

Newton Citizens Commission on Energy

City of Newton

<http://www.newtonma.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



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Minutes of the Meeting of March 31, 2021

The meeting was held on Zoom.

Attending: Halina Brown, Michael Gevelber, Stephen Grody, Philip Hanser, Asa Hopkins, Jon Kantar, Jim Purdy, Puja Vohra; Fred Brustman, Lucia Dolan, Councilor Tarik Lucas, Councilor John Oliver, Scott Rodman.

1. Recap of the Mayor's event introducing the Energy Coach and input received in breakout groups.

The Commission reviewed the March 30 meeting with the Mayor's introduction of the Energy Coach Liora Silkes; it included breakout groups on what people are doing, interested in doing, and finding to be barriers to taking action. It was attended by NCCE members Halina, Jim, Michael, and Cory and other people active in Newton climate mitigation measures.

Michael suggested that we should develop or join a network of cities/towns and MAPC to stay current on what others are doing. Puja suggested that MCAN might be better than MAPC in networking – it is a broader group of cities and towns that engaged in these efforts. Puja will reach out to MCAN to investigate how Newton and other communities active in Climate Action can interact with, and learn from, each other, with MCAN serving as a convener.

John Kantar noted that the Mayor attributed the pie chart of GHG emissions to him, but it was developed by Peter Barrer.

Halina observed that there are a number of these pie charts with slight differences; we should stick to one version – ours – which has 62% due to residential housing and transportation. She also noted that the Energy Commission and especially Jon Klein should have been credited with respect to the Citizen Energy Coach website.

2. Results of conversations about the agenda for the NCCE work in 2021

Halina talked individually to several members to get suggestions about our work in the coming year.

Michael said that our job is to keep a spotlight on whether the City is really doing the job in substance.

Halina said it is NCCE's job to create a vision, channel discussion, and create a consensus on action the City should take.

Several members brought up the topic of the Green Leadership Collaborative, a part of the Climate Action Plan that enlists the dozen or so major owners of commercial and institutional property in Newton. Several members agreed that we should make progress on this element in 2021, which begins with contacting businesses regarding their own climate action plans and actions they are taking. Owing to Covid, this element of the Newton CAP was postponed rather than trying to build the collaboration through Zoom meetings

Halina noted that Boston's Green Leadership Collaborative has developed an enforceable energy intensity standard for various sectors. Should we work to develop similar standards in Newton?

Asa suggested creating a cohort of residents who are asking more from their contractors and thereby raising the bar for contractors.

Stephen supports Halina's suggestion on priorities – getting information to homeowners makes a lot of sense. The MOU Working Group and the City CAP team share responsibilities, but don't have the all the background necessary to develop policy or lead implementation of the plan

Phil said that the MOU (with Eversource and NGrid) involves marketing to achieve CAP goals. But also acquiring data for analysis.

Asa said that implementers are not the same as policy makers. So the City Team (i.e., CAP Implementation Working Group) should get input from others on setting policies and targets. Halina added that the Implementation working group will track progress and NCCE will analyze the data they collect.

Philip noted that MOU tracking is easy – the utilities have the data; but outside the MOU, the City or others need to assemble data and analyze progress.

Halina said that Newton COO Jonathan Yeo suggests that updates to CAP should happen only once yearly; she thinks there is some need to do it two or three times a year. Periodic meetings with Ann, Bill, and others should track progress on new construction, existing buildings, EVs, etc. The City team should collect the data in the “big Four” areas (weatherization, electrification of HVAC, EV's, and solar installations) three times a year.

Michael said, we know what actions will have a major impact. There's a long list of items, many of which have only a small effect on CAP metrics. We should focus on the top 5-10 metrics. Our job is to shine a spotlight on the areas that make the most difference. Two or three of us should identify these key metrics. (Not all are quantitative.) Call it “endpoints.” Ask Ann and Bill to meet on this three times a year.

Phil suggested that we get Liora involved in the discussion of metrics – to get her familiar with it in depth, why we chose those metrics, etc. John Kantar agreed.

It was agreed that Stephen will confer with Michael and identify the key 3-5 metrics which the Energy Commission will use to monitor progress in implementing the CAP and to ask the City Sustainability

team to report regularly (possibly every three or four months) to NCCE on progress, using these metrics. They may be numerical or not.

Halina will communicate with Demie Stathoplos about the specific role of the Implementation Working group in monitoring progress using the metrics.

Michael proposed that Liora should help to create a plan for contacting the roughly 20,000 Newton households.

3. Green Leadership Collaborative (“GLC”).

Puja noted that this effort went on hold last year; it will take time to identify the top players and get the Mayor to invite their participation. To get this established in 2021, in the next quarter we should set the parameters in coordination with Ann and Bill: what sectors, what goal tracking mechanism, and who are the partners within one or more sectors we want to get going this year. We need the Mayor to be involved in inviting and forming the GLC.

Halina agree with Stephen that our goal should be to get the GLC going this year.

Michael noted that Boston’s GLC has foundation funding. He suggested that we follow Boston’s lead on what works and what doesn’t. Boston has set targets for 2035 for various categories of buildings. He thinks the Newton’s perspective is too limited. Specifically, Michael proposed that learn from Boston’s Building Energy Reporting and Disclosure Ordinance Including a Building Performance Standard (BERDO) and develop one for Newton commercial properties.

Asa pointed out that in Newton the players are much fewer than in Boston – 12 can speak for most of the non-residential space. We can work with those 12 (or so) people to develop a BERDO, for example. It gives them a consistent message, but the biggest benefit is to get everyone on board and to own the solutions.

Jon suggested specific areas of action – e.g. refrigerant leakage, which has a potentially very large GHG impact. We can get some businesses focused on these key issues.

