

## **Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council Annual Report for 2020**

Area Council Members in 2020: Bruce Blakely, Bob Burke, Barbara Darnell, Groot Gregory, Nathaniel Lichtin, Srdjan Nedeljkovic, Larry Rosenberg (joined starting with the June 4<sup>th</sup> meeting), Amanda Theunissen, and Amy Wayne.

Ex-officio City Councilors: Bill Humphrey, Brenda Noel, Holly Ryan

During 2020, the NHNAC met on the first Thursday of each month, except as noted below. Meeting agendas were posted on the City of Newton's electronic posting board. Area Council meetings in January to March were held at the Brigham House, 20 Hartford Street in Newton Highlands. Due to the Covid-19 crisis, subsequent meetings from April to December were held virtually using the Zoom platform.

Minutes of each meeting are available on the City of Newton website under the link for the Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council.

Financial Report: The NHNAC has an account at Village Bank in Newton. The balance at the beginning of the year was \$20,168.19 and the balance at the end of the year was \$17,169.13.

### January:

Officers for 2020 were elected as follows: Nathaniel Lichtin, President, Barbara Darnell, Vice President, Groot Gregory, Treasurer, and Srdjan S. Nedeljkovic, Secretary. The first topic was about the development proposal for 1149-1151 Walnut Street. The proposal from Talanian Realty intends to build 26 apartments in a 4-story building on this site. A discussion ensued that included topics of affordable units, underground parking, and the design of the project. John Pelletier proposed bicycle safety enhancements at this location. Other agenda items included a discussion of the Demolition Delay and Landmarking ordinance, and whether the Stevens building should be given Landmark status. It was noted that the housing development at 956 Walnut Street had been approved by City Council. John Rice announced that the annual Soup Social would be taking place on February 8. The work of Robert Fizek and John Osbourne in getting water to the Hope Fountain was commended. A brief update was provided about a development project at the Wellesley Office Park and about a development proposal for 24 residential units in Waban Center.

### February:

Gabriel Holbrow from the City of Newton Planning Department was introduced as the new city community engagement specialist, replacing Lily Canan Reynolds. An update was provided about the proposal for a retail marijuana store at 1158 Beacon Street. Area Councilor Theunissen and a number of Newton residents presented a number of concerns about the proposed facility regarding on-site parking, impacts on traffic, and proximity to the residential neighborhood, Cold Spring Park, and the Zervas School. The Area Council agreed to write a

letter to City Council expressing these concerns. An update was provided about a proposed development project at 1114 Beacon Street for a 27-unit residential building with underground parking for 50 cars. Further discussion ensued about changes proposed to the Demolition Delay and Landmarking Ordinance. An update was provided about the Newton Highlands Parking District, including a proposal approved by City Council to allow residents and businesses to obtain permits to park on certain parts of Lincoln Street between Woodward Street and Hartford Street. City Community Planner Gabriel Holbrow provided information about the schedule for the City's Zoning Redesign process, with a goal of adopting a completely new Zoning Ordinance by December 2021. A brief announcement was made about the upcoming Soup Social on February 8. The MBTA track and signal replacement project and the Newton Highlands accessibility project were discussed. A temporary raised platform on the westbound side of the Newton Highlands station will be extended 140 feet. A discussion took place about the role of Ward City Councilors at Area Council meeting, and how there was not an expectation that all 3 Ward councilors would attend every Area Council meeting.

