

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020

Mayor's Update

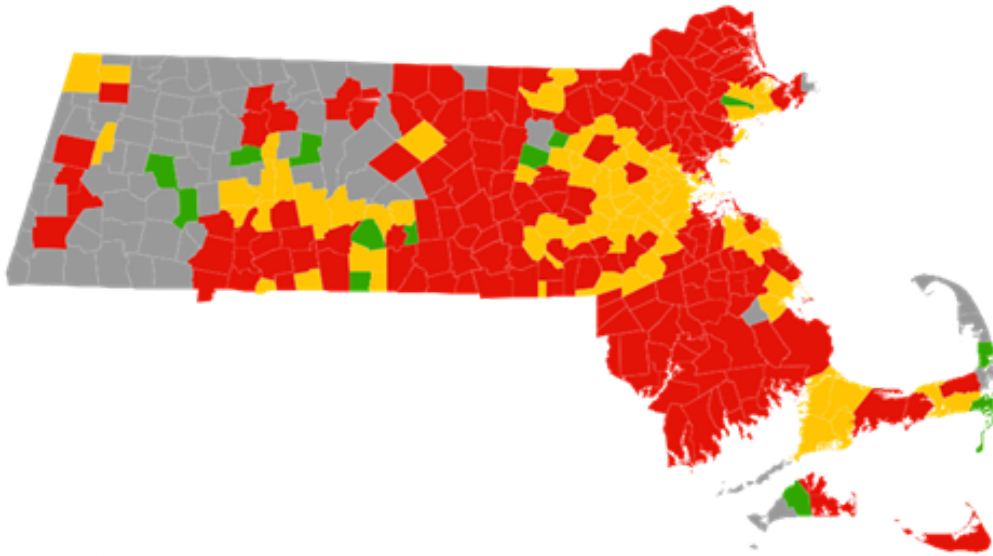
COVID-19 Updates and Losses

We had 169 new positive COVID-19 cases among Newtonians over the past seven days from Dec. 9 to yesterday, Dec. 17, bringing the cumulative total of confirmed cases in Newton to 1,934.

Over the two-week tracking period used by the state from Nov. 29 – Dec. 12, there were 320 new confirmed COVID-19 cases in Newton. The incidence rate increased again to 24.9 per 100,000, up from 23.6 during the previous two-week reporting period. Of all Newton residents who were tested for COVID-19 during this period, 1.27% of them tested positive (a.k.a., the positivity rate). This percentage is stable from the 1.33% reported last week. The positivity rate statewide during the same two week period is 6.01%.



