

Newton Urban Tree Commission
Meeting May 17, 2024 7:45 am
Minutes

Attendance:

Members: Barbara Darnell, Ruth Goldman, Julia Malakie, Marc Welch, Beth Wilkinson, Julie Winsett.

Guest: Judith Boroschek & Peter Barrer

VOTE: To Approve the minutes: Julia had some questions about meaning of sentence in Feb. 2024 minutes related to 2014 tree ordinance. Change the structure of the “proposed” set-back or by right, and ANSI.

February & March Minutes approved with four changes to February.

Peter Presents on Gas Leaks:

Methane is a huge contributor to GHG emissions and gas leaks release a lot of methane. He is part of an effort to map gas leaks and proximity to street trees. If root zone of tree crosses into the space occupied by the leak, it shows up on Peter’s map. They are not measuring impact on trees, just tracking the trees proximal to leaks. National Grid data is reported - depending on their measurements. National Grid is required to respond to complaints of leaks, and they are required to walk the streets and survey once a year. Newton has 500 leaks. Big leaks are over 2,000 square feet of leak area. Maps are updated quarterly. Large Norway Maple near a leak is in good condition.

Installing new gas pipes is very expensive. \$23M spent on new gas lines and \$3M on fixing pipes. They fixed a lot more leaks than replacing new pipes. The database and maps show new pipe and where it is and what is targeted for grants to replace gas pipes.

Many questions about specifics of where pipes have gone in.

Peter is working on this with his son, and they have a lot of volunteers working and contributing, including summer high school students. Public website: www.gaspipes.org This is state-wide map. Available for advocates in other cities. Coordinating with “multi-town” gas leaks initiative. Trying to fix leaks rather than replace pipes - faster, more cost effective. 8 years to replace leaks if not dangerous and 2 - 3 years for environmental damage, and largest leaks are Significant Environmental Impact and must be replaced within one year.

Overall the number of leaks and extent of leaks is going down, but every year there are more leaks. Newton is one of the leakiest gas system areas - because it is big, old and may have more reporters. It is not per square foot of road.

Collect data to push action. Had a meeting with the city and National Grid but city cannot push National Grid; they can only meet and encourage. Meet with state reps - the real action is at the state level. There is hope that this legislative session will result in a good crackdown on gas leaks. Cindy Cream is taking the lead on this.

Big thanks to Peter for the presentation and all his work and that of volunteers! Peter is enjoying it and learning a lot and producing a lot of good data!

Forestry Department Update:

Fairly quiet time period. Small amount of tree planting - big planting in fall. Tree Conservancy planted about 80 trees. Tree pruning and some removal - other requests. Risk tree removal and service requests. Going to be able to expand staff once the city budget is passed. By July, should have more staff. Optimistic that it won't take too long. 4 positions, including the vacancy to fill.

Tree removal requests: MA Highway tree requests - encourage them to leave one of them as it doesn't make sense to remove.

Are street tree plantings and process clear to people? Beth had a neighbor who got a new street tree and wants another and was going to plant an oak. She wanted to know if the site plans by Newton Tree Conservancy are communicated - appropriate location and appropriate tree.

Beth: someone sent out a message about lilac trees going in on Center Street. Marc: we plant lilac trees, not a lot, but some. He would have to check on where/when they were planted. Marc does plant some. He does not have success with them after a couple of years. It's hard to find under wire trees and he's purchased some of them. There are a bunch on Center Street near the Greek Orthodox on Homer. They are big now and likely 15 years old.

Gas Leaks: Beth: do we go back and look at the maps and if we are moved to action. If we looked and saw all the leaks near trees - say to administration - we are concerned that all this work is going into the tree department and we want to stop the destruction of it. Marc cannot quantify the impact of gas leaks completely, but will keep it in mind with future planting sites. It's not totally precise. Marc will add leak detection equipment in the future. Right now, he cannot say how many trees are lost or prevented from being planted right now. The study 15 - 20 years ago - 200 of tree removals were in the presence of a gas leak. In the same time, 2,000 trees died - majority was not from gas. The prevention of tree plantings because of a leak is the bigger issue. Already lost ground from 1989 - 2000 when no trees were planted. It is definitely an issue.

Julia: have you priced out gas leak detection equipment? Would it be collective bargaining issue? Marc: that would not be an issue, but this is not yet a priority. It's a technology issue - will get there in next 2 - 3 years. Especially with added administrative support though some of it is eaten up by new tree ordinance.

Newton Tree Conservancy has someone who does leak detection. There are various types of detection equipment at various price points.

Marc: thinks they will get the equipment just finding time to do so.

Julie: Their neighborhood did a tree planting about 5 - 8 years ago with Tree Conservancy and there were several houses that couldn't have trees because of gas leaks and they have not been addressed yet. 2018 Spring and Fall plantings.

Sounds like we are set to look at Peter's maps further, Barbara said we could support them if they go to speak to the city again.

Julia suggests that Peter go to Public Facilities and present.

New Business

Beth: new white oaks growing in City Hall Pollinator Garden and a volunteer is pulling them up and repotting them - would someone like them?? Marc said they could go in a Park. Makes more sense that they are likely Red Oaks. Beth will work it out farther.

Julia: suggested seedling sale at the community farm. Just give them away.