Puja said we were able to identify sectors based on usage and square footage: grocery, multifamily housing, office real estate, hospitality. The discussions about a Newton GLC left out Newton Wellesley Hospital (part of Mass General Brigham) and Boston College because they area already doing their own thing. In Boston, gathering and benchmarking data for the commercial sectors took two years before setting goals.

She said that John Cleveland, the Executive Director of Boston’s Green Ribbon Commission, was open to cooperating with us to help Newton do this. Asa noted that the City of Boston did its own work on defining sectors and setting goals; there was synergy with their Green Ribbon Commission, but they were separate efforts.

Halina asked, can emission standards for each commercial subsector be developed?

Phil asked, are the Boston standards fuel neutral? Do we want to make the GLC’s fuel neutral? Asa replied that there are specific standards for natural gas vs. other fuels, district heating systems, etc. The target is in terms of GHG emissions. Phil said his worry is about locking in fossil fuel technology for long term future.

Puja said that she and Michael talked about using EUI (Energy Use Index) as the targets. Asa responded that an analogous GHG intensity would be more appropriate.

Puja provided a link: <https://www.boston.gov/departments/environment/building-energy-reporting-and-disclosure-ordinance>

Michael said establishing a leadership council is not the same thing as actually promulgating reporting standards and a compliance price, so that all the major property owners are on a downward trajectory. It takes a lot of time and effort, but Michael's assessment is that it will be "a time sink" for the effort put into it. He urges that we look seriously at what will actually produce results, e.g., a compliance fee.

Halina said we have two different visions here: specific emission standards versus a "Kumbayah" gathering that doesn't get down to specifics. They are not mutually exclusive, but compete for our time and effort.

Cory said that another major item for 2021 is the need to track a Newton home rule petition on gas connections. (Brookline, Lexington, and Arlington are doing this.) If Newton's City Council votes to adopt a home rule petition, that can move us forward more quickly than the GLC mechanism we've been discussing.

Stephen said that he is wondering if our next step in considering a BERDO for Newton is for Halina, Michael, and Asa to meet with the Mayor to discuss whether there is any way to get legal department buy in.

Jon Kantar advised not putting the Mayor in that position.

Asa asked, is there anything about Newton that makes it different from Cambridge or Boston in this respect?

Halina asked, has the performance standard been formally adopted in Boston? Asa replied, not yet for enforcement – there is a little further to go on that; but disclosure has been in place for several years.

Phil suggested, so maybe the goal for this year should be to get the reporting structure in place. He has the impression that the roadblock on reporting doesn't exist for business property.

Stephen said that the only problem with residential disclosure, is that state bodies are not empowered to require it. Anyone can volunteer to disclose, but not necessarily be compelled.

Halina said in summary that it seems that we can compel commercial owners but not residential. Stephen disagrees about the residential.

Phil asked, can we do a copy-and-paste from Cambridge and Boston on the commercial side?

Puja proposed that we start with talking with, say, five commercial space owners to build familiarity and get more understanding of what they are doing. That's what she did in Rhode Island. We would get better reception from them if we go that way.

Halina said, so begin with data gathering, then disclosure, and following that, performance standards.

Jon Kantar said we could mirror the systems used in Boston and Cambridge, which might be faster after 3-4 businesses are on board.

Halina gave the example that in the 80s, people believed in a collaborative approach on pollution control; industry was offered a seat at the table with EPA. But progress was made only after EPA proposed

enforceable standards. That brought industries to the table. In her experience, a collaborative approach just didn't work. So we can talk about what commercial owners are willing to do, but it will be effective only after there is a non-negotiable mandate coming down the pike.

Phil said that the City Council should adopt a regulation for owners in Newton. Get a BERDO in place.

Halina asked how do we wrap this up? She proposed a small group of NCCE members prepare a description of the disclosure and reporting ordinances in Cambridge and Boston, as well as the standards that are in place there. We need to get clarity, so first put this information together on a piece of paper. Then approach players in Newton as suggested by Puja.

Asa provided the link <https://www.buildingrating.org>

Puja said she needs to talk with Halina to clarify what we are proposing before discussing it with Bill and Ann.

Phil said we know less about the commercial sector than residential. So is there a way to establish where we're starting and what data we need to get?

Asa offered: just promulgate a regulation and see who comes forward.

Jon Kantar suggested that we look for useful overlap with big owners in Boston.

Puja said that might traction in the grocery sector, but not necessarily other subsectors.

It was resolved that Halina, Asa, Phil Hanser, Michael and Puja will further develop the idea of introducing in Newton a policy requiring large commercial enterprises in Newton to report their GHG emissions and to meet numerical emission standards. This would be a phased policy, possibly in connection with establishing the Green Leadership Collaborative. They will present their proposal to NCCE at the next monthly meeting.

Cory will set up a Google group for the NCCE to keep documents.

4. Scorecard in Newton requirement: opinion from the Legal Department

Halina suggested requiring energy scorecards for houses receiving major renovations. Newton's Legal Department memo (provided to Halina by Deb Crossley) says that because the state gave the scorecard responsibility to DOER, it pre-empts whatever any municipality might want to do in this area.

Phil noted that it's a standard presumption that state laws and regulations pre-empt local action, but Halina argued that DOER doesn't require scorecards; it just collects data at the option of the homeowner; the Legal Department also says it is not legal to post the scorecard information publicly. Also, that in any case, the City would have no practical mechanism to enforce compliance.

Jon Kantar said that this is analogous to the current situation of requiring a fire inspection as part of sale, but leaving it to insurance company or bank to enforce it. Phil said he doesn't understand how they can claim a right of confidentiality.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:00 pm.

Respectfully submitted by Jim Purdy