



Newton City Council

Committee of the Whole Agenda

Monday, June 17, 2024

The City Council will meet in a Committee of the Whole on Monday, June 17, 2024, at 7:30 PM.

The City Council will hold this meeting as a hybrid meeting on Monday, June 17, 2024, at 7:30 pm, with the regular City Council Meeting to follow. This meeting will be held as a hybrid meeting and in-person in Council Chambers. To view this meeting using Zoom use this link: <https://newtonma-gov.zoom.us/j/82563825662> call 1-646-558-8656 and use the following Meeting ID: 825 6382 5662

- #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.
Committee on the Whole Held 21-0 (Councilors Albright and Lucas Not Voting)

Respectfully submitted,

Marc Laredo, President

The location of this meeting is accessible and reasonable accommodations will be provided to persons with disabilities who require assistance. If you need a reasonable accommodation, please contact the City of Newton's ADA Coordinator, Jini Fairley, at least two business days in advance of the meeting: jfairley@newtonma.gov or (617) 796-1253. The city's TTY/TDD direct line is: 617-796-1089. For the Telecommunications Relay Service (TRS), please dial 711.

Community Dialog Working Group

Final Report

Overview

The Working Group is sharing our final recommendations with concrete action steps for the Council to review and determine how to best proceed with these, or other, actions to improve communications, collaboration and information accessibility.

Background

In February, 2024, City Council President Laredo and Vice President David Kalis convened a working group of City Councilors to develop a set of specific recommendations as to how the City Council can help our community better understand city finances and, working with other city leaders, engage in efforts to create greater trust and civility in the city.

In March, the Council convened as a Committee of the Whole and discussed the community feedback the Working Group collected, as well as review initial recommended actions to address the issues raised within the feedback. The full Council suggested that the recommendations be edited to better leverage existing processes, meetings as well as work with more groups within the city.

Community Feedback

Out of the community feedback, there are several concerns that are shared across much of the commentary, all of which we believe are essential components to address as we move forward. We have condensed individual comments into several 'themes'. They require improving our communications, transparency, and partnership between 'branches' of Newton's government, as well as creating a [public facing] knowledge base.

Summary of Themes:

Communications & Transparency. Residents are seeking an objective source of information about topics including, but not limited to, the city budget, explanation of the acronyms and terms used within city documents, calendar of events, and materials to assist the understanding of the roles and responsibilities within Newton's government.

Cooperation & Partnership. While maintaining each of their primary responsibilities, there needs to be a heightened sense of collaboration between elected officials: the Mayor's office, City Councilors, and School Committee members. This extends to all city departments including the Newton Public School Department, the Superintendent, and the City Clerk's office for all relevant topics.

Knowledge Base. There is a concern that residents are unaware of many components of the functioning of Newton's government. Residents feel uninformed of many things,

including: budget allocations when and how personnel decisions are made, and program management. Residents would appreciate clearer visibility into this information.

Schools & Students. These comments center on the schools and our students: What are the primary concerns or challenges facing Newton Public Schools that they appear to be in 'crisis' mode? Why is morale so low among our teachers and staff, how is this impacting our students, those with IEPs - and what is being done about it?

'In the Crisis'. A broad set of concerns was expressed about experiences during the Newton Teachers Association Strike itself. The polarization and emotional force of the opinions shared became exacerbated. All communications were viewed as biased and incomplete.

These themes informed the direction of our recommendations, combined with the desire to ensure that the Council focuses our energies into known, existing properties and processes.

Tracking and Next Steps

It is our further intent that after one year, the CDWG or some other group within the Council be convened to gauge if these initiatives have demonstrated any benefit to the city. From that point we would then leverage successful activities to further this mission, and consider alternatives to increase success.

Recommended Initiatives

In order to address the concerns raised through the community feedback process, there are a small number of initiatives that will help address the collective concerns raised. The CDWG sought recommendations that are effective and only dependent upon existing resources within the city. We have engaged multiple individual stakeholders and group leaders to verify that these recommendations also work well for them and do not interfere with their normal activities.

These recommendations are primarily intended to integrate smoothly within existing structures, communications and scheduled meeting cadences.

1. Community Conversations

In-person or hybrid meetings between the community and city officials (elected and appointed) are critical touchpoints of engagement. Increasing the depth of the interpersonal connections is critical to overcoming the lack of trust expressed by residents of Newton and to offset the ‘anonymity’ of social media.

