

Newton Citizen's Commission on Energy

Minutes of Meeting of Wednesday May 23, 2018, 7:30 p.m.

City Hall Room 205

Present: Eric Olson, Chairman, Halina Brown, Vice Chair, Michael Gevelber, Stephen Grody, Jonathan Kantar, Ira Krepchin, Jim Purdy, Puja Vohre; Cory Alperstein, Asa Hopkins, Councilor Emily Norton, Nick O'Connor.

Chairman Eric Olson called the meeting to order at 7:30 p.m. The minutes of the preceding meeting (April 25, 2018) were reviewed and approved with revisions.

Minutes of the April 25 meeting were approved with corrections.

1. Update on filling vacancies on the Commission (Eric Olson)

Eric reported that he is working to fill vacancies in the Commission. He also urges interested people to attend and participate in discussions, even if they are not members. (They will not be able to vote on any motions that come up, however.) He is happy to meet with people individually or in small groups to discuss energy issues and the work of the NCCE. Stephen Grody was appointed by the League of Women Voters; two vacancies remain to be filled as of the date of this meeting, one by the Mayor and one by the City Council. Members and others in attendance introduced themselves and their backgrounds.

2. Update on Power Choice: Meeting of the Working Group on May 15 2018 (Jim Purdy)

Jim Purdy summarized the role of Sustainability Director Ann Berwick's working group, which meets with her monthly to discuss issues and advise on public outreach. NCCE members Halina Brown and Jim Purdy are members of the Working Group. (For more background on the Working Group, see the notes from the April Energy Commission meeting.)

The City's website explains the aggregation program, and it contains a web link to the Newton Coalition for Climate Action, which is an advocate for a reducing the City's carbon footprint, transition to 100% renewable energy, and adding 40% Class 1 Renewable power in the default option in Newton Power Choice to the state mandated level (currently 13%). The Coalition has a website <http://newtonclimateaction.org/> which has a link back to the City's website <https://masspowerchoice.com/newton>. Ann and working group members are meeting with Coalition members on June 6 to coordinate and discuss issues.

Outreach includes appearances at the meetings of local groups, e.g., Area Councils, house parties, presence at Village Day celebrations, presentations at library programs, and – in the future – lawn signs, presence at Farmers Markets, water bill inserts, etc. The outreach activity will increase closer to the launch date of the program. Newton Power Choice is being reviewed by the Massachusetts Department of Public Utilities, which held a hearing earlier in May which did not raise any issues or problems with the City's plan; DPU certification is expected to come late in the fall.

The Mayor intends to conduct a survey of Newton residents concerning willingness to pay for more renewables in the power provided. The Mayor's survey needs to be designed and will cover the same issues as the survey designed by Michael Gevelber and Halina Brown that was sponsored by Green Newton and conducted in Fall 2017; it made statistically significant conclusions about willingness to pay. It is expected that the Mayor's survey will confirm the conclusions of the earlier survey, but it is crucial that the questions are properly worded. Survey consultants have not yet been identified; Ann Berwick will assist in the selection.

Jon Kantar suggested that the City should simply get a peer review of the earlier survey. Cory noted that Councilor Emily Norton had intended to survey her constituents in Ward 2 on the same subject and received advice from the Coalition; Councilor Norton now intends to rely on the City's survey, and Cory suggested that the advice that she provided to Councilor Norton would be applicable to any survey that the City ends up doing.

Michael commented that the original survey was designed to avoid bias and achieved statistically significant results with over 400 responses, so the main value of a separate survey is political credibility.

Jon Kantar noted that a key feature of the original survey was a table that showed the cost of various levels of renewable power, and he doesn't see how that could be done in a phone survey. Eric noted that a professor at Brandeis has offered to review the original survey.

Cory commented on the Coalition's advocacy for a high percentage of renewables.: a 4-month 40% campaign, getting signatures on letter of support. They are taking a multi-pronged approach to outreach, including getting Council members to sign the letter – currently 7 of them did; she hopes a majority of the Council ultimately will.

Their goal is to meet with the Mayor on this. Also getting groups like 350 MA to formally advocate for a 40% default and is doing outreach on this. The Coalition is also establishing a fund to indemnify people who unintentionally end up with the default if the extra 40% is adopted by the Mayor. A presentation is on the NCA website. The Coalition is willing to assist in promoting an opt-up to 100% renewables, but its immediate goal is to build support for the 40% extra.

Halina sent a letter to the Mayor suggesting that the Mayor should choose a cost level to use in setting the default, but the Mayor didn't agree that this is the way to proceed. Asa commented that a dollar driven approach may have undesirable consequences.

3. Improving performance of public buildings in Newton (Michael Gevelber)

City Energy Manager Bill Ferguson proposed an energy audit on the top 3 or 4 school buildings by amount of energy used; (they account for 54.8% of total school dept energy). Michael has some concerns – he is familiar with the companies that do these audits – and using a consultant is not always an efficient use of budget. Bill wants \$200k per building for study and implementation of some improvements.

Two thirds of the total energy used is electricity and one third is gas.

Jon noted that the elementary schools have very different space programs than the high schools; also some schools are campuses, not single buildings.

There are also differences in how the energy use is managed; for example, Day Middle School has central air conditioning that is on 24/7 throughout the summer.

Administrative differences between the Public Buildings Department and the School Department also must be reconciled. Michael would like to encourage a more nuanced study.

Jon commented that the Design Review Commission has included in its guidelines that we should recommission buildings every three years. He said that Building Commissioner Josh Morse believes that this would be useful. So coming to Josh with the DRC recommendation might be the best way to address the issue. Michael suggested that a full recommissioning study can be quite expensive, so preliminary study about the building and how it is operated should be the first step.

Puja commented that MassSave together with Eversource and NGrid can provide funding for engineering analysis as well as building improvements.

Asa asked if performance contracts have been considered – Eric explained that several years ago Noresco did this for 55 buildings and recommended improvements in 13 buildings to improve performance; however, recommended equipment costs were high. It was concluded that assessments could be done cheaper in-house, and the City shifted from the Noresco contract to a preferred vendor program and went that route. Preferred vendor is the program recommended by MassSave; it includes incentives from NGrid and Eversource.

Michael recommends that Bill Ferguson should meet with the School Department to resolve some of these issues. Jon suggested that the Public Facilities Committee could help with this issue.

Eric noted that there are opportunities for meeting with Josh; Jon should meet with Peter Barrer first. He will talk with Michael first about what the ask is.

4. Update on Climate Action Plan for Newton (Halina/Jon Kantar)

Not discussed.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:30 PM.

Respectfully submitted by Jim Purdy