

## *A System of Village-Based Neighborhood Area Councils*

Significant sentiment in Newton suggests that the time has come to consider creating a system through which residents across the city can participate in the civic and government affairs of the city, and through which residents can express their preferences and priorities for the city. Largely because our existing villages represent small geographic areas with which residents so clearly identify, and already serve a variety of civic and social purposes, we propose to build on the presence of these villages to build a citywide system of village-based area councils.

### **Background**

With the many citizen boards, associations, and advisory councils in Newton, and the extraordinary level of participation, engagement and commitment of the residents of the city, as well as the propensity of Newton residents to identify with the village they live in, it is perhaps surprising that the city does not take advantage of 14 (or 12 or 13) villages to provide input into government decisions. Although, as the Newton Comprehensive Plan notes so clearly, the common parlance term “village” may no longer be entirely apt in describing major parts of the City, we use the term village here as a shorthand for the areas of the city having geographic boundaries consistent with the 1996 Planning Department report.

The current opportunities for village-based engagement are very uneven across the city. For example, there are two organizations – the Chestnut Hill Association, and the Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council – that have an enduring presence in the city, the latter being the only “area council” created and operated under the City of Newton’s Charter Article 9 provision. Other villages do not have such organizations, although they certainly may have neighborhood groups that cover smaller geographic areas, or other citizen or civic groups. The Newton Planning Department also works with village-based advisory committees primarily for implementation of its CDGB and other federal grant programs. These would include such committees in the target villages of Nonantum, Newton Corner, Newtonville, and West Newton. And the several villages have Historic District Commissions, including Auburndale, Chestnut Hill, Newtonville, and Newton Upper Falls. Unlike the Chestnut Hill Association or the Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council, these latter committees and commissions are not open participatory groups. Rather, their membership is by mayoral appointment only.

Neighborhood Area Councils do not need to conform to boundaries thought to define an existing village. In many cases, residents of an area of the City may prefer to define an Area Council that does not conform to such boundaries, either as small geographic portions of such villages, or as areas that cut across existing villages. The intent here is to facilitate meaningful geographic definitions for Area Councils, consistent with the City’s Charter (discussed below), so that everyone in the city shall recognize which area council(s) covers where they live.

### **The Time is Ripe**

Newton is a city blessed with an extensive array of opportunities for participation and engagement. Indeed, some suggest that the opportunities are so extensive that they are

fragmented, and ultimately most residents of the city have difficulty making sense of it all. Even those opportunities for participation that are in some sense village-based are difficult to sort out. The idea that the existing array of village-based organizations is uneven, provides little opportunity for residents to be engaged, and has not heretofore been used to provide guidance to city hall or city administrative agencies has not been lost on residents. At least three different recent processes have made the argument that the time has come for Newton to consider establishing a more formal presence for its villages in the civic and government life of the city.

The Newton Charter Reform process has included the need for an enhanced role for neighborhoods in the affairs of city government. In February, guest columnist Tom Sheff wrote in *Wicked Local Newton* that “While many citizens serve honorably and put in long hours working for various boards, committees and commissions, there are significant gaps in the connections between city hall and the people and city government generally does not take full advantage of the available talents of citizens and groups to study and solve important problems. Neighborhood associations, for example, are generally in tough shape.” As explained below, Charter reform is not necessary to enhance the role of the villages.

In addition to the Charter reform process, the CAG made significant reference to the need for increased use of village or neighborhood based organizations particularly in the capital budgeting process. [add reference to the CAG report’s language]

A third process that points to the need for greater citizen involvement is that associated with the Newton Comprehensive Plan, prepared by the Comprehensive Planning Advisory Committee and adopted as official policy by the Board of Aldermen on November 19, 2007. Without prescribing the exact form that public engagement should take, the Comprehensive Plan nonetheless promotes the need for greater engagement when it points to the need for:

Structured opportunities for exchange. The breadth and timing of opportunities for public voice should be related to the scale of a proposal’s impact, enabling early and adequate input without overburdening either public agency resources or public attentiveness. It should be recognized that projects of major impact require a corresponding level of review, where minor projects may not require the same process. Communication with the public should be clear, open, encouraged, and well-informed. For the project review process to be well-informed, it needs to involve a public whose understanding of what the community wants has been built through its involvement with earlier planning and community education.

Taken together, all three of these processes strongly suggest that the time is ripe for the City of Newton to make a significant commitment to defining new, broad-based opportunities for public engagement.