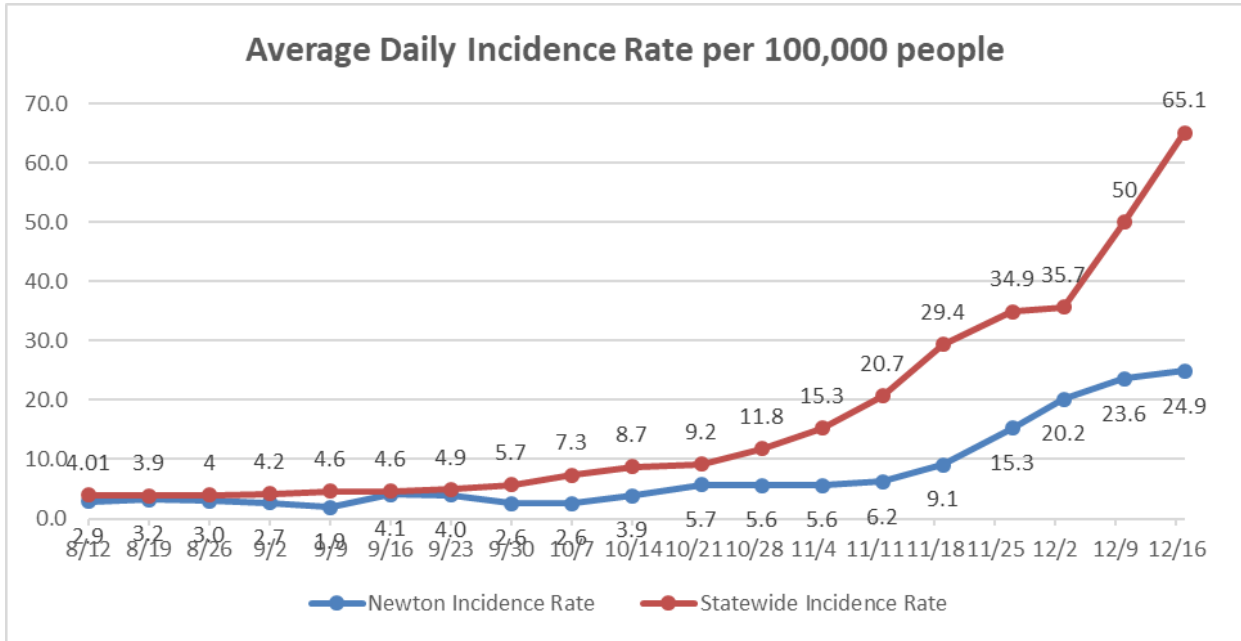
Massachusetts COVID-19 Color-Coded Map



Map credit WCVB Boston

Newton remains in the yellow group as classified by the state. (Yellow communities with a population of greater than 50,000 have an average number of new cases per day less than 10 per 100,000, or a positivity rate of 4% or less.) Five of our neighbors – Boston, Brookline, Needham, Weston and Wellesley – are also designated as yellow, while Waltham is experiencing higher rates of COVID-19 and is designated as red with a positivity rate just over 4%.

Newton's 2-Week Average Daily Incidence Rate Per 100,000 People Over Time



What does the information in the graph and the map above mean? There are more COVID-19 cases across the Commonwealth and right here in our own community. As Lt. Gov. Karyn Polito said in a call with Mayors last week, new daily cases in Massachusetts nearly doubled since the week before Thanksgiving, as has the number of COVID-19 patients in hospitals. As the wave of red shows on the map, nearly half of Massachusetts is at high risk for COVID-19.

Notice that in the graph, Newton’s blue line is flattening. With our actions, we can keep it flat or bend the curve down. Masks and distancing remain incredibly important, as does sticking with only those you live with.

It’s also important to pay very close attention to your own health. If you have even the slightest [COVID-19 symptom](#) such as a sore throat, loss of taste or smell, cough or others, you should stay home and contact your healthcare provider. If a COVID-19 test is recommended and your healthcare provider cannot help you access one, check here for options: mass.gov/gettested. Stay home while you await test results. If you test positive or are identified as a close contact of someone who tests positive, follow [isolation and quarantine instructions](#) and be sure you answer the call/text from the Newton Health and Human Service Department or the Community Tracing Collaborative (a.k.a., MA COVID Team).

COVID-19 in Newton

Total Cases
1,934

Total Deaths
160

*As of 12/17

Adhering to all these recommendations will help to prevent more illness, and, more deaths. The Massachusetts Department of Public Health, and I, are asking all of us to do our part and as the year ends, please celebrate the holidays safely at home. Find guidance on how to stay safe during the holidays [here](#).

The graph above, and additional Newton COVID-19 data, are available on our COVID-19 data page at newtonma.gov/covid19data.

Again this week, I need to report another three of our neighbors died with COVID-19. The total now stands at 160 Newtonians who lost their lives since the first week in April. As 2020 creeps to its end and we look to 2021 and the promise of a vaccine, the cruel loss of so many is a haunting reminder that we are not yet through this crisis. Let's try our best to have a healthy end of 2020 and begin the new year more hopeful, safe and positive.

Newton Public Schools Data

Fifteen new cases of COVID-19 were reported in the Newton Public Schools community during the past week, bringing the cumulative total since the start of school to 90 people. All 15 new cases were among students – 9 of the students are participating in hybrid/in-person learning, 6 are Distance Learning Academy or remote learning students. As was the circumstance last week, most of those who tested positive were not at school during their infectious period. The full dashboard table with week by week data is available [here](#).

