

Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council

Meeting Minutes, September 5, 2019

Area Council members attending:

Bruce Blakely, Bob Burke, Carol Clark, Barbara Darnell, Groot Gregory, Nathaniel Lichtin, Srdjan Nedeljkovic, Bill Roesner, Amy Wayne

Ex Officio:

City Councilor John Rice

Guests: None.

Note that this truncated meeting was an extra-ordinary meeting held at the former Emerson School in Newton Upper Falls to coincide with the Ward 5 City Council Debate organized by Newton's four Area Councils. The meeting took place immediately prior to the debate.

Meeting called to order at 7:13 pm. Srdjan Nedeljkovic taking minutes.

Administrative Items:

Approval of the August Minutes:

A motion was made by Amy Wayne to approve the August minutes with revisions to include the names of the police officers who attended the meeting. This was accepted 8:0, with 1 abstention from an Area Councilor who was not present at the August meeting.

Treasurer's Report:

The Treasurer's Report was submitted to Area Council members by Groot Gregory. It was noted by John Rice that the Hyde Community Center has deposited \$4000 of income and donations from Village Day. Area Council Treasurer Groot Gregory noted that \$5000 was collected. On behalf of the Hyde Community Center, John Rice has requested \$1000 donation to the Hyde Concert Series. The Area Council has made this donation in previous years to support the summer programming. Groot proposed a motion that the Area Council donates \$1000 for the Hyde Concert Series. Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin brought forth this motion, and a unanimous vote was made to approve a donation of \$1000 to Hyde Community Center to support the Concert Series.

Nathaniel also noted that Steve Feinstein, Chris Pitts, and Maureen Oakes will be getting gift certificates to O'Hara's for their service for Village Day.

Agenda Items for Future Area Council Meetings:

Area Council President Lichtin brought forward several topics for discussion at future Area Council meetings.

1. Marijuana dispensary applications. There are apparently 4 applicants to open a marijuana dispensary at sites in Four Corners. The City will allow only one of the petitions to be approved. At this time, there is a petition to open a facility at the former Apgujung restaurant site at 1114 Beacon Street. The recently proposed housing project is no longer applying for a permit at this site. There are two proposals for at the former Edible Arrangements property at 1136 Beacon Street. And there is one proposal by the company Union Twist at 1158 Beacon Street. The Area Council will invite the petitioners to present their proposals to the community at a future meeting.
2. NewCAL project. The city is in the process of developing a proposal for a Newton Center for Active Living, which will be a multigenerational facility with dedicated space and programming for senior citizens. John Rice will discuss the size and scope of the proposed project at one of the Area Council's upcoming meetings.
3. Climate Action Plan. The city will be deliberating about a proposed Climate Action Plan. The Area Council in the past has discussed and commented on the city's Climate Vulnerability Plan. An additional plan regarding climate resiliency has been proposed by the Citizen's Commission on Energy. The Area Council will bring up this topic up at a future meeting. Area Councilor Groot Gregory will contact Ann Berwick to invite her to attend.
4. Invitation to Mayor Fuller to attend a future Area Council meeting. Council president Nathaniel Lichtin proposed that we invite Mayor Fuller to an upcoming meeting to hear concerns and receive feedback from the community about local issues. Nathaniel will contact the Mayor's office to schedule her attendance.

City Updates:

Climate Action Plan: A public hearing is scheduled for November, so comments are due before that time.

Northland Development proposal: A hearing is scheduled to take place on September 10 before the Planning and Development Board. The Board may vote to approve to change the zoning at the site for what is required for the project. The Land Use Committee is scheduled to have a discussion about the Northland Development Special Permit on September 11 and September 24. There will be a public hearing about the Washington Street Vision Plan on September 9.

Nathaniel Lichtin announced that The Newton Cultural Council is offering grant funding to support community cultural events, so all interested parties are welcome to apply.

Meeting Adjournment:

The meeting was adjourned at 7:28 PM.

