

Newton Citizens Commission on Energy

City of Newton

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

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



Mayor Ruthanne Fuller

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Minutes of the Meeting of May 27, 2020

The meeting was held on Zoom.

Attending: Halina Brown, Beverley Craig, Michael Gevelber, Stephen Grody, Asa Hopkins, Jon Kantar, Jon Klein, Jim Purdy, Puja Vohra; Cory Alperstein, Fred Brustman, Ed Craddock, Lucia Dolan, Phil Hanser, Jane Hanser

The meeting minutes for April 2020 were accepted as corrected.

1. Updates on the recent activities around CAP implementation, and next steps

1. Current activities in Climate Action Plan implementation

Halina listed current activities:

- The NCCE Energy Coach website in development
- The Communications Working Group,
- Steps toward a Green leadership Collaborative by Puja, Jon Kantar, and Halina
- EV taskforce by Michael,
- Developing public access to HERS ratings by Stephen
- The City Council's zoning redesign being followed by Jim, Jon Kantar and Cory,
- The Heat Smart program by Bev,
- The Green Newton "Take Action" website by Bev, Cory, and other GN members
- People are working on a logo for climate action and a story line for the narrative.
- Halina is working to get a landing page for all climate action efforts on the City's website, with links to the CAP and the working groups.

Energy Coach website: Jon Klein made a push a few weeks ago. He made a demo of the website (newtoneneergycoach.org.) with improved navigation. Jon needs some technical assistance on content of certain topics, e.g., home remodeling; Bev and Jon Kantar are working on this. Jon Kantar suggested

that the website could have sortable Q&A by topic, e.g., water heating. Bev plans to create a section on remodeling.

Jon Klein said we should be able to proceed by starting with a list of high level questions. Jon Kantar noted that there are probably already some of these in the Heat Smart website FAQs – but those questions don't currently address remodeling, for example. Jon Klein suggested that we get a group together to come up with the Qs and content of answers, then he can write it up.

Michael suggested that we can review building permits to get a distribution of kitchen remodels, etc. ISD does a monthly data dump. Asa said we can get a quick dataset of the last 1000 permits, but Jon Kantar said it would be difficult, because the information of interest is in the brief narrative description, not numbers, so there is other key information that one would want to know. Asa responded that detail is not needed for our purpose.

Stephen has looked at this data; we can get it through newtonma.gov. Stephen will send what he has to Jon Klein.

Heat Smart: Bev said the planned June 15 webinar will cover these topics. Information is on the HeatSmart website, media section; there are also videos. Stephen said that the case studies should be identified by type, e.g., minimizing cost, with a full menu of types. Bev offered the example of what homeowners with a dying AC system can do. Stephen added that we should indicate the level of expenditure so that people are able to decide what they can undertake. Jon Kantar suggested that we can develop criteria and create a table summarizing options with symbols for cost (\$bills) and level of greenness that can be achieved (tree symbols).

Jon Klein will go to the HeatSmart site for the info. Cory proposed that we should get links to the information onto a variety of websites so more people can find it; and cover a variety of topics such as solar, that would be found on some websites but not others.

Jon Klein noted that we also need to finalize a list of energy coaches. He suggested that we keep it in the inner circle of experts as we get the site up and running, then expand.

Jon Kantar cautioned that there could be the appearance of conflict of interest, because he and other building experts do paid work in some of these areas. However, Stephen thinks this is OK if it is disclosed in advance.

Bev does a once a month group on home efficiency. These are listed on the Green Newton calendar.

Jim asked about EV information for the Energy Coach website; Jon Klein said he has it covered.

2. Heat Smart Program

A Request for Qualifications (RFQ) is out to choose installers who are vetted for both kinds of work; there two reviewers on the Heat Smart committee to select them. Puja will point a couple of companies she knows to HeatSmart for heat pump/water heaters. Stephen concludes that there is no financial interest by any party, so there are no conflicts.

3. Green Leadership Collaborative

Puja described a meeting with the Boston GLC and information from them that we could apply. Newton staff and the two utilities have identified the top 16 electric and top 10 gas customers. We are getting their information together, but don't plan to reach out to them right now (owing to Covid). Puja and Halina have talked with Ann Berwick and Bill Ferguson about how to proceed. They shared a list with Puja and Michael. They will categorize the top customers by building type – e.g., grocery, hospitality, office/real estate, apartment housing. They will then characterize these customers and how they compare to national baselines for these building sectors. And they will identify targets for each sector. The City will develop a channel of communication to these owners, and identify modes of involvement (e.g., providing incentives to their employees).

Michael cautioned that he thinks the City staff is not being forthcoming, but they are listening though, and need to be convinced.

Halina said there has been some back-and-forth with the City, and we now have been granted permission to proceed.

4. HERS Rating Disclosure

Stephen reported a breakthrough on publishing HERS scores. He has the HERS scores from Inspectional Services Department (ISD) files for the past 10 years organized and accessible through a web interface, with no password required. Jonathan Yeo is cooperating with this effort.

The HERS ratings became available in hard copy list form with street addresses and associated scores. He made it map-searchable through MapGeo. Or searchable by the parcel ID from assessor database.

Asa asked: are there HERS ratings that are not related to a building permit? Stephen said yes, there is a state legal requirement to submit the rating. Also, some owners will want to get their rating in the accessible database.

5. Zoning Reform

Halina discussed the zoning reform process with Jay Walter. Weekly tasks are posted on the city website (Zoning and Planning Committee).

A current list of upcoming topics:

ability to build houses as small as 800 sf (currently 1400).

density – permitting multifamily within ½ mile from major T stations/stops, and no mega-houses within these zones.

ZAP will deliberate all summer; there is a weekly newsletter from planning

One proposal is that energy use by new houses is not to exceed the energy use of the house(s) that were torn down.

We need someone to work with Green Newton's Building Standards Committee and with Engine 6 over the summer to coordinate involvement with ZAP.

6. Comparative Costs of Heat Pumps Versus Natural Gas

Phil Hanser gave a presentation on this topic. Bottom line: it's about the relative efficiency of the systems and the comparative energy prices.

A heat pump more efficient in creating hot air than a natural gas-fired system, but electric rates are currently higher than gas rates.

Heat pump capacity declines below 5 degrees F, but is very efficient even below that temperature.

The conclusion is that the ratio of electric vs gas is not advantageous at current energy prices.

Bev said the big question is a new construction discussion, which is very different than retrofit. A 15% difference is a tiny margin. Jon Kantar is talking with CADMUS about this.

Asa pointed out that using rooftop solar to meet the new load addresses this cost disparity.

JP – the presentation to PST from a representative of Brookline's gas ban bylaw made a good comparison, that the town meeting seemed to find persuasive; they included both capital and operating costs in their comparison and included state incentives that reduce the capital cost to the homeowner.

Bev noted that people buying new heating/cooling systems should do everything they can to make the home energy efficient (air sealing and insulation of the envelope). Those improvements are highly cost effective in reducing overall heating and cooling cost.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:15 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Jim Purdy