### **Neighborhood Area Councils**

Article 9 of Newton’s Charter provides for “neighborhood area councils” as mechanisms “...to encourage citizen involvement at the neighborhood level by permitting limited self-government through the establishment of neighborhood area councils as legal entities of the City

government.” The article provides the procedure for establishing such councils, and specifies that the council “shall consist of five to nine members,” elected at large by and from voters residing in the neighborhood area covered by the council. Councils must have by-laws that designate the geographic area covered, as well as any officers’ positions. The full text of Article 9 is presented in Appendix 1.

Currently, there is only one such neighborhood area council in operation, the Newton Highlands Area Neighborhood Council. Details about this Council are presented below. Consistent with the desire to enhance public engagement and participation, this proposal calls for a significant effort to promote and encourage the creation of additional neighborhood area councils until such time as the entire population of the City resides in an area service by such a council.

### **A Citywide System of Area Councils?**

The idea of encouraging and promoting a citywide system of neighborhood area councils is rooted both in the history of Newton’s villages and neighborhoods, as well as experiences in other cities. One city that stands out in this regard is St. Paul Minnesota. While many cities have such citywide systems, St. Paul relies very heavily on its citywide system of “district councils.” Although St. Paul is a much larger city than Newton (about 280,000 residents), it nonetheless has a system where the entire city is represented by one of the 17 district councils. These councils provide residents in each neighborhood with the ability to be heard, and to affect service provided by city government. Each district covers a geographic area of between 12,000 and 15,000 residents, far larger than what would be envisioned for Newton. City Hall provides a basic level of support for each district council (there is a full-time District Council Coordinator responsible for assisting each council). District councils typically hold open meetings for any resident to attend once a month; they hold an annual open meeting for the purpose of electing officers for the following year; they often prepare and distribute a newsletter; they serve as the first level of response for resident issues or complaints, making sure that issues raised are forwarded to the appropriate person in City Hall; they provide “early warning” to residents, and field requests from city departments, over issues that affect the district; they routinely invite elected officials to visit with them during the monthly meetings; they participate in neighborhood and citywide “visioning processes;” and they are intimately involved in the capital budgeting process each year.

When District Councils deal with citywide issues, such as capital budgets, they do so with the assistance of a second layer of organization. In this second layer, officers from each Council join together to compare priorities and responses, and to create a single ranking of projects for the city. Each District Council proposes potential projects within the District area that they would like to see funded through the capital budget, including where eligible, CDBG funds. The potential projects are ranked and prioritized. The officers from all of the District Councils then meet together in a Capital Improvement Budget Committee for the purpose of considering all of the projects most highly ranked by the individual Councils, as well as any projects proposed by City Hall, and set an overall capital budget priority. The St. Paul city council has final authority over which projects get funded, but as a matter of practice, the capital budget priorities of city council almost always coincide with the priorities of the CIB Committee.

Analyses of the District Council system in St. Paul makes clear how valuable such organizations are in providing voice to residents, and enhancing the ability of city government to be responsive to the needs and preferences of residents. These District Councils provide an effect mechanism for enhanced communication between public officials, including the mayor and city councilors, and neighborhood residents. And one of the more important results of such a system is that it seems to promote civil dialogue and to reduce conflict, even over very controversial issues.

For more information about St. Paul's District Councils, see <http://www.stpaul.gov/index.aspx?NID=1859>

### **The Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council: A Shining Example**

As noted earlier, despite the presence of Article 9 of the City Charter, only one neighborhood area council has been created – the Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council.

[provide case-study details, bylaws, operations, etc.]

## Appendix 1: Article 9 of Newton's City Charter

### ARTICLE 9: NEIGHBORHOOD AREA COUNCILS

#### **Sec. 9-1. Purpose.**

It is the purpose of this article to encourage citizen involvement in government at the neighborhood level by permitting limited self-government through the establishment of neighborhood area councils as legal entities of the City government.

#### **Sec. 9-2. Establishment of Neighborhood Service Areas.**

The Board of Aldermen may establish one or more neighborhood service areas to provide services or functions that the neighborhood area council is authorized to undertake.

#### **Sec. 9-3. Creation by Petition.**

(a) A petition may be submitted to the board of Aldermen requesting the establishment of a neighborhood service area to provide any service or services which the City is otherwise authorized by law to provide. Such petition must be signed by twenty per cent of the voters residing in such area. The petition shall describe the territorial boundaries of the proposed service area, shall specify the services to be provided, and shall indicate the size of the neighborhood area council.

(b) Upon receipt of the petition, the Board shall submit the petition for verification of signatures thereon, and within thirty days following verification, the Board of Aldermen shall hold a public hearing on the question of whether or not the requested neighborhood service area shall be established. The hearing may be adjourned from time to time but shall be completed within sixty days of its commencement.