#### March:

Attorney Alan Schlesinger provided an update on the 1149-1151 Walnut Street development project. Architect Michael Liu, a resident of Newton Highlands, presented a modified design for the project. Community feedback ensued. General support for the project was provided. The topic of shuttle buses in Newton Highlands was discussed, along with the location and impact of shuttle bus stations. Concerns were expressed about the impact of shuttle buses on local businesses. Planning for the upcoming Village Day celebration was discussed, as several people expressed concern about large gatherings due to the recent Covid-19 virus outbreak. A decision was made to increase pricing for booths and for food vendors. A discussion ensued about the musical venue and the road race. It was noted that a meeting between local residents and representatives from the Price Center was in the process of being planned regarding the Christina Street Pedestrian Bridge. An update was provided about the proposed development project at 1114 Beacon Street, including concerns about water table issues and the underground parking that is being proposed. A recap of the Soup Social was provided. It was noted that the Newton Zoning Redesign project would be resuming soon. Meetings to discuss the MBTA Better Bus Project and bike lanes on Beacon Street are forthcoming in March. It was announced that Crystal Lake would be treated with aluminum to bind phosphorus to reduce algae blooms. A discussion ensued about Area Council goals for 2020. Proposals were made for work on a postcard to promote community engagement and a proposal for a sign on the Walnut Street MBTA bridge. John Rice informed the Area Council about the designation of John O'Hara Square at Lincoln and Walnut Streets. A number of beautification efforts were suggested.

#### April:

The meeting was held virtually for the first time due to the Covid-19 crisis and requirements for social distancing. It was noted that the City had applied for a grant to move forward with establishing pedestrian access across the Christina Street bridge. It was noted that the current proposal for the 1114 Beacon Street development project included only residential units without commercial space. Concern was expressed about the loss of commercial space.

Regarding the Union Twist retail marijuana store proposal, issues about parking and traffic were discussed at a recent City of Newton Land Use Committee meeting. Due to the Covid-19 crisis, the Area Council voted to cancel Village Day for 2020. Area Council Treasurer Groot Gregory noted that he would issue refunds to those who had paid for booths for the now-cancelled Village Day. A discussion ensued about other ways that the Area Council could promote community engagement during the pandemic. Robert Fizek announced that he had purchased a pump to enable the Hope Fountain to function. It was decided to purchase a Zoom account subscription to enable future Area Council meeting to take place virtually at least during the time of the pandemic. Efforts to design a banner for the Walnut Street MBTA bridge and for a community engagement postcard were discussed. Long time Newton resident Larry Rosenberg expressed an interest in joining the Area Council. It was noted that the former owner of Walnut Market, Mo Khalaj, had transferred the business to a new owner, Matt Santarpio.

May:

Carol Stapleton from the Parks & Recreation Department, brought up the topic of compliance with social distancing requirements at Crystal Lake, as many people were noted to be congregating at the coves. Ms. Stapleton updated the Area Council about the redesign of Levingston Cove and about the plan to treat Crystal Lake with aluminum sulfate to bind phosphorus and reduce algae blooms. She noted that the lake may need to be treated again in 3-4 years. Ms. Stapleton also provided an update on plans for improved walking paths in Cold Spring Park. A discussion ensued about social distancing and the wearing of masks by people engaged in activities in public spaces outdoors. A plan was proposed for the Area Council to hold a virtual trivia contest, with questions about local history and architecture, with the Area Council providing winners with gift certificates to local restaurants. Mr. Larry Rosenberg was appointed by unanimous vote to be a member of the Area Council. Area Councilor Amanda Theunissen provided an update about the design of a postcard to be disseminated to the community to increase engagement with the Area Council. It was noted that Village Bank had provided the Area Council with a donation in support of Village Day that could be used for other activities. The issue of Zoning Redesign and impacts of shuttle buses were discussed. An update was provided about plans for the dedication of John O'Hara Square, noting that the ceremony will need to be postponed. It was also noted that the summer concert series at the Hyde Community Center had been cancelled for June, and that it may be cancelled for all of 2020.