Ward 5 City Council “Ward Councilor” Debate:

Disclaimer:

Note that the following text is not a verbatim transcript of the debate. This information is being provided to give those interested an overview of what was discussed at the debate. Due to the fast nature of some of the responses, certain comments may have been left out. Candidates are certainly welcome to clarify or add to anything written here.

Introduction:

Newton Upper Falls Area Council President Anil Adyanthaya opened the forum by introducing the Ward 5 councilor debate. The debate is being held on behalf of the 4 Area Councils in Newton: Upper Falls, Newton Highlands, Waban, and Newtonville. Anil made a quick announcement about parking at the former Emerson School and locations where parking is not permitted. He also informed the audience that Upper Falls Village Day will be taking place on September 15. Anile then introduced the debate moderator for the evening, Ms. Marjorie Arons Barron, a Newton resident who is former editorial director at WCVB Channel 5.

Debate Moderator Statements:

Marjorie Arons Barron announced that the Preliminary Election for Ward councilor is taking place on Tuesday, September 10, in one week.

Ms. Barron set the ground rules for the debate. The debate is scheduled for a full hour. Each candidate will have 45 seconds for an opening statement. After opening statements, there will be several rounds of questions. Candidates will have a 45 second limit to response. The goal is to encourage a discussion to provide insight to each candidate. Marjorie noted that she will help manage the conversation. Afterwards, questions will be taken from the audience. At the end of the debate, the candidates will then wrap up with closing statements.

Rena Getz is a scientist by profession and has been an active Newton parent. Lived in Waban for 25 years and has served on the Waban Area Council. Bill Humphrey has had a career in digital media. Kathryn Winters has lived in Newton for 19 years with husband and 4 children. Has held a number of leadership positions and is now president of the Waban Area Council

Opening Statements:

Rena Getz. Was born in Spain, and has lived in different parts of the world. Has the richness of multicultural sensitivity. Has learned to listen to people. It is important for a Ward Councilor to listen to her constituents. As a scientist, she can delve deeply into studying data. She has grown to know the community over the past 25 years.

Kathy Winters. Grew up outside of Schenectady New York, and then was a student at Boston College. She went to Georgetown Law School, then eventually moved to Newton and has lived here for 19 years. She has been very involved in the community and joined the Waban Area

Council when it was formed. Through her work on the Area Council, Kathy believes in respectful dialogue and aims to build consensus. She feels motivated to step up to the role of a Ward councilor and work to move Newton forward.

Bill Humphrey. Grew up in Newton, went to Newton Public Schools. Participated in discussions about mayoral election as a student in 2008 and 2009 and was a student activist. He then studied political science at University of Delaware. Bill has been involved in various campaigns in Newton. He is an advocate for affordable housing and supports the fight for rights of immigrants. He is a 5th generation resident with roots in Newton. Bill believes that we should be a community for everyone and that everyone should be welcome here.

Questions from Ms. Barron:

Note: Questions were developed by representatives from the Area Councils and then certain questions were selected at Ms. Barron's discretion as debate moderator.

Marjorie: Are there current or past councilors who have inspired you and who you look towards as models?

Kathy's role model is John Rice, and how responsive he is to constituent concerns. He has done a wonderful job in community building. Councilor Rice is good at getting things done in a quiet and efficient way. He is a model Ward councilor and I have his endorsement.

Bill's role model and mentor is Susan Albright, the Ward 2 at-large councilor. Bill noted that he has worked with many city councilors. He has worked on housing issues and immigrant right issues.

Rena's role model was Brian Yates. She worked with him on three of his election campaigns. The Ward has lost an incredible human being in Brian's passing this March. She feels that Brian did a wonderful job in representing the City and Upper Falls.

Marjorie: How do you balance preferences of Ward residents compared to needs and perceived needs of the city at large?

Bill states that he has knocked on more than 5800 doors to talk to as many people as possible to better understand views of voters in the Ward. He doesn't see a conflict between the interests of people in the ward and the city as a whole. He will be representing Ward 5 and will act in the best interests of the city. Bill does not assume that public opinion is fixed, and believes people may change their mind based on how an elected official leans towards one solution or another. He does not think that there are any issues for which there is a conflict between what Ward 5 voters desire and what is desired by other Wards in the city.

