

# Newton Citizens Commission on Energy

City of Newton

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

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, Fred Brustman, Edward Craddock, Ira Krepchin



Mayor Ruthanne Fuller

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## Minutes of the Meeting of February 24, 2021

The meeting was held on Zoom.

Attending: Halina Brown, Michael Gevelber, Stephen Grody, Philip Hanser, Asa Hopkins, Jon Kantar, Jim Purdy, Puja Vohra; Beverly Craig, Lucia Dolan, Jane Hanser, Bob Persons, Philip Vergragt; Ann Berwick, Liora Silkes

### 1. Introduction of new Energy Coach on the City staff, Liora Silkes

Members and other attendees introduced themselves to Liora, the newly hired Newton Energy Coach.

Later in the meeting, Ann Berwick introduced Liora and the process that selected her from 61 applicants. Liora recently worked for MassSave regarding construction contractors who are doing new construction work that includes heating/cooling systems. She has a social science background and has focused on how to persuade people to do things, both individuals and at a more macro level. She worked on the Rhode Island Climate Action Plan, and she did stormwater work in Seattle on communication with homeowners.

For Newton, Ann said, Liora will be doing the biggest part of working with homeowners and tenants – moving them toward Heat Pumps, insulation, solar, and EVs. She will be part of the team with Ann, Jennifer Steel, Nicole Freedman, and Bill Ferguson. There is lots of internal communication on the City team.

### 2. Updating Newton's Greenhouse Gas Inventory

Michael reported on work with he is doing with Karen Shilo to update the GHG inventory. He requested data from NGrid and Eversource on electric heating and gas heating by customers.

Bev Craig pointed out that a missing item in the GHG inventory is refrigerant leaks from supermarkets in Newton. These chemicals are on the order of 1 to 2 thousand times more potent than CO2 in atmospheric heating impact.

We could estimate the quantity of leakage based on the amount of refrigerants resupplied to these sites each year.

Puja noted that the Boston Green Ribbon commission looked at this issue and reported some results. Newton's upcoming Green Leadership Collaborative could discuss this issue when it is up and running.

### **3. Implementation of Climate Action Plan: Persuading People to Take Action**

Philip Hanser commented that in trying to persuade people it is necessary need to couch the proposition carefully. Ann used the example of trying to get people to opt up to 100% renewable power under Newton Power Choice, which yielded only about 7 percent opting up. Michael commented that Ann is right – which is why the default level is the most important part of Power Choice; (it was raised to 80% Class 1 renewables in the second contract, which is about to begin.)

Ann said a current issue is how to get past the reluctance of dealers to steer people to EVs, which use less maintenance than internal combustion cars.

Bev commented that 5 minutes at a Boy Scout meeting, a church group, PTO meeting, or Historic Newton meeting is going to do more than anything else to persuade the public to consider buying an EV.

Liora added that rental cars and ZipCars, could act as a test drive introducing people to an EV.

Asa provided a web link: <https://www.mass.gov/guides/massachusetts-low-emission-vehicle-lev-program>

Halina asked is there an analogous opportunity in home retrofits?

Jon Kantar said – every time heating or cooling equipment fails is an opportunity to replace it with a more efficient system; so it is important to get vendors up to speed – lunch and learn programs, meeting with wholesale vendors, etc. Home Depot has hot water heaters including heat pump units, but no one is trying to sell them to customers.

Asa commented that we should be careful in drawing conclusions from Power Choice, which is different in kind from decisions on much more costly repairs and upgrades to home systems. The critical time for persuasion is before something breaks; also, comfort is a major issue that can be improved along with energy efficiency. Halina agreed it's an important distinction.

Philip Vergragt said he has lots of experience in outreach (peer-to-peer etc.) on EVs, but it is not easy. Worries about EV purchase price, range anxiety, etc. are beliefs acquired a few years ago, when things were much different.

Ann commented that the opt-up to 100% was significant experience in what people are prepared to do. (For example, people have said that finding their electric bill for their Eversource account number was a significant barrier.)

### **4. Home Energy Scores**

Halina posed the question how do you get people to think about their home energy use? One way is to require that they get an energy score when they do improvements on their houses. Newton's Inspectional Services Department (ISD) issues about 3500 residential building permits per year. Assume 3000 are for

more than \$10K, so if they would get an energy score (at a cost of \$150-\$300, which is a small percent of the total cost), that would bring them into the conversation.

Jon Kantar said this may not be the right time to require energy scoring. There is worry in Mass DOER about doing this prematurely and triggering backlash that sets the whole effort behind. Whoever sticks their neck out first is going to get the backlash, so let DOER go first, as Ian Finlayson (Director of DOER Energy Efficiency Division) would recommend. Ann agrees.

Bev said that the Cape Light Compact will be the first to go forward with energy scores, because Eversource and NGrid botched it. Massachusetts CEC is developing its own template for a scorecard, which is designed to be updated after an energy improvement is made; details are still to be worked out.

Jon Kantar warned that the real estate people will lobby the City Council and it will be similar to what happened with zoning redesign.