Consensus on Next Steps for Zoning

I have had many discussions lately with our residents, members of our building community, City Councilors and Planning Department staff about where we are on evaluating and updating our zoning ordinance. These conversations come near the end of a year of intensive reviews of possible updates for our residential areas and, in the last few weeks, the engagement of 500+ residents in discussions of various options.

I'm pleased that a consensus developed in the City Council's Zoning and Planning Committee last Monday night. There is agreement on three important points:

- (1) To wait to vote on an overall updated zoning ordinance beyond 2021 so Councilors can undertake considerably more analysis, assure broader understanding of options to address shared goals,* and develop more of a consensus,
- (2) To move away from considering both two family zoning as well as the conversion of very large homes into up to six units as by right options applied everywhere in Newton,
- (3) To use 2021 to delve deeper into critical challenges that our zoning can be used to address, including how our village centers and mixed use areas can better accommodate housing that is affordable at a range of price points, support our local businesses, protect our environment, and create more vibrant community life for everyone.

To stay current on the Zoning Redesign project, fill out the current community engagement survey [here](#), or to learn more about the recent community engagement events, visit the newly redesigned and updated page [here](#).

* The shared goals the Zoning and Planning Committee put forth: Expanding housing opportunity at a wide range of price points, fostering economic and environmental sustainability, advancing the City's Climate Action Plan and respecting the physical context of neighborhoods and villages.



Photo: Thanks to so many generous Newtonians, and the Rotary Club of Newton and the Village Bank for donating holiday gifts for children in Newton. Thanks, too, to the Newton North boys ice hockey team which collected and donated toys. Pictured here with me are NNHS Hockey Co-Captains Jake Urquiola and Declan Chamberlain and Joe DeVito, President and CEO of the Village Bank.

MBTA Cuts Impact Newton

On Monday, Dec. 14, the Fiscal and Management Control Board, which oversees the MBTA, took steps to close a \$580M budget gap by voting to make cuts in service that will impact public transportation riders in Newton.

The Control Board's vote means that the shortened versions of Newton's bus routes 553, 554, 556 and 558 will continue to end in Newton Corner rather than in downtown Boston. Also, bus routes 501, 502, 503 and 504 will continue to be consolidated into two routes.

The Commuter Rail service line through Newton, the Worcester line, will also see some diminution in service. Both the frequency and hours are decreased. Those using The Ride will also be negatively impacted.

Of all the changes which the Control Board approved on Monday, what troubles me the most is the elimination of Bus Routes 52 and 505. Twenty bus routes are being eliminated and two of them are right here. Route 52 is the only bus that operates through the center of Newton and that travels north/ south from Watertown Square to Newton Centre to Dedham. Route 505 provides express bus service between Auburndale/West Newton and Boston with multiple stops in Newton. These two bus routes provide very important connections to, from and within Newton. Last month I sent a letter to the MBTA and provided testimony where I strongly urged the MBTA to maintain service along Routes 52 and 505 during this period and to fully restore service on all lines once the pandemic is controlled.

While nobody wants to run empty buses and trains, I believe it is bad public policy to cut public transportation services in Newton and across the region just as people are starting to get ready to travel again. Ironically, the Control Board voted to cut public transportation in our region on the very same day that a vaccine was first administered to our front-line health workers. As we begin to come out of this pandemic, I strongly believe that we will want and need more public transportation service, not less. Worse still, it is not clear how and when the services that have

been reduced, shortened, combined or eliminated will be brought back, and what they will look like.

The MBTA must function within the budget that it is given. Rather than point fingers at the Control Board, I believe that we must work together, as a region, with all our elected officials to address the structural deficit of the MBTA. A healthy regional public transportation system benefits all of us and must be in place if we are to achieve our accessibility, economic development, housing, congestion and air quality goals.

Keeping the Library Open

How can we keep the Newton Free Library open as cases of COVID-19 continue to rise in Newton and throughout Massachusetts? The answer is with your help and some ingenuity.