June:

Larry Rosenberg was welcomed as the 9<sup>th</sup> member of the Area Council. A discussion ensued about the Union Twist marijuana dispensary proposal. Concerns about parking and traffic were again expressed. The hours of operation were also considered a problem, as was the proximity of the business to Cold Spring Park. The Area Council decided not to send another letter to the Land Use Committee, but to share the minutes of the Area Council meeting with them instead. An update was provided about the Area Council postcard, noting that a design was in the process of being developed. An update was also provided about the proposed Landmarking Ordinance. It was announced that the Crystal Lake bathhouse would be closed for the entire season and that the city will place "no trespassing" signs at the Lake. However, it was also noted that there were large numbers of people at all of the coves and using the lake. A note

was made of an upcoming Green line shutdown due to construction. The proposal for dedicated bicycle lanes on Beacon Street was mentioned. It was announced that the Zoning Redesign project was moving forward. It was noted that the developer for the proposed 1114 Beacon Street project was in the process of redesigning the project. Amy Wayne noted that the Area Council would be going forward with a community engagement virtual trivia contest. It was also noted that O'Hara's restaurant would have outside dining in the parking lot across the street.

#### July:

A discussion took place about parking and traffic flow at the proposed Union Twist marijuana dispensary on Beacon Street. A proposal was made for there to be just one curb cut into and out of the site, with new green space in the front setback. Further questions were asked about deliveries to this site. The Area Council decided to send another letter to City Council regarding impacts on traffic, pedestrian and bicycle safety, and parking related to this project. A discussion ensued about the proposal to hold a Newton Highlands trivia contest, and about ways to promote the activity. A discussion also ensued about the proposed Area Council postcard, and a design was presented that was supported by the Area Council. John Rice presented a plan for making a quilt from old Village Day T-shirts. It was noted that demolition at the proposed Northland development site would start during the next winter and that construction would start next summer. The plans for bicycle lanes on Beacon Street were discussed, noting that on-street parking will be prohibited along most of the corridor. Zoning Redesign was discussed, including a proposal to increase multifamily housing within  $\frac{1}{4}$  or  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile of transit. Bob Burke presented a letter to the Tab in support of local businesses. John Rice updated the Area Council about renovations at the Hyde Center. It was announced that Crystal Lake had recently been closed due to high bacteria counts. An update was provided about Drive-In Movies sponsored by Newton Pride.

#### August:

A discussion about Zoning Redesign took place, specifically about a proposal to expand multifamily housing through many residential areas of Newton. Problems such as loss of affordability of housing and potential negative environmental impacts of demolitions and new development were discussed. A finished version of the Area Council postcard was presented, and a decision was made to mail it to the community in early October. An update was provided about the Newton Highlands trivia contest, including how to publicize the contest and what prizes to award. It was noted that the Newton School Committee had decided to begin the school year with either all remote or hybrid learning. An update was provided about the proposed 1149-1151 Walnut Street apartment project, noting that the proposal had been filed for City Council review. It was noted that a state grant had been provided to study the feasibility of re-establishing pedestrian access across the Christina Street pedestrian bridge. Disappointment was expressed that a recent Eversource electrical line project did not include undergrounding of power lines on Woodward Street. It was noted that the Hyde Community Center was intending to hold two movie nights later in the summer, as long as Covid-19 regulations permit such a gathering.

#### September:

The development project to construct a 4-story 26-unit apartment building at 1149-1151 Walnut Street was discussed. It was proposed that the Area Council should write a letter in support of the project, specifically to support the zoning relief requested by the petitioner. Concern was expressed by representatives of the adjacent Christian Science Church regarding potential impacts from the project based on its scope and density, including the issue of blocking sunlight to the church property. Further discussion ensued about design elements of the proposed development. Additional issues that were discussed included improvements to the north façade of the project and developing a transportation demand management plan. A decision to take “no action” was made by the Area Council. The next topic was a review of the Trivia Contest held by the Area Council. Winners were announced. A discussion then ensued about the recent renovation work done at the Hyde Community Center and its cost, and whether the Area Council should make a donation to the Hyde. The Area Council voted to make a \$1000 donation to the Hyde Center. The question of whether to hold any events at Halloween was discussed, and it was noted that it would be unlikely that any events could be held due to the pandemic. John Rice informed the Area Council that space at the Hyde Center would be used to support activities related to the Zervas School. An update was provided about the NewCal senior center project. The City is recommending that the Senior Center should remain at its current site in Newtonville, and that a decision regarding demolition and replacement vs renovation would be forthcoming. Further updates were provided about Cold Spring Park paths, MBTA construction, and plans for virtual learning at the public schools. It was noted that the Beacon Street bicycle lane project would go before Traffic Council in an upcoming meeting.

