

Newton Citizens Commission on Energy

City of Newton

<http://www.newtonma.gov/gov/building/projects/energycomm/default.asp>



Mayor Ruthanne Fuller

Halina Brown (Chair), Beverly Craig, Michael Gevelber, Stephen Grody, Asa Hopkins,
Jonathan Kantar, Jon Klein, James Purdy (Vice Chair), Puja Vohra,
Ann Berwick, William Ferguson (*ex-officio*)
Advisory Members: Cory Alperstein, Edward Craddock, Ira Krepchin, Philip Hanser

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Minutes of the Meeting of April 29, 2020

The meeting was held on Zoom.

Attending: Halina Brown, Michael Gevelber, Stephen Grody, Asa Hopkins, Jon Kantar, Jon Klein, Jim Purdy, Puja Vohra; Cory Alperstein, Fred Brustman, Lucia Dolan, Councilor Emily Norton, Demie Stathoplos

The meeting minutes for March 2020 were accepted as corrected.

1. Letter to Mayor Fuller

Halina's draft addresses the need to fill the Energy Coach position. Should we send it?

Jon Klein suggested that the first sentence should be empathetic and recognize the challenges she faces. Our goal is to make progress, and here's our proposal on how to do that. Parallel with Covid might be taken the wrong way.

Michael said Green Newton is going ahead with action of its own, so what are the one or two things we want the Mayor's buy-in for?

Emily said working with the City Council should be mentioned, as it doesn't require extra effort from her staff, so continue to mention it.

Jon Kantar said the other big item out there is the zoning redesign. Expect to see the Massachusetts AG's reaction to the Brookline gas ban bylaw in the next few months; it is important to be part of that process to ensure that the new Newton zoning code is as sustainable as possible.

Halina asked what would our role be in zoning? Jon gave examples such as to increase permitted density for housing in appropriate areas, like transition zones between village centers and surrounding areas. Cory suggested we could provide some research on how zoning is being used in other places as tools for sustainability.

Halina asked if we should work as an advisor to the Planning Department? Jon replied yes. They're seeking input from everyone. Since James Freas left, there is a new group of staff, who are very new to this zoning code.

Jon Kantar agreed to represent the NCCE in this process. Jim volunteered to participate. Emily asked if we are working with MCAN or MAPC on achieving net-zero energy in Newton; they have resources to take advantage of. Cory suggested also Somerville and cities outside Massachusetts that are using zoning as a tool to achieve the net zero goal.

Puja is on the MCAN board and she will forward material to us.

Halina said that Jon, Jim, Cory, and Puja should coordinate.

2. Efforts to ban natural gas in new buildings.

Emily reported that Newton's legal dept agrees with Cambridge that we don't have the authority to legislate in this area, so we should be discreet. If Brookline's gas ban is overruled, a home rule petition is one avenue, but may be difficult to get through the Mass legislature. Emily has talked with Brookline's lawyer on this issue. An AG announcement is expected June or July. The Newton Public Facilities Committee will take this up again after progress is made on the budget. Gas ban issues will be on PFC's agenda for May 13.

3. Progress on the Energy Coach website.

A meeting is scheduled for May 8. We plan to present it with next generation improvements.

A library meeting on heat pumps was held on Monday. There was a series of good questions. Michael will get the Q&A from this meeting. Green Newton also has Q&A in some of the categories on their website. We should ask to use some of their material on the Energy Coach site. Halina will direct JYK to this material.

4. Updates on the recent activities around CAP implementation

The City staff wants a landing page on climate action instead of burying the documents on the Planning Department's documents page; this page should include the NCCE's 30-year Climate Action Plan and links to information sites, e.g., the Heat Smart program site,

Green Newton Building Standards Committee (BSC): Peter Barrer is tracking several projects including Four Corners, Riverdale, Riverside, Dunstan East, etc. BSC is making progress with these developments, especially regarding electrification. In talking with developers, they are pushing the education aspect and free money for studies from Massachusetts Clean Energy Center.

Cory asked about the status of special permit regulations development? Jon Kantar reported that Deb Crossley is pushing to make the requirements applicable to 10ksf buildings. Emily said the City Council is also looking at climate resilience as special permit condition.

Jon Kantar reported that the ZBA chair Brooke Lipsett has welcomed our input. We can make an argument on behalf of the future tenants' health, etc.

Halina asked if there is any way to promote passive house for single-family residential? Jon replied that BSC is concentrating its efforts on the bigger developments.

Stephen proposed that we could push for the City's Inspectional Services Department to do things at the desk to get small project developers to consider passive house and electrification. This is difficult, as Bill Ferguson once said, because people go to ISD for a building permit with the project already advanced. Stephen added that If we want to shoot the moon, working through the City Council on zoning amendments is the way to go; but a procedural strategy for projects that go to ISD is also a way to seek improvement.

Cory suggested that new construction is more susceptible to modification than a systems replacement that has already been decided by the owner.

Halina said that we'll follow up on this and consider how to introduce the idea to the City Council, but we need to decide where to put our effort. Cory proposed that we bring Bill Ferguson into the conversation.

5. Green Leadership Collaborative for commercial properties –

Ann Berwick and Puja met with City of Boston staff about their Green Ribbon Commission to get ideas. Their initiative is much bigger than ours, and involves many different building types, e.g., health care facilities. Their Commission has a real estate group, a universities group, a cultural facilities group, etc.

Their research is pretty comprehensive, and their tracking tools might be useful in Newton. For Newton, their healthcare group's experience is relevant; Puja is getting deeper into how the group is operating and what tools we might emulate. Benchmarking is a particular thing that they find very valuable. We should aim to get 5-10 Green Leadership participants in Newton to make commitments to benchmark their progress and share the data with us and the carbon emission reductions they achieve. Later we can look into best practices.

It was suggested that Newton's GLC might take on a bigger role in things besides energy, e.g., sustainability.

For the next NCCE meeting we need to make a list of Newton commercial property owners/managers to be on this commission. A GLC Meeting is scheduled for May 5 at 4pm. Halina will ask Ann to include us in the Zoom invite.

Jon Kantar pointed out that it will be hard to get the Mayor's time on this during Covid. He is not sure if the MOU with the utilities has been signed yet. Bill Ferguson wants to get them involved in the GLC process.

6. Communication Working Group

Halina sent an email update a few days ago. The group is looking to create a narrative that could be customized to specific situations, but always with an overarching message. Demie, Karen Sloat, and Halina came up with: *Powerful. Make a difference. Not alone.*

This was modeled after the New Economics Foundation in the UK, which aims to mobilize progressive people to create a better economy. There are two story lines: 1. populist and 2. elitist.

Suggestions were made by various members:

Stephen suggested that we avoid the negative in “Not alone”. Asa likes that the message encourages individual action that goes to the two big things to make an impact.

Michael – prominently call for “Take Action”

Jim – the three statements speak to people at a personal level.

Stephen – convey the point that we are looking for substantive action. Also, the idea of ownership of the problem and solution should be in there.

Michael – building on a strong start. Newton leads the state in aggregation, so extend from our strength into these other areas. Appeal to the sense of community.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:15 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Jim Purdy