Everyone has to wear a face covering over their nose and mouth while inside the library and while waiting outside. Everyone also needs to stay physically distanced.



In addition, starting today, the Library is making visits shorter to help with safety. The Library modified its Express Browsing services by implementing shorter visit guidelines (15 minutes) for borrowers and discontinuing public computer use. (We realize that eliminating the use of the computers is a real hardship. Sigh.)

Our curbside service is ongoing, giving borrowers another method to pick up library holds without having to enter the building. Librarians deliver books out to your car (parked in the live parking area in front of the brick plaza at the Homer Street entrance) or they will meet you by the Homer Street doors if you prefer.

Interested in this service? Sign up for a pickup appointment. Currently, the library offers the service Monday 2:00 – 4:00 p.m., Wednesday 6:00 – 8:00 p.m., and Friday 10:00 a.m. to noon. You can make an appointment [here](#) once you have a hold that is listed as "Ready for pickup".

Find more information about services and programs at the Newton Free Library [here](#).

Storm Cleanup

This time the weather forecasters got it right. We saw 15-plus inches of snow fall on Newton over the course of about 19 hours, with as much as 2 inches of snow falling per hour at times.

City crews and contractors worked through the night on Wednesday, through the day and until 11:00 Thursday evening, and are

back out today using as many as 130 pieces of equipment to plow roads, municipal parking lots, MBTA bus stops, T and commuter rail stations.

They're also responsible for clearing sidewalks along walking routes to our 23 school buildings, and the walkways and parking lots at each building.



So, many of us are asking, why no in-person school today? Simply put, the volume of snow made huge piles at curb cuts and corners which can't just be pushed back but have to be hauled away, a time intensive, block by block, corner by corner undertaking. The piles are so high, drivers may not be able to see children and staff walking to our schools.

Crews are also still working to haul away huge piles of snow in our parking lots in our village centers and cut more paths to and from the lots to sidewalks. Plus, they are doing more cleanup. We want to make it easier to shop locally for a last-minute holiday gift or to get a meal at a Newton restaurant. (Remember, parking in Newton is still free, so no need to climb a snowbank to feed a meter.)

Thanks to everyone who got their vehicles off the roads during the Snow Emergency, so our crews could more effectively and efficiently clear the snow. The emergency was lifted last night at 10:00 p.m., so vehicles can again be parked on City streets and in municipal parking lots.

We extended the deadline for property owners to clear their sidewalks because of the volume of snow. Instead of the typical 24 hours, we now have 48 hours before we are subject to a warning or fine. The storm "officially" ended in Newton on Thursday at 5:00 p.m., so sidewalks need to be cleared by 5:00 p.m. tomorrow night, Saturday, Dec. 19. Please, please remember to shovel your sidewalk.

Huge thanks to the many people who gave up a couple nights of sleep to clear the snow including our DPW and Parks, Recreation and Culture staff and our contractors.

Warmly,

Ruthanne

P.S. The Newton Police Reform Task Force wants your help. Please provide input and help shape the future of policing in Newton via this [community survey](#). Answers will be kept confidential by members of the external consulting team who are compiling the results and will be shared with the Newton Police and other public agencies only after all identifying information has been removed. If you have questions, reach out to info@strategymatters.org.

Newton Police Reform Task Force Community Survey

To participate, click [here](#)

Please respond by Tuesday, Jan. 5, 2021

In addition, the Task Force invites residents and others to join a second Town Hall on "Where do we want to go?" on Tuesday, December 22 from 5:30-7:30 pm. RSVP [here](#) for the link to the meeting.



P.P.S. The new art mural at 28 Austin Street Bram Way in Newtonville is one of the brightest and best of 2020 in the Boston area, as selected by the Boston Globe. Austin Street Partners, in conjunction with the New Art Center, the Newtonville Area Council, and Newton Community Pride brought us the vibrant and exciting mural by Boston area artist Destiny Palmer. Check out more

fabulous art murals in the Boston Globe article [here](#).



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