Halina said, but we need to change the conversation. We want to get people to talk about their energy score. Philip Vergragt said that in the Netherlands, this kind of system has been in place for years, publicly available, and it does change the conversation.

Ann Berwick said that Councilor Crossley has asked the Newton Law Dept for an opinion. Ann pays attention to the advice of Bev and Ian, who are very close to the issue.

Liora noted “for future reference, Portland OR requires energy scores when selling homes:  
<https://www.pdxhes.com/>

There also is an extraordinarily underutilized Mass Save incentive given to contractors who report system downsizing. It is very hidden within the web page, but they're working to make it more well known:  
<https://www.masssave.com/en/learn/partners/become-a-measurequick-contractor>

Bev Craig agrees: Portland OR requires it and Burlington VT is very close to doing so, but this has been tried by Governor Baker in the past and it was killed by the real estate industry. For 10 years now DOER has been working to get it into the MassSave program. It was in their last 3 year plan. The Cape Light Compact and Unitil are about to start an initiative on this. Eversource and NGrid screwed up their relationship with vendors, so it's going to be at least a year before they can try again. Bev is frustrated by the slow pace, but feels strongly that we won't have success if we do it on our own.

Bev Craig in chat: “My opinion: year one, focus as much as possible on spreading the word re EVs and all new options. At same time, focus on people getting their home electrification ready by insulation and air sealing significantly- use MassSave as first step and then go beyond. Focus on new construction net zero. Jonathan's education efforts with HVAC contractors, and remodeling firm, and architects is best approach is best approach in my mind than other mechanical system approaches.

Halina asked, so what is the best time to do this? We need to move the CAP forward, and we should be willing to take a risk. Bev said she agrees with the need to expedite action, but for something that is on the verge of happening, it may not be a good strategic choice.

Jon Kantar said there are other things we could do with our time that could get more bang for the buck. E.g., a heat loss analysis of the house. Come up with a form that owner or contractor could fill out, and that might be more productive. Introduce the vocabulary to the public. Heat loss analysis is a state energy code requirement that isn't well done at present.

Phil Hanser asked what the enforcement mechanism is to get this heat loss analysis done, and appropriate sizing, etc. Puja said it is mostly left to the jurisdiction to enforce this. Phil replied – that’s the point: ISD should be doing it.

Michael commented that a heating contractor has only to check a box on a form to meet this requirement. What you really want is to get a comprehensive analysis of the costs/benefits of an upgrade. A Lunch-and-Learn program might be good, but we need to think of the best way to get contractors to do this.

Asa posted the following links in the chat:

<https://nate-the-house-whisperer.ck.page/c8038e4c13>

<https://www.hvac20.com>

<https://twitter.com/energysmartohio/status/1362805082136412163/photo/1>

Halina asked, so how do we translate this into a new set of norms?

Ann commented that this conversation suggests that we need to talk with contractors a lot.

Phil said he would like to see a stick as well as a carrot.

Jon Kantar suggested that we get someone who can do good heat loss calcs as a service to contractors who need to do it.

Bev commented that the fact that people spend more time at home lately is an opportunity to sell services to make the home more comfortable.

Stephen asked Liora, having listened to this conversation about market dynamics, etc.: as a social scientist how do you structure communication with homeowners?

Liora replied yes, it’s very important. And there are issues such as supply chain in home improvements and renovations, including HVAC. We can go beyond the anecdotal level to more systematic research.

Stephen suggested that we should set for ourselves a task to sort through these issues and identify the ones that are essential to making good public policy. “So, my question is how you go about doing it?”

Liora said we need to start by having conversations with homeowners to surface the key issues. You don’t need years of data to do this.

Phil Hanser said he wants to push back: data lags development, e.g., changes in VMTs due to Covid that have changed mobility patterns, perhaps for the long term. So, what if people say “why the great rush?,” since we won’t have key data for a couple of years, which is after the fact.

Liora said we do have a lot of data on demographics, the year the house was built, ownership vs rental, etc.

Phil replied that the point is to be able to answer when asked “Why the great rush?” He thinks there are good answers to this question.

Ann said, It’s a completely new world. E.g., what will happen with Covid variants that might extend the period of staying at home. Things we can’t control or foresee. She appreciates the point about heat loss calculation – how it is done is an important area of inquiry, not just whether it was done or not.

Ann raised the issue of electrification of heating and the efforts to get a home rule petition that permits Newton to regulate this. She is talking with Councilor Crossley about this. We need to fill in what kind of authority the City needs to require things.

Halina said, regarding ISD issues, how to help contractors do a better job with energy needs analysis; how to reach the homeowners. Liora has lots of work she can do.

#### **5. Climate Action Plan Progress Meeting, February 17 2021**

Halina reported that the CAP progress meeting on 2/17 brought very good feedback. She presented along with City staff. The presentations emphasized that year 1 was setting foundation, year 2 will be the year to make progress.

Philip Vergragt said that on March 30, the Mayor is to introduce the Energy Coach to the public.

#### **6. Citizen Energy Coach program**

Halina said that we need to organize the citizen energy coach program. Jon Klein is transferring it to the City. But we should have those schedules set up for the 30th.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:00 pm.

Respectfully submitted by Jim Purdy