

NEWTON UPPER FALLS AREA COUNCIL



September 16, 2016

Newton Charter Commission
City of Newton
1000 Commonwealth Ave.
Newton Centre, MA 02459

Re: Proposed Changes to Article 9 of the Newton City Charter

Dear Members of the Commission:

We are writing to express the thoughts of the Newton Upper Falls Area Council on changes we would support to Article 9 of the Newton City Charter. In addition to those recommendations suggested by the Waban Area Council listed in Attachment A, we have the following recommendations:

- The references to “neighborhood” be changed to “village” to reflect more accurately the area represented. The use of “neighborhood” also diminishes the role area councils play in our view. Neighborhood is more commonly thought of as a collection of contiguous streets. The areas represented by area councils are much broader. Newton has historically been a city comprised of villages. The area council structure should recognize that.
- Area Councils should receive some annual stipend from the City to fund their efforts. Such funds would support improved communication and community activities such as village days.
- The powers granted to Area Councils should be consistent across all Area Councils and should reflect the absence of Ward Councilors if such a change is ultimately proposed.
- If Ward Councilors are removed from the City Council, then Area Councilors should be granted a small stipend to recognize the increased work they will be asked to take on.

These recommendations were approved at our September 15, 2016 meeting.

Sincerely,

Anil Adyanthaya
President

ATTACHMENT A

WABAN AREA COUNCIL

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Comments to Newton Charter Commission Sept 7, 2016

The Waban Area Council has agreed to the comments and recommendations herein.

I. OVERVIEW OF BENEFITS OF AREA COUNCILS

- Area councils can be an effective way to increase community engagement in government and to respond to community concerns.
- The Waban Area Council has been in existence since January 2014. The mission of the Waban Area Council is to hear, respond to and represent village concerns and issues; to provide a forum for Waban issues, and to encourage resident involvement in local government.
- Over the past two and a half years we have worked on a wide variety of issues relating to Waban. Some examples:
 - Established a website and email list that allows WAC to provide regular updates to the community and content regarding issues of importance.
 - Acted as a liaison between the community and the City/building team regarding the Angier and Zervas school construction projects.
 - Held two well-attended community meetings (which included City staff, police officers, traffic consultants, and City Councilors and were attended by over 50 residents) focusing on traffic improvements/changes in connection with the Zervas rebuild.
 - Held a well-attended community meeting (which included City staff, police officers, traffic consultants, City Councilors and Angier principal Loreta Lamberti) focusing on traffic and pedestrian issues related to the re-opening of the Angier School.
 - Worked with City staff and the developer of the St. Philip Neri housing development to provide timely updates to the community on the 40B process and to connect the developer with abutting neighbors. Provided input to the Planning Dept. and the ZBA regarding the project.
 - Held several Future Visioning community meetings and worked towards creating a Waban Future Visioning document.
 - Formed the Friends of the Quinobequin subcommittee, which focuses on improvements to the Quinobequin parkland.

- Sponsored and organized an educational forum on the permitting process for multi-family housing developments.
 - Worked to further improvements to the Sudbury and Cochituate Aqueduct trails.
 - Responded to a variety of citizen concerns which were raised at the beginning of each monthly meeting.
- A major challenge we have faced is residents' lack of awareness of the existence and function of the area council. We are consistently working to reach more residents in order to improve overall communication and responsiveness to resident concerns.

II. RECOMMENDED REVISIONS

We believe that area councils can be a valuable asset to their communities and to the City government and we encourage changes to the charter that make the establishment of area councils a smoother process and that make it easier for area councils to reach their constituents.

1. **Area Council Boundaries** – We believe that pre-designated neighborhood council service areas would facilitate establishment of area councils. We recommend that the new charter include a mechanism for designating area council boundaries for the entire city in an equitable manner. One possible option would be for the Executive to draw a boundary map subject to City Council approval.
2. **Notify Residents of Possible Area Council Establishment.** One impediment to establishing an area council is residents' lack of knowledge about area councils, which hinders both signature collection and attracting candidates. In order to adequately inform residents in a service area about the possible creation of an area council, require that the City provide direct notification to residents about possible formation or changes to an area council.
 - a. Upon obtaining 5% of signatures for a proposed area council creation, dissolution, or boundary change, the City clerk will provide direct notification to all residents in the affected area describing the proposed changes.
 - b. Provide additional direct notification to residents of an affected area to announce a public hearing of a proposed creation, dissolution, or boundary change of an Area Council.
3. **Receiving Funds** – Revise language of Sec. 9-8(iii) to allow acceptance of private and public funds and add a new Sec. 9-8(v) allowing area councils to establish and manage improvement districts as follows:

(v) establishment and management of business improvement districts and neighborhood improvement districts, and receipt or control of funds to support district service area projects, including their overhead and management costs.

4. **Candidate Signatures.** Codify the current practice of requiring area council candidates to gather 25 voter signatures by adding a clause to Article 8 Section 3.
5. **Elections.** Modify Article 9 Section 7(b) to provide that Area Councilors be elected on the same day, at the same polling places (those that include residents of the service area), and during the same hours as City Councilors are elected.
6. ***Ex officio* Members.** It has been WAC's experience that our Ward 5 City Councilor as *ex officio* member has been an important advocate and ally, a valuable source of institutional knowledge, and has often served as a point of contact for City staff (allowing WAC to effectively reach City officials in a streamlined manner). It is unclear how City Councilors will be assigned as *ex officio* members of area councils under the new charter. We are concerned about the impact of the possible loss of ward councilors on the effectiveness and access of area councils, and we hope that Article 9 of the new charter can address the assignment of City councilors as *ex officio* area council members in a sensible and equitable way.