

# Newton Citizens Commission on Energy

City of Newton

<https://www.newtonma.gov/government/climate-and-sustainability/citizens-commission-on-energy>



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, Fred Brustman

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## Minutes of the Meeting of January 16, 2022

The meeting was held on Zoom.

Attending: Halina Brown, Michael Gevelber, Stephen Grody, Philip Hanser, Jon Kantar, Jim Purdy;  
Cory Alperstein, Fred Brustman, Alexandra Lermond, Philip Vergragt

Agenda:

1. The current status of efforts to develop and bring the City Council an ordinance proposal modeled on BERDO 2.0

Update on docketing, writing the ordinance, the Mayor's position, and needed resources (Halina).

A strategy to garner support from the business community: Economic Development Commission, Environmental and Real Estate Committees of the Chamber of Commerce (general discussion).

2. Green Newton's project to pilot *Before 2050*<sup>TM</sup> (Stephen)

Halina announced that our long-time Associate Member Ed Craddock has passed away. We will send a condolence card to his wife Jenny.

Alexandra Lermond, a sophomore in environmental at BC attended the meeting.

Halina also announced that Jim is going to track issues on the City Council Friday packet and send an update to members every week.

## 1. BERDO –

Halina noted that a potential BERDO ordinance has been docketed for Zoning and Planning Committee agenda but is not yet scheduled for discussion.

She also noted that the Planning Department is spread very thin attending to committee issues. It had been proposed that a standing Council committee be established to address the whole variety of sustainability issues, but the Mayor did not agree. 350 MA Newton (under Demie Stathoplos) has petitioned the City to create this committee.

At meeting two weeks ago with the Mayor, Deb Crossley and Ann Berwick were not in favor of such a committee; Bill Ferguson proposed asking Planning Dept to advise on how much work would be required. A follow-up meeting is to be held today. Halina understands that on February 14, the ZAP committee will set their agenda for addressing these key issues. Planning staff Zach Lemel said the work could be done though groups of staff. The League of Women Voters suggests creating one or more Task Force working group(s) to help do the work.

Halina urged everyone on NCCE should attend the Committee meeting on February 14.

The BERDO issue needs to be moved through the City Council. Boston's BERDO could be the model for Newton. Asa Hopkins' firm worked for the City of Boston developing it, so Asa may have insights about how it got the needed support from Boston companies.

Jon commented that Newton EDC's reaction to an electrification ordinance was negative; but BERDO is not the same issue.

Halina said that the Charles River Chamber's environmental committee invited a BERDO presentation on 2/18 at 9 am. Jon Kantar is doing a presentation to that group next week.

Halina said that BERDO could be resource intensive, hence Jonathan Yeo's concern that it would be unsustainable in terms of staff.

Phil Hanser replied that BERDO should not require much staff time once set up. So it should not be necessary to add a staff person.

Halina commented that Cambridge finally invested in a data management system to provide better access to the data for its BERDO. (She heard that about 25% of buildings covered by Cambridge's BERDO are not in compliance.)

Jon wonders how many of the big energy users in Newton are also prominent in Boston.

Phil said several of the institutions in Newton are already complying with other cities' regulations. E.g., the Marriott hotel chain

Jim pointed out that the Green Ribbon Commission proposed in the CAP was concerned with the same issues as a BERDO.

Michael asked: who is going to take this on? We need to make arrangements with whatever group can do it.

Halina said we also have natural allies in developers who are doing very low energy projects, e.g., Mark Development, Northland, etc.

Michael said the Green Ribbon Commission was proposed as an organization outside the City government and didn't need City resources, except for coordination.

Michael gave a slide presentation of BERDO-related work he did for Boston University (with Marina Lyons).

Ann Berwick has asked for some information to use in talking with business community.

Stephen asked, is Ann the person who has taken the responsibility to meet with owners of commercial buildings? And does that presuppose that BERDO would have been passed before the dialog begins.