<p>Description</p>	<p>Establish in-person, informal interactions between the community and City Council, Mayor’s office and School Committee.</p> <p>Meetings can be considered a part of existing opportunities such as Village Days or Area Council or Neighborhood Association Meetings, or creating separate events in the community). This will encourage residents to engage on a topic of interest and to engage with their elected representatives. Ideally, residents should be encouraged to bring topics of their own to discuss in addition to any other ‘set’ agendas.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Invitations could be extended to city departments around projects of ‘high interest’. ● These are a mixture of structured and ‘open forum’ sessions ● Open meeting laws (OML) must be observed ● Community participation should be encouraged ● These events can be promoted via councilor newsletters, the new Council newsletter, area councils, etc.
<p>Outcomes</p>	<p>Create a broad sense of connectedness and accessibility between residents, elected officials and the city staff.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Participation from all councilors annually - Events scheduled in all 8 wards - Events scheduled at least quarterly
<p>Owner</p>	<p>Each Ward’s councilors are responsible for coordinating activity within their wards; this can be a combination of area council meetings, community sessions, or meetings with other groups, etc.</p> <p>Supported by area council leadership, SC, city departments as needed for high interest projects.</p>
<p>Timing and key steps</p>	<p>Each ward’s councilors should create a calendar that includes meeting location, times, topics. This should include events across the year, ideally quarterly.</p> <p>These can begin as early as Spring, 2024</p>

2. School Outreach

Increasing the 'connectivity' of the school community (parents, educators, students), the School Committee and the City Council is an important step to improve transparency across the city. We want to augment the collaboration to include the City Council when appropriate in the discussions that will organically create cross-body information sharing.

Description	<p>Bring city council / councilors into the already existing 'principal / superintendent coffee' chats that are coordinated via the PTOs. These are generally held by individual schools, therefore the City Council representatives from that school's footprint should be welcomed to attend to listen and contribute.</p> <p>The relevant City Councilors do not all need to attend every meeting, nor would it be required that all meetings include the councilors.</p>
Outcomes	<p>Engagement between the public and local School Committee and City Council representatives is critical.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased attendance at events - Stronger connection to elected officials - Improved communications between all parties
Owner	<p>PTO / Principals, as the goal is to maintain the existing owner of these meetings, leveraging an existing event that generates dialog with the school community.</p> <p>The change is adding the councilors as attendees; including council by ward or school footprint when the school serves multiple wards.</p>
Timing and key steps	<p>Begin this practice immediately on a rolling basis - per the existing practices.</p>

3. Newsletter

The Clerk’s office will create and publish a monthly newsletter of items of interest that have gone through the council and are on the docket within the next month. The rationale for the Clerk’s office owning this is to remain objective and prevent the need to gain approval from the entire council on content.

<p>Description</p>	<p>The Clerk’s office re-starting the newsletter will allow for a new information source about important changes in city ordinances and policies. The newsletter will also provide upcoming events, deadlines for elections, dog licenses, and information about what will be discussed at City Council meetings.</p> <p>The Council can offer content ideas, but the newsletter will be from the Clerk’s Office.</p> <p>This newsletter would need to be an OBJECTIVE discussion of the items going through the council. Items that have been and will be discussed. This is not a councilor newsletter.</p> <p>The city clerk will need to determine how to best choose topics / length of newsletter.</p> <p>How can we best generate a large recipient list?</p>
<p>Outcomes</p>	<p>Ultimately, the goal is an informed public that TRUSTS the information in this newsletter.</p> <p>We need to generate traffic and engagement, as well as positive feedback</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Volume of newsletters sent (registrations) as well as opens / clicks (engagement) with the content in the newsletters - Comments collected from user feedback (positive or negative)
<p>Owner</p>	<p>City Clerk and staff</p> <p>Support from City Councilors and city staff will be required for fact-checking, updates, and proof-reading.</p>
<p>Timing and key steps</p>	<p>This is dependent on the funding and hiring of a new part-time staff member, but targeting a Fall 2024 re-launch</p> <p>Ideally this would be a monthly deployment.</p>

4. Web page

The current city website and search function do not provide a positive experience when coming to find specific information. Even if you know exactly what you want, finding the right information can be very difficult and time consuming. This causes confusion, frustration and a sense of mistrust that can be reduced.

Description	<p>The City Council, working with the Clerk's office, will commit to gathering, publishing and promoting content that helps residents access constituent services and important city information to stay informed about city happenings.</p> <p>There are several content areas where clarity and simplicity is important:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Provide links or short-cuts to important documents that are seen as high-interest (e.g., budget, glossary of terms, roles & responsibilities, 311 tool, road maintenance schedules)- Ensure clear descriptions of these links are included- Avoid duplication of content that exists on the City website
Outcomes	<p>We will use a few measures to understand the relative effectiveness of this work:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Page visits to new content- Clicks on links on these pages- Volume of newsletters sent (registrations) as well as opens / clicks (engagement) with the content in the newsletters- Comments collected from user feedback (positive or negative)
Owner	<p>City Council's CDWG to gather initial content, publish it to the site, then on an ongoing basis, ask for support from Clerk's Office, City IT, City Councilors.</p>
Timing and key steps	<p>Clerk Carol Moore to help determine what level of effort would be required</p>

5. Collaboration

Increasing the information sharing between Newton Public School leadership, the School Committee and the City Council will facilitate a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing the city as a whole. While each group will maintain their primary responsibilities, this exchange is important to protect and promote.

Again, leveraging existing meetings as often as possible, the intent here is to exchange information and to strengthen the dialog between these entities.