(c) Within thirty days following the public hearing, the Board of Aldermen shall by resolution approve or disapprove the establishment of the requested neighborhood service area.

(d) A resolution approving the creation of the neighborhood service area may contain amendments or modifications of the area's boundaries, functions, or the size of the neighborhood area council as set forth in the petition. (Referendum of 11-4-75)

#### **Sec. 9-4. Boundary Changes of a Neighborhood Service Area.**

The board of Aldermen may, pursuant to a request from a neighborhood area council accompanied by a petition signed by at least twenty per cent of the voters residing in the area to be added or deleted, enlarge, diminish, or otherwise alter the boundaries of any existing neighborhood service area following the procedures set forth in Section 9-3 (b), (c), and (d).

#### **Sec. 9-5. Considerations in Setting Boundaries.**

In establishing neighborhood service area boundaries and determining those services to be undertaken by a neighborhood area council, the Board of Aldermen shall study and take into consideration, but not be limited to, the following:

- (1) The extent to which the area constitutes a neighborhood with common concerns and a capacity for local neighborhood initiative, leadership, and decision-making with respect to City government.
- (2) City agency authority and resources which may appropriately be either transferred or shared with the neighborhood council.
- (3) Population density, distribution, and growth within a neighborhood service area to assure that its boundaries reflect the most effective territory for local participation and control.
- (4) Citizen access to, control of, and participation in neighborhood service area activities and functions.

#### **Sec. 9-6. Dissolution of a Neighborhood Service Area.**

(a) The Board of Aldermen may, after a public hearing, dissolve a neighborhood service area on the initiative of the Board of Aldermen or pursuant to a petition signed by at least twenty per cent of the voters living within the neighborhood service area.

(b) The Board of Aldermen shall give notice, in a newspaper of general circulation in the neighborhood service area, of its intention to hold a public hearing on a proposed dissolution. Such notice shall be given not less than fourteen days before the date of the public hearing.

**Sec. 9-7. Election of Council; Vacancies.**

(a) A neighborhood area council shall consist of five to nine members. The term of office of each member shall be two years, and until a successor is qualified.

(b) The council members shall be elected at large by and from voters residing in the neighborhood service area at the time of the election. The board of Aldermen shall determine the time and manner of holding such elections. The ward alderman or ward aldermen who represent any portion of the area included in a neighborhood service area shall serve, ex officio with no power to vote, as members of the neighborhood area council.

(c) A vacancy shall be filled by the neighborhood area council, by appointment. Members so appointed shall serve for the remainder of the unexpired term and until their successors are qualified.

**Sec. 9-8. Neighborhood Area Council Powers and Functions.**

A neighborhood area council may exercise any powers and perform any functions within the neighborhood service area expressly authorized by the Board of Aldermen, which may include but not be limited to:

- (1) Advisory or delegated substantive authority, or both, with respect to such programs as a community action program, urban renewal, relocation, public housing, planning and zoning actions, and other physical development programs, crime prevention and juvenile delinquency programs, health services, code inspection, recreation, education, and manpower training. Nothing contained herein shall be construed to authorize the Board of Aldermen to delegate to any neighborhood area council any substantive authority with regard to zoning.
- (2) Self-help projects, such as supplemental refuse collection, beautification, minor street and sidewalk repair, establishment and maintenance of neighborhood community centers, street fairs and festivals, cultural activities, recreation, and housing rehabilitation and sale.
- (3) Acceptance of funds from public, but not including the City of Newton, and private sources, including public subscriptions; and expenditure of monies to meet overhead cost of council administration and support for neighborhood service area projects.

**Sec. 9-9. Compensation; Meetings; By-Laws; Quorum.**

(a) Members of a neighborhood area council shall receive no compensation but may receive reimbursement of actual and necessary travel and other expenses incurred in performance of official duties.

(b) A neighborhood area council shall adopt by-laws providing for the conduct of its business and the selection of a presiding officer and other officers. Copies of all by-laws adopted by neighborhood area councils shall be made available to the public upon request.

(c) A majority of the voting members of a neighborhood area council shall constitute a quorum for the transaction of business. Each member entitled to vote shall have one vote.

**Sec. 9-10. Annual Report.**

Each neighborhood area council shall make an annual report of its activities to the Board of Aldermen which annual report shall be open to the public.

**Sec. 9-11. Financial Records.**

Each neighborhood area council shall keep complete financial records which shall be subject to city audit.