Kathy states that she will be a voice for the Ward, and will insure that ward issues can be raised at the City level so that other councilors will respond.

Rena feels that a Ward representative should be a voice for her community. Since she will be elected by constituents from this ward, Rena believes that her primary responsibility is to represent the viewpoints of her constituency. There may be a role for mediation, but Rena intends to reflect the prevailing opinion of voters in her ward.

Marjorie: What are the most important issues you will face, and what are your top three priorities?

Kathy: My top priority is to improve the streets and sidewalks. We need to have complete sidewalks, and adequately paved streets. Ward 5 is a place that residents should be able to walk to amenities. We need to fix sidewalks and support traffic calming. We need a comprehensive plan to make Newton accessible to pedestrians.

Rena: My top priority is development. The constituency needs to be engaged and involved in the process. This is one of the most impactful issues we are facing in Newton. We need to engage the constituency in discussions about the proposed new zoning code such that we understand the impacts of development.

Bill: My top priority is to fix the roads and sidewalks. Bill wants to take bold action on the environment and the climate crisis. Bill supports efforts to provide affordable housing.

Marjorie: Please talk about Newton as the Garden City and balancing historic preservation and the rights of individual property owners.

Rena: We need to be stewards of our community and protect open space. We need to respect historic preservation, and it is important to value open space and the history of our community. We need to value trees and recreational open space. We need to balance property rights and historic preservation. There are some buildings that should be preserved. We need to have engagement from residents for Village Center planning.

Bill: The concept of Garden City is looking backwards. Bill noted how one of his relatives from the 1800s complained that how an nearby property was to be sold for houses, but that these new houses and their inhabitants were later valued in the community. Some of these kinds of changes happen and it's a question of managing these changes. Many people who live in new homes get to know existing residents and become a welcome part of the community. Bill wants to preserve village centers, preserve our green space, but not necessarily make every building a historic preservation project.

Kathy: We are still living in the Garden City. This is what drew our family to Newton. Nobody wants less green space or open space. In balancing private interests to the wishes of the public, it is important that we come up with clear rules and that we reduce teardown vulnerability. Tremendous carbon emissions are related to tear downs and new builds. It should not be the case that you can never tear down a building. Kathy intends to try to reduce teardown vulnerability through dimensional controls.

Marjorie: What are your thoughts about a former proposal to establish a Newton Highlands Historic District.

Bill: Understands that an effort took place to create a historic district in Newton Highlands but that the effort failed and has not been floated again. He is not sure if it's a good idea.

Rena: Historic preservation is important and has value. Some people may have a misunderstanding of what it means to be within a historic district. There is value in having some sort of historic preservation of significant buildings. Buildings that are 100 years old should have the right to be 200 years old. It is more environmentally sound to modify houses and add to them, rather than tear them down.

Kathy: Agrees with Rena, historic districts can be valuable. Establishing a historic district requires education, and she will only be supportive if the residents of the proposed district are supportive.

Marjorie: Please discuss development. Some communities have put a moratorium on new development. Would you put a moratorium to slow down the changes associated with development?

Kathy: We are part of a region that is facing a housing shortage and we haven't developed a lot of housing in recent years. Kathy would not support a moratorium on multifamily housing. For single-family housing, Kathy believes we need to provide clear rules about future development.

Rena: A moratorium is a pause, and is typically intended to be short term. Rena hopes that we do not get to a point to require a moratorium on development. The new zoning code will hopefully provide context-based rezoning of our community. There needs to be a long term process to educate the community to understand and apply the new zoning proposal to their own properties. We need to spend time to understand the zoning code.

Bill: Does not support a moratorium. A pause will not stop the changes that are proposed, and will only delay them. Many working class people will not be able to find work while there is a moratorium. Bill believes that we need overall zoning code reforms. From an affordable housing standpoint, if we are taking away modest homes and replacing them with giant homes, this is not good for natural affordability. Large homes tend to be so large and are often occupied by small families such that their energy use is so high that it offsets any environmental gains from improved energy efficiency standards. Bill is concerned about clear cutting of trees with some development proposals.

