, Kalis, Krintzman, Laredo, Leary, Lipof, Lobovits, Lucas, Malakie, Micley, Oliver, and Wright

Absent: Councilor Kelley

Clerk's Note: The full Committee meeting can be viewed on the following link:

[03-27-24 Committee of the Whole Meeting](#)

#161-24 **Discussion on the findings from the Community Dialogue Working Group**
Councilors Bixby, Krintzman, Micley, Lobovits and Oliver, acting as the Community Dialogue Working Group, requesting time to present and discuss findings from the responses to the survey and public comment session. The conversation will include recommended actions for the council to evaluate, approve and act on.

Action: **Committee on the Whole Held 21-0 (Councilors Albright and Lucas Not Voting)**

Note: Councilor Oliver presented the attached presentation, explaining the work the Community Dialogue Working Group has done to come up with recommendations the City Council can take to address concerns raised in the survey and public comment session that was held. The working group read through the comments, came up with themes, and from those themes created recommendations.

Councilors expressed that a lot of the comments revolved around transparency and communication and felt there is a need for opportunities to engage with the public.

A Councilor noted that the initial discussion started with the communication around Newton Schools, but the survey highlighted there were questions that were broad across City government.

There was a discussion around Councilor office hours, with some Councilors expressing the need to balance responsibilities among all councilors, and it should be objective as possible. Some Councilors expressed concerns with public attendance at office hours, and the added time this would put on the

Councilors that might take them away from doing other duties they are responsible for as Councilors. It was noted it might be better to attend gatherings where there is already a large public attendance.

A Councilor expressed any information coming from the City Council should come from the Clerk's Office, as the Clerk works for all the Councilors and would work to ensure it is objective. Councilors expressed concern about the Clerk's Office being able to handle this added responsibility without additional staff. A Councilor noted that it is hard to be objective with many different opinions on subject matters.

A Councilor noted there is a lot of information available, but at times it is difficult to find. Noted that it might be good to have a spot on the website to make the information available.

A Councilor noted that he would like the working group to take some time and come up with more specifics on some of these recommendations, regarding how they would work, and turn them into action items for the Council to discuss.

A Councilor noted that in the past, there has been success with having Blue Ribbon Commissions.

A Councilor expressed that information and transparency concerning the City budget should be done through the Finance Committee, and not creating an additional group.

A Councilor expressed caution about having regularly scheduled meetings with the School Committee. If there is going to be a meeting it is felt there needs to be a particular reason for the meeting with a structured agenda. Noted it is important to remember the School Committee is an elected body with their own responsibilities.

A Councilor agreed with the division of responsibility between the City Council and School Committee, but noted it is important to know what each other is working on.

Councilor Block motioned to hold, which passed 21-0 (Councilors Albright and Lucas not voting)

The meeting adjourned at 8:10 pm.

**Respectfully submitted,
Marc Laredo, President**



Planning Session:
Community Dialogue Working Group

March 27, 2024



Agenda

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Background

Tonight is focused on councilor questions and discussion.

Themes

Ideally we will identify some number of our recommendations to execute, and identify who will be responsible for taking them forward.

Recommendations

Next Steps

Appendix

Mission

The working group will be charged with developing a set of specific recommendations as to how the City Council can help our community better understand our role, city finances.

Working with other city leaders, how can we best engage in efforts that foster trust and civility in the city.

Project Objectives

In defining the work for the group, these objectives will guide our decision-making

- Gather broad input from a variety of voices across the community
- Build both a public-facing knowledge base and strong relationships across the community
- Identify actions for the city council to further this mission
- Partner with leaders across the city to ensure a robust response to the community input gathered

Background

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Planning the work

1

Explore the Problem

1. How to best gather community input from Groups +/- individuals
2. Determine specific questions
3. Understand the Problem

2

What CC can Solve

1. Assemble and share the inputs
2. Recommendations to CC
3. Prioritize actions
4. Identify, engage other leaders to act

3

Launch CC Solutions

1. Identify the who, what, how, when for each action
2. Implement
3. Promote and engage
4. Measure response

4

Iterate / Improve

1. Determine what is working
2. Focus on wins
3. Iterate
4. Add new actions as needed



We are here : March 27th

Themes (cont'd)

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The following pages summarize our best interpretation and synthesis of the sentiment behind the vast majority of the comments and input received.