Description	<p>This represents another opportunity to leverage existing properties to improve collaboration across branches of the city gov't.</p> <p>The Superintendent, School Committee [which includes the Mayor] will be invited to join the Programs & Services committee meeting on a regular basis (2x annually or perhaps quarterly). Topics can be identified as needed, and should consider budgeting, new or unmet Newton Public School needs, and reporting on special projects.</p> <p>Additionally, the School Committee should set aside time for members of the City Council to join special sessions, and participate when the agenda includes issues for the City Council to consider.</p>
Outcomes	<p>The exchange of information around the state of Newton Public Schools and the "city side" is the most important outcome. Success will be holding at least 2 sessions per calendar year.</p>
Owner	<p>Chair of Programs & Services for city council committee meetings, Chair of School Committee for School Committee meetings.</p>
Timing and key steps	<p>Timeline discussion</p>

6. Explainers

Making the workings of the city more accessible to the public is an important attribute of transparency; residents need to understand how things work in order to meaningfully participate in public discussions about how Newton operates.

Leveraging existing content around topics like the city budget, the roles and responsibilities of the branches of city government, our goal with this effort is to ‘wrap’ existing documents with explanations of how they fit into the ‘big picture’ and why they matter.

Description	<p>The topics that we explain are meant to be relatively important and broad enough so that our audience can then explore additional topics and build a sense of understanding of the functioning of the city. Large topics of interest would become the starting point for residents to explore additional issues of interest.</p> <p>These explainers would be shared with the public via the city website, newsletters and councilor newsletters.</p> <p>Sample topics include the city budget and approval process, and roles and responsibilities of the branches of city government (Mayor, School Committee, City Council).</p> <p>These can take almost any form (slides, written documents, spreadsheets, videos).</p>
Outcomes	<p>Engagement - These materials will be deemed successful if they are watched, downloaded, viewed.</p> <p>Interaction - if this material is referred to by the public in their newsletters, discussions; if they are asking questions about the content.</p>
Owner	<p>Budget, budget process would be a project for the council’s Finance committee chair to lead, with support from the comptroller and the Newton Public School CFO.</p> <p>Roles and responsibilities across branches of the Newton city government would need to be led by a volunteer each from the Council, School Committee and Mayor’s office.</p>
Timing and key steps	Timeline to be determined

7. Training

Building trust between the community and Newton’s gov’t and elected officials is going to take effort and intentional changes in behavior. While there are different approaches that can be learned and practiced, the FranklinCovey methods have been around for some time, and generate strong results and positive reviews. (visit their site here)

Attending the same training across all branches of the Newton government will provide additional benefits in utilizing a shared language / lexicon that will accelerate understanding. Our collective ability to demonstrate integrity, positive intent and build a track record of results together will pay dividends in creating trust within the community.

<p>Description</p>	<p>Train elected officials to lead with Trust; conduct <i>Speed of Trust</i> training sessions for NPS, elected officials and key public-facing employees. Provide our elected officials with the skills to build trust via listening and speaking habits that are aligned across the branches of city government.</p> <p>The proprietary content of this program is designed by FranklinCovey, and is founded by the author of ‘The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Leaders’. Focused on the ‘four cores of credibility’, the course exposes and challenges participants to See, Speak and Behave in ways that build trust.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Integrity ● Intent ● Capability ● Results
<p>Outcomes</p>	<p>Full success would be to have 100% of the city council, school committee, key customer-facing leaders by department within the city to take this training. Feedback from participants who have had an opportunity to practice new habits will be critical to this program’s ongoing success.</p> <p>Success will ultimately come in the form of a stronger relationship between the public and city officials.</p>
<p>Owner</p>	<p>A volunteer from each of the city council, the school committee, NPS, Newton HR, and the mayor’s office.</p> <p>This group would be responsible for coordinating training locations, date / time and participants.</p>
<p>Timing and key steps</p>	<p>TBD</p>

Tracking and Next Steps

It is our further intent that after one year, the CDWG or some other group within the Council be convened to gauge if these initiatives have demonstrated any benefit to the city. From that point we would then leverage successful activities to further this mission, and consider alternatives to increase success.

Time Commitment

In an effort to be sensitive to existing commitments and calendars, we are looking to leverage existing meetings, events, and properties as frequently as possible. The table below is based on best assumptions and planning available to use at the time of this writing.

Estimated ANNUAL Time commitments (in hours)						
	Individual City Councilor	Comptroller	City Clerk	Individual School Committee Member	PTOC / School PTO Board Member	NPS Superintendent
Community Conversation	4* (2 meetings @ 2/mtg)	0	0	4* (2 meetings @ 2/mtg)	0*	0
School Outreach	3 (3mtgs @ 1/mtg)	0	0	0*	0*	0*
Newsletter	0	0	tbd	0	0	0
Web Page	4**	0	tbd	0	0	0
NPS, Council Collaboration	4*	0	0*	4* (2 mtgs @ 2 / mtg)	0	4* (2 mtgs @ 2 / mtg)
Budget Summary	8***	8***	0	0	0	0
Training	4	0	4	4	?	4
Total (Additional Time)	16	8	4	4	0	4

* Assumes no ADDITIONAL commitment

** This is completely discretionary to participate in. Assumes zero required time, but there would ideally be minor participation on a regular basis.

*** This would ideally be less; assumes that the task is identifying the small # of charts to create from existing data, create those charts, consolidate and publish.