Marjorie: We have a special permitting process that is considering rezoning at sites in the city that may generate 11,000 new residents in Newton in the next few years. This includes Northland, Riverside, and other high-density projects on Washington Street. How much growth can Newton sustain?

Rena: We in the city need to decide how large we want to become. We need to consider infill development. It is important to understand that we have an accessory apartment ordinance that

almost every single-family dwelling can add an accessory apartment to the house. Large projects are asking for waivers outside of normal zoning. We need to understand what is the mitigation, and how will the community benefit from these builds? Is it of benefit to the City of Newton to have high-density sites that may not be sustainable? We need a roadmap for master planning.

Kathy: She doesn't agree with Rena's framework of thinking. Kathy believes that we need to consider more than just if we in Newton will benefit from a development proposal. We cannot ignore that we are part of the larger Boston region. We are facing a housing shortage and affordability crisis. All cities need to participate in developing housing. We cannot just look at it and consider only if development benefits just Newton. Kathy is cognizant that some developments will have impacts on neighbors, traffic, and school enrollment, but these are issues to address with developers and to mitigate.

Bill: The issue with growth is not if it should happen, but it is where and what, and what it looks like. Privately owned parcels will probably be subject to development, and we need to negotiate to get the best possible project that we can. I will go into the negotiations and ask for modifications to get us to environmental sustainability, to make sure that the development does not depend on fossil fuels, and to insure what level of affordable units are available. As a progressive, Bill stated the need to evaluate development through the lens of a progressive agenda. Bill noted that the real estate market treats housing as a commodity, and that we need to respect property rights when it comes to development.

Rena: We have real estate investors making investments for market driven reasons due to the desirability of our location. Rena is concerned that some developers may be taking advantage of our community and making it an asset for their development. We have a stressed infrastructure, and we need support and mitigation for roads, traffic, and schools.

Marjorie: What if the proposed Northland project creates the need for 70 elementary school students? Does there need to be a new elementary school in Upper Falls?

Kathy: She is familiar with a report that projects there may be declining student enrollment. Kathy is skeptical of new projections that predict declining school enrollment. As housing is expensive, families will be willing to move to apartments in Newton to access the schools. She would like to negotiate with Northland about more school space.

Bill: We may need to talk about another school due to higher enrollment, and it may need to be here in Upper Falls.

Rena: Rena believes that a new school belongs on the Northland site, at the site of the proposed community building.

Marjorie: Development and population growth has an impact on roads traffic, and transit. Is our traffic congestion a problem that you could address as a City Councilor?

Bill: Transit is a state issue, and public transportation is funded by the state. Discussions with the state will be the key to addressing congestion. Much of the traffic on Needham Street is pass-

through traffic commuting in and out of Boston. This is a regional issue, and the city needs to work with the state. At the local level, the city can make changes to the design of streets to improve traffic flow.

Kathy: Traffic has been worsening, and it has not been due to development in Newton. Needham's population is projected to grow 20%. We do not have a lot of control over what happens outside of Newton. We need to continue to lobby the state for improved transit, pursue shuttle services, and collaborate with Needham on electric shuttle system.

Rena: Traffic and transportation is a regional problem. We need to put tax dollars into transit. We need to support free transit. Cars will be smaller and more efficient in the future. As individuals, we need to think of not taking too many car trips, and to try to plan for only one car trip per day.

Marjorie: In a discussion of development and affordable housing, do you believe that developments with a small amount of affordable units are the best way to create housing in Newton?

Rena: Austin Street is not meeting the need to provide truly affordable housing by using 80% Area Median Income standards. We need a maximum 50% AMI to have affordability. At Austin Street, there are 2/3 of units that are on market for \$4000 for a one bedroom and over \$6200 for a two bedroom. These are exorbitant costs. We need to support naturally affordable units. We need small footprint builds. We need a higher percentage of subsidized units. The city should consider establishing community land trusts.