- The themes address the recent NTA strike and NPS, and attempt to encompass potential larger set of issues across the city
- We see this work as solving a portion of the larger challenge, therefore we focused on issues that the council can address as a whole, not as individuals
- Everyone is encouraged to read through the comments (the link is in the appendix of this document)

Themes (cont'd)

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In order to define specific actions resulting from the feedback, themes are organized into five categories

Communications and Transparency

Cooperation & Partnership

Knowledge Base

Schools & Students

“In the Crisis” Open Questions

THEMES THAT EMERGED FROM RESPONSES TO OUR SURVEY, PUBLIC COMMENT SESSION, AND MESSAGES FROM THE PUBLIC:				
COMMUNICATIONS + TRANSPARENCY	COOPERATION & PARTNERSHIP	KNOWLEDGE BASE	SCHOOLS & STUDENTS	'IN THE CRISIS' OPEN QUESTIONS
The City Council, School Committee and Mayor need to be more proactive and communicative. City officials need to share facts and opinions, making it clear which is which. Communications need to be clear as to WHO is sending the message.	City Council, School Committee, Mayor's office + departments need to find a better way to work together - to understand what each other is doing and the challenges they face. Working together is the only way to solve the problems we face (e.g., possible future overrides)	It is unclear how central functions of the city work - for example, the budget and related processes. Where does Newton's revenue come from, how is it allocated? Can we create different views of the budget to make it easier to follow along? Make it more visual?	Concerns about NPS - it's in decline, it's not a desirable place to work, it is in crisis (either it IS, or the perception is that it is). Need to address residual impact of pandemic, and the resulting shut down.	The city took too long to negotiate in good faith, and it should not have required that much time.
The communications coming from the city were hostile toward teachers and NTA in general. The tone was received as offensive and off-putting.	Can there be a 'single source' of actual truth available to the public when things like this happen? Or even on an ongoing basis?	Significant misunderstanding around which 'branch' of the city government is in charge of what (e.g., roles and responsibilities). Does the Mayor really have total control over the budget? Why is the Mayor part of the School Committee? Who or what is the Pension Board?	We lost our focus on kids - their experience, their challenges. Many of these concerns focused further on students with IEPs, and the legal implications of not fulfilling those plans.	The broader 'stage' for a teacher's strike has many unknowns; what were the NTA and MTA roles and goals? The courts? Role of the Mediator? What were the fines for and who received these funds?
Respondents wondered: what do the terms being discussed mean? (including terms such as free cash, overlay surplus, operating override v. debt-exclusion override)	Some feel discomfort with Newton's 'strong mayor' form of government. (i.e., Mayor has too much say over the budget / funding decisions. Residents should have more input.)	Regardless of who or where a respondent's information was gathered from, everyone else's motivations were questioned. Therefore, they were either 'lying' or publishing 'misinformation'; much of the available information was seen as useless, biased, or false.		Why did the teachers have to strike - as in why not continue working while negotiations were in parallel, ongoing?
There is a lack of 'open data' in Newton (reference to the Cambridge Open Data project); there should be a 'self-service' approach to data / data accessibility in Newton.				The information published during the strike 'from the negotiating room' was overly and obviously biased.
				All parties involved were both praised and criticized; gratitude was expressed to all parties by various respondents and many concerns raised about leaders, individuals, and entities / organizations

Recommendations

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The recommendations from the Working Group include actions for the city council's attention, and require support from councilors and others in gov't

We have also separated the higher priority recommendations; this is to generate dialog around actions the council can undertake more immediately, and have a larger impact