#### October:

The topic of Zoning Redesign was discussed, including a review of the upcoming schedule of public meetings. A discussion was held on whether the Area Council should host community meetings regarding zoning redesign, but no decision was made. A number of other proposals for community engagement were discussed. The next topic on the Area Council agenda was the issue of high water bills. It was noted that the high bills were a result of costs of water and sewer improvements that are going on in Newton. Members of the Northlands Liaison Committee were announced, and it was noted that tenants had moved out of the site. Construction is anticipated to start in the summer of 2021. An update was provided about the Newton Highlands station ADA accessibility project, and concern was expressed about the proposed covered walkways and the escalating costs of the project. The next topic was the 1149-1151 Walnut Street project. Several Area Council members offered support for the project. Representatives from the Christian Science Church continued to express concerns about the project, specifically about its height and proximity to the north property line. The Area Council voted on whether to send a letter of support to City Council, and the measure failed to pass. Further topics included a discussion about organizing a debate for the upcoming Ward 2 City Council At-Large seat and ideas for a pumpkin decorating contest for Halloween. A motion was made to allocate funding to maintain the Newton Highlands domain name.

#### October: Special Meeting

An additional meeting of the Area Council took place on October 8, one week after the regular October meeting took place. The purpose of this meeting was to have a further discussion about the 1149-1151 Walnut Street development project. After a discussion about the proposed project, including hearing opposition from the Christian Science Church, the Area Council voted to submit a letter to City Council supporting the project with a recommendation that the developer and the adjacent church come to an amicable agreement.

November:

Winners of the Halloween pumpkin photo project were announced. Two members of the Planning Department involved in the Zoning Redesign project were introduced, Jen Caira and Nevena Pilipovic-Wenlger, the new Community Engagement Planner. Plans for community engagement were outlined, and a number of concerns about the inclusivity of the process were expressed. A discussion ensued about the proposed Garage Ordinance, and how to make houses with forward facing garages fit better into the surrounding neighborhood. The Area Council voted to write a letter to the City's Zoning and Planning Committee concerning issues such as the width of driveways, paving, and curb cuts. It was announced that the proponent of the Union Twist proposal has withdrawn the project. Further discussion ensued about the 1149-1151 Walnut Street development project. It was noted that the Fair Housing Committee and the Design Committee had expressed concerns about the project. Area Councilor Bruce Blakely announced he would be resigning from the Area Council and moving out of Newton.

December:

The 1149-1151 Walnut Street project was discussed, as a new proposal for the design of the building has been put forth, reducing the building height, adding balconies and windows on the north façade, and increasing the size of some units. Some residents expressed displeasure with the new design, stating that it did not fit contextually with the surrounding buildings. Many favored a more traditional contextually appropriate design. A lengthy discussion ensued about features of the proposed design, with some expressing support and others favoring a more traditional building. The next topic concerned the removal of an old oak tree at the Hyde School. The tree was damaged during a recent storm and was subsequently removed. A proposal by Newton Housing would replace the tree site with additional parking. This proposal was not favorably received, as many preferred retaining green space. A discussion then ensued about proposed reductions of MBTA service, with many expressing support for maintaining service. A proposal was made to have a Winter Holiday photo contest. Plans for a banner at the Walnut Street bridge were discussed. Updates were provided about the recent city engagement event regarding zoning redesign. Planning for candidate debates for the Ward 2 election and the issue of parking in the front setback at 66 Winchester Street were discussed. The meeting concluded with a discussion about lighting in the village center during the dark winter months.

Submitted by:

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May 5, 2021