Bill: Supports community land trusts. We cannot solve affordable housing problems by setting aside only 15% to 20% of units as affordable. Bill is concerned about high rents within a building subsidizing low rent units.

Kathy: We have no other way to develop affordable housing, and the development process is the best way we have right now to increase the stock of housing.

Rena: We need to be creative. We have a strong desire from residents who want to address this issue and give back to our community, and this could increase interest in creating more accessory apartments.

Marjorie: Do you expect that Mayor Fuller will propose tax override and will you support it or oppose it?

Bill: Doesn't know of any specific plans for a tax override. He supports a specific override to help fund certain projects, and to retrofit city buildings to reduce reliance on fossil fuels. This type of energy action will be a necessity.

Kathy: We are on sound financial footing. But we have pension and employee benefits that are dependent on sustained high investment returns. Every year our contributions to pay for these

obligations increases by 9.6%, but our tax levy increases by 4.5%. We need to grow our commercial tax base, or we will need another override.

Rena: OPED and pension liability is fully funded until 2030, and then we will pay off the retirement fund by 2040. Concerns about impact of a potential tax increase on fixed income residents. Her support for an override will depend on the specific reason for an override, and how we consider those who cannot pay into the system.

Candidates ask questions: The next part of the debate was one in which the candidates asked questions of one another.

Kathy's Question: She has had the ability to work with people of different perspectives and consider views of others. What in your background prepares you to work well with other city councilors?

Bill: Bill responded that he has been working with city councilors on a range of issue, and that he has had good relationships with everyone. In his former job as a senior editor, this involved working with high-level cabinet members and others who had sensitive personalities. Bill noted he was successful in these sensitive situations.

Rena: Rena stated that she has a background in learning how to listen to others, and recognizes the need to interpret what someone is saying. Being a parent teaches you a lot in life. It teaches you how to live with a group of other people. Rena has been on the Waban Area council. She has worked with councilors on many issues and topics to reach consensus.

Bill's Question: Bill asked the two candidates, Rena and Kathy, who have been serving on the Waban Area Council, what position did you take on Engine 6 and about other recent development proposals in Waban?

Rena: Rena stated that she is proud of the work that Engine 6 supporters have done. Even though the housing proposal did not go forward, what came out of it is that there are now criteria for projects in terms of fulfilling fair housing rules. Also, we have benefited from 10 -12 units of ne housing at the Gold Meir house. In terms of the development projects proposed recently in Waban, Rena stated that she supported historical preservation in the village center. For the St. Philp Neri site, Rena would have liked to have seen the old church saved and reconfigured to accommodate multiple housing units at the site. However, the developer did not choose to go forward with this option.

Kathy: Regarding the Engine 6 decision, Kathy stated that this predated her role on the Waban Area Council. At that time, she did not have a position on Engine 6, but this issue got her involved in local concerns. Regarding St. Philip Neri, Kathy noted that she had worked with developer to connect with community, and sat through many meetings with neighbors and tried to facilitate dialogue. The neighbors and the developer reached a compromise on that site. Kathy also noted that a developer has filed special permit for 24 units behind Waban Market, and that the neighbors are supportive of development at the closed nursing home.

Rena's Question: Are there buildings that are deserving of historical landmarking? The other candidates did not comment.

Questions from the Audience: About 50 people attended the debate, and a period of time at the end of the debate was set aside for a few questions from the audience.

Question #1: A resident expressed her concern about climate change and that buildings are not energy efficient, and that new projects are not getting built with solar panels. Would you advocate requiring positioning of buildings to have more solar energy in the city?

Bill noted that he has been endorsed by the Sierra Club and has the support of multiple other progressive organizations. He is concerned about developments reliance on fossil fuels and believes there is a need to be taking a firm line so that we are off of fossil fuels. Bill noted that he is 28 years old, that we all agree that this is a pressing emergency, and that we cannot be flexible on this point of eliminating reliance on fossil fuels

Kathy stated that she isn't certain if state law allows these kinds of requirements for solar and other alternate energy sources for new development. However, we can require education and discuss the opportunities with developers.