Michael said that Ann wanted to understand what impacts BERDO would have on the commercial sector.

Jon said that Ann needs to feel confident that this is important.

Michael said that in Boston the presumption was that a very small number of buildings was contributing the majority of GHG in that sector. He also noted that in Boston the emission restrictions don't start for five years.

Boston's goal is to reach net zero emissions by 2050 – a “staircase” going down by certain dates.

Newton has 388 commercial buildings, which are responsible for 29% of all emissions. In terms of GHG, commercial emissions are 5-6 times the GHG per square foot of the residential sector.

Michael ranked types of buildings by GHG emissions; in Newton they total 25% of the total of 8.7 kg/sf for 268 buildings.

Halina asked Michael to double check these percentages.. But it is a significant number of square feet and emissions.

Phil Hanser commented that he would guess that most of the education building emissions are due to lighting.

Michael said we can work down the list, starting with the largest buildings; we have the data to partition it.

Philip asked, do we know the owners of these buildings? Michael said yes. Philip said we should also understand whether each building is owned or leased.

Michael presented residential buildings by type and GHG intensity.

Michael did the analysis based on square footage for each building type, but we don't know how much energy each building uses? Bill Ferguson is reluctant to put in staff time to get the numbers.

Boston's Synapse study estimated emissions per square foot by category; Michael then applied these numbers to Newton buildings. The result came within 5% of the totals provided by Eversource.

Michael summarized that 89% of commercial sector GHG come from the non-residential buildings. Commercially owned residential buildings total only 11%. So he proposes skipping the residential buildings for now.

The energy used is 40% electrical, 60% natural gas. So we just need to get green electrons, and a 42% reduction will be achieved.

Michael showed a chart of Boston University's current emissions and compliance level timelines.

Boston's compliance regulations don't kick in until 2025. Emissions are expected to ratchet down every 5 years.

Boston University's emissions are such that the BERDO standards don't affect it until 2030. And, if BU buys green electricity they won't be constrained by BERDO until 2040

(BU is looking for a deal with a windfarm for this.)

It would cost an additional 2 cents per kwh to meet the electricity standard. For fossil emissions it is much more expensive to meet the standard.

Boston's BERDO 2.0 established an alternative compliance payment of \$234/MT CO<sub>2</sub> ; but it is unclear whether this be enough to drive large existing buildings to change their systems.

Michael said heat pumps eliminate fossil emissions, but because of electricity prices, he doesn't believe you can save money with heat pumps, so that is an obstacle to overcome.

Philip Vergragt said that the state will come up with standards pursuant to the climate law; however, Michael is skeptical. So, what are the drivers for change?

Phil Hanser thinks it reduces the likelihood that you will have to make an investment later to meet a law. This may work for Amazon, but will smaller building owners do it?

Philip Vergragt said we need leadership from the top to convene these building owners.

Phil Hanser suggested we should propose to do BERDO phase 1, then collect data, then go on to phase 2. But if you say you'll add 2 cents per kwh or double the cost of heating, it's a non-starter.

Halina asked, how did Boston get such strong support from business community?

Stephen said perhaps it is because Boston didn't depend on its City Council to pass a regulation first.

Phil Hanser said, but these owners will need something from the city, sooner or later. That provides leverage. But he doubts that the City will do what's necessary.

Cory asked, so why is the Mayor putting off this BERDO initiative?

Philip Vergragt suggested that it is good to start with a BERDO 1.0. Phil Hanser agreed: it's harder to oppose merely providing data.

Cory said we need a multipronged approach in dealing with property owners. Start with Newton Power Choice as example. And solar opportunities.

Halina asked, so what can NCCE do about this? or the City? or a hypothetical consultant? or Green Newton, etc.? We need to identify the possible roles.

Phil Hanser said we can use Boston BERDO as a model for Newton, and start with acquiring data from owners. That would be a relatively low cost to get this going.

