

Newton Citizens Commission on Energy

City of Newton

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



Mayor Ruthanne Fuller

Halina Brown (Chair), Michael Gevelber, Stephen Grody, Philip Hanser, 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,

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Minutes of the Meeting of September 23, 2020

The meeting was held on Zoom.

Attending: Halina Brown, Michael Gevelber, Stephen Grody, Asa Hopkins, Jon Kantar, Jim Purdy; Cory Alperstein, Fred Brustman, Lucia Dolan

1. Consideration of Halina's draft memo to Zoning and Planning Committee

Halina summarized the zoning redesign process as it now stands.

Key issues in Halina's draft memo

1. Proposed reduction in size of new houses, which is the fundamental way to reduced ghg emissions.
2. Passive House vs net zero
3. Deconstruction to salvage materials with embodied energy
4. Half mile zone for multifamily
5. Accessory dwelling units
6. Streamlining permitting process.

Asa suggested that the proposed zoning should refer to heavily used roads rather than transit line, because that creates opposition to transit. Also, he is not sure there should be a size limit for houses; better to use an energy limit or to encourage energy reduction

Halina proposed that in conversion of an existing house to multiple units, the maximum unit size should be 1250 sf, or 950 sf for affordable units.

Asa suggested that the key question is what are the right "hooks" to incorporate in the zoning to trigger and incentivize energy reduction.

Michael said he wants to be clearer about the process and NCCE's position on the zoning redesign:

what kind of area definition should be used?

He agrees with Halina's point about discouraging teardowns – but might want to use a new system for framing the issue. For example, we don't care so much about absolute floor area, but rather should focus on area per person.

Halina believes that “livable space” is the important measure, not gross square footage or building footprint.

Halina will speak to the City's lead staffer Zach LeMel on Friday September 25; he may be waiting for someone else to introduce the climate-related issues. She will also discuss the memo with Deb Crossley.

Halina will use the memo in its current form to discuss informally with those people. She will also share it with Green Newton and other organizations with a stake in these issues.

Halina asked whether Asa has more ideas for leveraging the zoning process to reduce ghg.

Lucia said that in the current memo to City Council from Councilor Pam Wright [who is on the zoning and Planning Committee], the Councilor discusses whether and how people build to the limit that the zoning permits.

Jon Kantar likes the Halina's memo, but he pointed out that the Code and the proposals are complicated, and there may be unforeseen ramifications. While the City's draft defines house types [based on the Pattern Book analysis done in 2019], and assigns the “Type A” house a maximum size of 6000 sf, there are probably few parcels in the City that would support this large a house.

Asa suggested that for buildings that replace an existing structure, the focus should be on maximum effect on total ghg, not the largest house size that is possible under the Code.

Halina asked members how to leverage the zoning to reduce ghg? Stephen replied that if the objective is to churn the installed base and replace existing structures with higher performing structures, then the zoning should provide that the owner: (a) gets their desired step-up in size; in return for (b) PH construction and expected longevity, and (c) gets the procedural benefit of a free pass through historical review commissions. Jim asked if this issue would apply only within historic districts (which has regulations and a separate review process. Stephen and others replied that historic issues are considered even outside official historic districts.

So, Stephen's answer to Halina's question about leverage is that the leverage comes from allowing the desired size.

Asa added that leverage comes also by creating regulatory hurdles that slow down poor construction, and streamline high quality energy-efficient construction. Stephen agrees.

Stephen noted that owner-occupied single family homes are the most common residential building type in Newton, so it is appropriate to focus on that building type.

Jon pointed out that zoning needs to focus on the review and approval process in order to stay clear of the building code [which municipalities are not permitted to go beyond on materials and methods].

Asa agreed and emphasized the importance of a faster, simpler, approval process as an incentive.

Jon noted that we don't understand the real numbers of houses that pose a problem – are they common or rare?

Halina doesn't think the NCCE is in a position to do this kind of analysis, but the Planning Department can and should.

Jon suggested that we need real examples in the zoning memo, as well as ideas from other cities; but he would request the Planning Department to analyze how many lots will be affected by these provisions.

It was suggested that any incremental change is an opportunity to limit the City's additional carbon footprint.

Asa proposed that there's not categorical limits, but the extra process is what governs. The memo should say the zoning process can offer incentives for the kinds of things that are desired for ghg reduction, and the staff should develop these ideas into technical provisions.

Cory suggested, "such as all electric".

Asa said we're being pulled in two directions: a) smaller is better and b) people are building houses that are not energy efficient.

Stephen suggested that "the trend is your friend." So make use of it.

Halina asked Asa or Stephen to wordsmith this concept and get it back to her within a few days. Asa agreed.

The next ZAP meeting is October 6; Halina will talk with Zach LeMel and Councilor Deb Crossley this Friday (9/25), but it doesn't need to be in final form for that.

Michel emphasized that electrification should be a required part of high building performance.

Jim summarized that revisions to the memo will be made after Halina talks to LeMel and Crossley; then it would be sent to the ZAP Committee.

Cory added: and also the Green Newton Building Standards Committee.

Jon noted that the general ideas in the draft zoning memo are really good, but some of the numbers are problematic, e.g. the maximum square footage for a house. Halina responded that we can put forward the idea without the details.

Stephen asked who is our audience? What we write might inform Crossley's framework that she puts forward in ZAP.

Halina responded that the customer is City Council ultimately, but they don't all recognize energy use and GHG as a zoning problem; So we want the memo to identify the problem and offer a solution. She will add a "Goal" section at the top of the memo.

Jon added, and it should include Stephen's suggestion to use the zoning code to motivate people to save energy.

2. Progress on Energy Coach website

Members discussed the need for a liability disclaimer on the home page, such as, “This is a good place to start but you should do your own research on contractors, etc.”

Halina asked Jim to offer assistance to Jon Klein on coach training and other matters.

3. Newton Power Choice

Halina reported that Ann Berwick says they will bid on next contract in November. The market price of RECs is currently very high. So they expect to need to reduce the renewable percentage in the default.

Halina pointed out that the opt-up campaign resulted in 7% of households moving to the 100% renewables option.

Halina asked if we should promote opt-down for the many households that can't survive the current pandemic economic environment.

Michael responded that we should find out the price structure from Paul Gromer. Michael will do it.

Cory stated that Mothers Out Front, 350 and others want to increase the default level of renewables. We should go back to our beginning position from last time.

Halina suggested that Michael can run some numbers; then 350, MOF, and GN should organize a response to the City.

Michael asked how many households are affected by Covid? Jon suggested that the state unemployment system may have data by zipcode.

How many people are turning to the City's help fund? Cory suggested that we could put together a fund to support people with insufficient means (like last time).

Michael said we need to know how many people really are in economic straits.

Cory suggested the City should maybe go for a shorter term contract.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:50 pm.

Respectfully submitted by Jim Purdy