Rena noted that the city's Climate Mitigation Plan includes a solar plan, and stated that we should advocate through the special permit criteria to include solar with regards to large development projects. For private property owners, we need an education campaign. Rena supports the need to get off of fossil fuels.

Question #2: What remaining green spaces are there in Ward 5, and what would you recommend to improve them?

The candidates responded with a listing of Lincoln Field, Cold Spring Park, Braceland Playground, Hemlock Gorge, and the Quineboquin Road and linear parkland adjacent to the Charles River. The candidates remarked about Quineboquin Road. Bill noted that safety issues should be addressed to enable better use of parkland for recreational paths and bicycling. Rena supports a bike path and pedestrian path, along with better signage. Kathy noted that the road is in need of traffic calming, and that we need a bike path and recreational path, and to reduce speeds on this road.

Question #3: What should be the size and composition of the City Council?

Rena is supportive of ward representation. People come to participate at City Council because of their love of the community. She stated that she could look at reducing size but would not support loss of ward representation. Bill stated that he supported the recent proposal to reduce size of the city council and to eliminate ward representation. He noted that his views are consistent with voters of Ward 5 during the last election. Kathy stated that she supports reducing the size of the council, but does not support eliminating ward representation. She noted that now that charter reform failed, we would need the city council, mayor, and electorate to approve any changes in the number or composition of City Council.

Question #4: Speak about the programs and services available for older residents, and the process to build a new Senior Center.

Kathy: She is supportive of a new senior center, a multi-generational facility that serves the needs of senior population. Kathy is concerned that cost is an issue, and wonders if we can afford it? Kathy is concerned if we can make the site layout work at Albemarle or elsewhere. If we cannot make it work, then Kathy would opt to revert to a seniors-only facility. Kathy stated that there is no better site on the list of locations for placing a senior center other than Albemarle. Kathy supports enhancing facilities at Albemarle as this would have the least effect on losing parkland compared to other proposed sites. She hopes that the city is still considering purchase of private property.

Rena: She believes we need to hold on this project, and that Albemarle is not ideal site. If there is potential for a more central site, we should wait for this to become available. We should advocate for improvements to programs and services to our seniors with or without a new facility. We need to provide better services for seniors, and it's not necessarily about the building.

Bill: Voters felt blindsided about the process for NewCAL. He is concerned about how the process transpired so far. People have not been adequately looped in, and people don't understand the conclusions reached about the size and scope of the proposed facility. With regards to the Albemarle site, how do seniors get there without driving? Seniors have transportation issues, so this needs to be considered. Bill is supportive of having a center primarily for seniors. He wants to make sure that young people can connect with seniors, but Newton needs to have a facility for seniors fundamentally.

Question #5: A citizen asked if Waban council members Rena and Kathy have been to Upper Falls meetings. Rena noted that she has attended both Upper Falls and Newton Highlands Area Council meetings. Bill stated that he has been to almost every meeting of Area Councils in the past year. Kathy stated that she has been to some meetings at Upper Falls and the Highlands.

Candidate Closing Remarks:

Kathy: Thanked the Area Councils for putting on this event. She hopes that the community has a sense of her vision and priorities. She stated she intends to be an effective city councilor. She has built a record of community service as an attorney and community leader. She has experience in building consensus. She is proud of her endorsements and hopes that you will give her your vote.

Bill: Grew up on Chestnut Street, and he hopes people vote for him. We need to be a community for everyone. Bill notes that he has been endorsed by many groups and organizations. His priorities will be road repair, strong city services, environmental stewardship, and affordable housing.

Rena: Wants to be the voice of the community for Ward 5. She has had experience on how city hall works, and will bring her background and knowledge to the city council if she is elected.

The community needs to be engaged, and to have a voice at the city chamber. Rena reiterated that she will be a ward councilor who works to represents her ward. Her focus will be on the Zoning code, and she has concerns about climate change. Rena hopes that more people will become further engaged with the city on these and other issues.

Hereupon the debate concluded at 8:52 pm.

Respectfully Submitted by Srdjan S. Nedeljkovic
Secretary, Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council