Halina said Michael's analysis is very compelling. We should present it to the business community. What else do we need?

Michael said, it depends on what question you are trying to answer. Making people aware of their own energy use is a good first step. You need to get them thinking about it.

Halina said Cambridge and Boston had BERDO 1.0 in place for 6-7 years and no reduction in GHG was achieved in that time. So you do need performance standards five years down the road.

Cory said she is opposed to the idea that the first phase has no binding requirements for the owners. How real are our elected officials willing to be?

Jon said we need to use the Boston model of approaching developers and offering support if they cooperate. The owners in Newton who also have property in Boston are familiar with the process. So with a little leadership, progress can be made. MassSave has major incentives for owners.

Phil Hanser agrees with Jon that we need to find some leaders. We should start with the owners with property in both Newton and Boston.

Cory suggested we should talk to Peter Smith about this; he chairs the Chamber's environmental committee..

Halina asked, so what responsibility should NCCE take on, and what should City take on?

Phil Hanser said we should check the numbers before going to the Chamber. Don't give opponents the opportunity to jump on something. We should look at assessor presentations to make sure our data matches.

Michael said today's presentation will go to Ann and Bill. We need a different presentation for the businesses.

Jon said there are lots of interesting points in Michael's presentation, but we need something different for businesses. But we should focus on 10-30 commercial owners instead of 34,000 residential owners.

Halina will arrange a meeting with Ann and Bill; others should distill the data for a presentation to them.

Cory said it will be easier to get staff commitment once we get it off the ground.

Stephen suggested to use a title page in the presentation with who is the audience, who is the presenter, and what do you want to accomplish with the audience. E.g., "answering your questions".

## 2. Pilot for *Before 2050*

We have a proposal, but it hasn't been sent out yet. Waiting for the right moment to get this docketed. The app (which is very nifty) needs to undergo a pilot. Green Newton's board approved its role in recruiting people to test the app. Bill is supporting this in the background. We are also working group with John Sloat, who has some experience with developing apps.

Stephen presented on the Green Newton pilot effort. He showed the page that has been designed for the Green Newton web site, [greennewton.org](http://greennewton.org). People can click and download the app from this page, which is not live yet.

The Green Newton team has run the app and have some suggestions for modifications. Green Newton also organized this into a presentation.

The app's connection to NGrid worked last year, but they no longer have an in-house consumer-facing application. So that needs to be worked out.

Halina said, the process of getting this docketed has been difficult; e.g., some people reacted quickly and worried whether there is any conflict of interest? The answer is no, but some people have jumped on it without really understanding.

Stephen said the Councilors act as gatekeepers, but are not very open to engage on this question. There will be a data use agreement, with the City using the data and publishing it. The City's view ought to be about the benefit to the community in toto.

Jon said he is hoping the GN pilot will be so successful that it will provide enough grass roots pressure to overcome these roadblocks.

Cory said that GN message needs to include why this is so important.

Halina summarized: there is a concept here about collecting, tracking, and disclosing energy use. These ideas require some effort to understand the concepts. This is a difficult task for NCCE to accomplish. And leadership on the City side is needed. So it's an uphill push. However, the pilot is all Green Newton. None of it involves the City.

Jon has met with Green Needham. The Realtor Craig Foley is part of that group. 80 people have signed up for their Building Green program.

Phil Hanser said it would be useful if people who are buying a house understood the energy consumption of the home before they purchase. So the info should be available.

*Stephen wrote in the chat:*

*If the building (property?) count numbers in the right column of Slide #2 are meant to reflect the inventory in the City of Newton, please note that the Powerpoint numbers are significantly different from the counts in the Assessors' Tax Classification Notebook reported to the City Council in November 2021.*

*<https://www.newtonma.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/77195/637720656292970000>*

*See the table on Internal Page #7*

The meeting was adjourned 9:25 pm.

Respectfully submitted by Jim Purdy