

A Garden City Guide on Fences on Public Property

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This official document of the Newton Landscape Task Force is provided as information for the Parks and Recreation Commission.



Chainlink Fences at Newton Centre Park

Fence Decisions

The decision to erect or remove a fence has an important effect on the public and there should therefore be ample opportunity for the public to participate in the decision-making process. Neighborhood associations, abutters and other concerned groups should be notified of the plan and be given time to assess and comment on it.

The city's Public Safety Officer or the Parks and Recreation Department may determine that danger to the public requires immediate action at a given site. Following emergency measures, notice to neighbors and other concerned parties will be provided to explain the reasons for the action and the steps necessary to have it reconsidered.

Any citizen or group can request that a fence be installed, removed or replaced by contacting the Parks and Recreation Department. The final decision on putting up or taking down a fence on Newton's public land will be made by a city department, usually the Parks and Recreation Department.

When to Use Fences

As a matter of policy in Newton, we want to preserve open, natural vistas and fences should generally be thought of as a solution of last resort. A fence is desirable when there is a clear reason to believe that normal caution or supervision will not be enough to avoid danger for adults and children. A fence may also be needed to prevent misuse or damage to a site, especially if such incursions have already occurred.

Kinds of Fences

First consideration should be given to using plant material rather than hard fencing. Shrubs, hedges, or rows of small trees can create an effective barrier. They look better and provide environmental benefits. If some hard fencing is required, shrubs can supplement and improve its appearance. Landscape boulders can also be an aesthetic, environmentally friendly way to substitute for conventional fencing.

The hard fencing of choice in Newton parks, playgrounds and athletic fields is black vinyl-clad chain link. It calls least attention to itself, it seems almost to disappear in the landscape, and it is durable. Galvanized chain link fencing is somewhat less expensive, but much less attractive than black vinyl-clad chain link. It can be an alternative where aesthetics are not an issue or when a quick, temporary solution is needed. The standard gauge for chain link fences is 2" x 2', but for tot-lots and areas where smaller children play, a smaller gauge 1" x 1" is recommended to discourage climbing and avoid injury.

One major caution about chain link: In Newton, chain link fences should never be installed with twisted wires along the top. They can cause injuries and snag clothing. Most chain link now comes

without these protruding twists, but fences with twists can be installed upside down with no loss of effectiveness.

Wooden fences are very expensive to buy and maintain, and they are the least durable. But they are appropriate on historic sites such as the Jackson Homestead.

For historic cemeteries, cast iron fences are traditional although cast aluminum alternatives are now available. Aluminum is somewhat less expensive than iron, but both are very durable and easily maintained.

Another traditional New England fence is granite pillars and wooden rails. Newton has a few of these and they are easily maintained. They form an open barrier and are appropriate for sites where an unimpeded view of a landscape is desirable.

Stockade fences are rare on Newton public property, but when they are used to screen something unsightly from public view, they should be installed with metal support posts. The metal posts better maintain the vertical posture of the fence and are more durable than wooden posts. For wooden pasture or split rail fences, typically used on dead-end streets, metal posts are again preferable.

How High?

The general rule of fencing is to install the lowest possible fence appropriate for the site. On athletic fields, courts and pools, fence heights are set either by law or by organizations like the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association. If there is sufficient open space around a soccer field or basketball court, fences may not be needed. To permit multiple uses of athletic fields, movable fences should be considered for seasonal sports.

Wherever fencing around children's playgrounds is required, it should always be a minimum of four feet.

Fencing around municipal parking lots of more than five stalls must be screened by a barrier at least three feet high. (See Zoning Ordinance 30-19 for details.)

In parks and conservation areas intended primarily for passive use, low, open fences to define the area and identify points of pedestrian access should be the rule.

Gates

In the spirit of open access to most public spaces in Newton, gates are not common. A simple opening through a perimeter fence is typical. When required, gates should be constructed of a material compatible with the adjacent fence. Latches or locking devices should be secure and durable.

Why this Guide?

A variety of considerations influence decisions about fencing on public spaces in Newton. They include:

- Preserving the open, natural character of public property
- A need to protect citizens from hazards
- A desire to discourage access
- An attempt to screen an unsightly structure
- The appropriateness of the fence material for the site
- The cost of buying and installing the fence
- The durability and reparability of the materials

The purpose of this Guide is to summarize the city's policies and standards regarding selection and placement of fences. It is also intended to explain to users of public spaces how decisions about fences are made and how they can play a part in those decisions. This Guide is prepared for the benefit of city employees and members of city commissions and boards who are responsible for decisions about purchasing, installing or maintaining city fences.

Maintenance

No matter which city department originally installed them, the Parks and Recreation Department has responsibility for maintaining all fences on city property. If a citizen has a question about an existing fence or wants to report damage to a fence, he or she should call the Parks and Recreation Department.

Resources

For help with questions of design and the choice of plantings, call the Open Space Coordinator (617-796-1500). For all other matters call the Commissioner, or the Superintendent of Maintenance in the Parks and Recreation Department (796-1500)



Stone Bollard Fence at Weeks Park