Existing guidelines for OML, Newton City Charter must be observed

	Recommendation	To Dos	Additional parties involved
1: The Work Continues	The city council will monitor and validate successful outcomes, determine if efforts are accomplishing their goals, if modifications are warranted. The Community Dialog Working Group (CDWG) continues to lead the projects.	- Set timeline of regular reports to Council from CDWG - Set realistic duration of this work.	- Members of CDWG
2: Public Engagement	Increase public input and engagement through establishing "Office Hours" style sessions staffed by members of the School Committee and City Council, and perhaps attended by NPS staff as well. These sessions would be intended as a forum for discussion, sharing ideas, and for residents to be heard directly. Many councilors already hold office hours or similar opportunities, this is not to replace that, but to have more group opportunities and to perhaps reach a wider group of residents. Perhaps some of these sessions would focus on certain themes and some would be open to discussion of any topics.	- Confirm plan with SC - Set number of sessions - Distribute attendance among Council and SC - Advertise to public - Hold sessions - Follow up to solicit feedback/measure impact.	- School Committee - NPS - City Staff
3: Collaboration	The City Council (CC) and School Committee (SC) need to work more closely together to understand the challenges and opportunities facing both groups and help share information on what's going on in the schools. Working together, both groups would create a cadence, agenda for combined meetings on a regular basis (quarterly? or more or less frequently?). As the Program & Services committee has responsibility for NPS-related topics, this would fall to their members to coordinate. The start of this conversation should start in Q2, 2024.	- Confirm plan with SC, P&S - Establish timeline for meetings	- School Committee - Programs & Services Committee
4: Transparency	Establish a group or commission that allows for an "independent analysis" of the City's budget and creates a report or presentation that would allow the public to understand and gain confidence in our budget, and allow for understanding of budget constraints (such as Prop 2.5, new growth, state funding), gaps, and shortfalls. This could take the form of a broader working group that includes members of City Government and the public, or an independent group.	- Decide on format of group and its exact mandate - Recruit members - Establish timeline of work - Group conducts their work, creates & presents final product - Create mechanisms for evaluation of recommendations or identified needs	- City Council representative - Mayor's office representative - Residents expert in finance, municipal finance - Expert in communications - Community members (review for clarity)
5: Communication	The City Council (as a group or whole) should increase proactive communications with the public. This should include compiling useful information on our section of the City website, reestablishing our newsletter, and potentially creating informational resources that would help convey information on Newton's government and our work to the public.	- Add a page of resources to CC "section" of newtonma.gov that includes shortcuts to useful tools & info - Council (with Clerk's office) create set of "explainers"- budget summary charts, how city works, glossary of terms - Initial version live within 3 months - create more content as we go after that - If staffing available, re-start Council newsletter with simple reports on Council's meetings and votes, key dates from Clerk's office, etc	- City Clerks Office - newtonma.gov Management representative
6: Debatable Positions	In order to generate more communications from a collaborative and single-source during a crisis period (strike, override initiative, other), we should create a group responsible for communicating on behalf of the city government. This group would be comprised of some equal # of city council, school committee and mayor's office members. There should be some number of community members either chosen or appointed by each of these city entities as well. Their goal would be to provide balanced information to the public about the events going on; they might publish a set of information, followed by 2 or more opinions or perspectives.	- Determine how the group functions in greater detail, as this MUST be seen as a trusted group both inside and outside of Newton govt - Determine composition of the group - Establish members (recruiting, nominating, etc)	- School committee - Mayor's office - Public appointees

Additional Ideas for Newton

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There were also specific thoughts shared in the responses that are best addressed across other branches of Newton government. Some examples:

Replicate the Cambridge Open Data Project

Joint School Committee & City Council calendar

Comparative school data for other municipalities

Create more opportunities for residents to be heard

Next Steps

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Ensure clarity for approved recommendations

Build, launch, monitor and iterate as needed

Provide updates on a regular basis

Appendix

Links

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The questions posed to the community can be found here: [Community survey](#)

The worksheet with [Full list of responses to survey \(as of March 19\), working group themes and recommendations](#)

Counts of self-reported demographics from survey respondents (through March 20).

Counts	
Parent of NPS student(s)	170
Resident (non-parent) of Newton	127
Parent of NPS student(s), Teacher	14
Parent of NPS student(s), Resident (non-parent) of Newton	12
Parent of NPS student(s), Teacher, Resident (non-parent) of Newton	4
Teacher	4
Teacher, Resident (non-parent) of Newton	4
Total	335

Planning Framework

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