

Thursday, March 10, 2022

Mayor's Update

Three New Projects Proposed & Update on Needham Street Improvements

Three proposed developments now in the planning stages could bring 209 units of senior independent living, assisted living and memory care to Crafts Street in Newtonville, a 50 unit apartment building behind the retained façade of the former Santander Bank building in West Newton Square, and a 410 unit apartment building on Needham Street in Upper Falls.



These are all still in the preliminary stages. I'll provide updates as they proceed.

Senior Independent Living, Assisted Living and Memory Care on Crafts Street

Mark Development and partner Senior Resource Group (SRG) are proposing a 209-unit senior housing development on Crafts Street in Newtonville behind Whole Foods and Marty's Liquors on Washington Street.



The proposed development will include a mix of 129 apartments for seniors living independently, 52 assisted living units, and 28 memory care units for people with Alzheimer's and dementia. Plans are for a "U" shaped development with buildings at various heights up to seven stories, a center courtyard, an outdoor dining area for residents and an underground parking garage.

Developers have met with neighborhood groups and the City's Urban Design Commission to get feedback on the project. Once plans are formally submitted to the City, the City Council will begin the special permit process which includes public input at the Land Use Committee.

Apartments at the Former Santander Bank, West Newton Square

The iconic façade of the former bank on the corner of Washington and Highland Streets across from Newton Police Headquarters in West Newton Square is retained. The back of the bank building is transformed and expanded into the former back parking lot to create a restaurant and 50 one-, two- and three-bedroom apartments, ten of which would be reserved as affordable units.



The developer, Mark Development, plans a restaurant for the front of the building which will include an outdoor seating area for al fresco dining. The five-story apartment building has both underground and surface parking.

Plans have not yet been submitted to the City Council for its special permit process.

Apartments on Needham Street

Northland recently met with the Newton Upper Falls Area Council to preview plans to build 410 units of housing on the 7-acre site of the HC Stark property behind Needham Street between Christina and Charlemont Streets.

The plans, which have not yet been filed with the City's Zoning Board of Appeals, will be submitted under Chapter 40B. (More on Chapter 40B, the State law enacted in 1969 to encourage construction of affordable housing by allowing developers to bypass certain local zoning requirements, a bit later.)

Northland's 40B plans include an 8-story building with the 410 units made up of one, two and three bedroom apartments, 103 or 25% of which will be affordable to people making up to 80% of the area median income.

This proposed development will be across Needham Street from the Northland development approved in 2019 which includes 800 units of housing (120 affordable units and 20 middle income units), restaurants, shops, offices, a shuttle to the T, a center green and a community spray park bordering Upper Falls between Oak Street and Tower Road. Demolition on this approved Northland development is ongoing. The first phase of construction will begin this summer/fall beginning with the

underground parking and followed by construction of the buildings beginning next year. The first residents are expected to start moving in in the fall of 2024 or early 2025.

The approval process for this new Northland 40B development will be different from the City Council special permit process Northland went through for its other Needham Street development.

How is the City's Special Permit process different from Chapter 40B?

Under Newton's special permit process, the City Council has the discretion to allow certain uses or structures that are not allowed as of right if it finds that the development meets the criteria in the Zoning Ordinances for approval of a special permit.

In contrast, under a Chapter 40B application, the City Council has no role. Chapter 40B is a state law that establishes a consolidated local review and approval process for projects that contain a certain level of affordable housing (typically 25 percent). The law allows a developer to apply for a single "comprehensive permit" from the City's Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) rather than seeking separate approval from each local board having jurisdiction over the project, including the City Council. This allows developers to have a form of "one-stop shopping" for the numerous permits that would otherwise be required and also allows developers to override certain local restrictions and zoning requirements.

The Zoning Board of Appeals review of a 40B project is strictly regulated by state laws and regulations with the public hearing process completed in 180 days. The ZBA does not have the same level of discretion to deny 40B projects afforded to the City Council for special permit projects. When the ZBA considers a 40B comprehensive permit application, it may only deny the application if there are local concerns — such as health, safety, environmental, or design concerns — that outweigh the regional need for affordable housing.

The ZBA has authority to review the impacts of the project and will work with the developer to negotiate changes and improvements to the plans. The ZBA is also able to craft appropriate conditions and mitigation measures before voting on the project as long as the conditions do not make the project financially infeasible. If the ZBA denies a 40B project or burdens it with conditions that make the project "uneconomic," the developer can appeal directly to the Housing Appeals Committee, an adjudicatory body within the state's Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD). The standard of review by the Housing Appeals Committee has historically been a very difficult burden for communities to meet and project denials are rarely upheld unless the community has met one of the statutory safe harbors.

Chapter 40B allows municipalities to be exempt from the Chapter 40B framework by invoking various so called “safe harbors” if their municipality is providing their fair share of affordable housing. If and when the City creates enough affordable housing to meet a safe harbor, the provisions of the Chapter 40B law may be lifted; this in turn means a decision made by the ZBA concerning a comprehensive permit application — whether it is to deny the permit, approve the permit, or approve it with conditions — will be upheld on appeal as a matter of law.

Is Newton near one of the two “safe harbor” thresholds?

Safe harbor status is available to municipalities that have met either (1) the General Land Area Minimum, achieved when housing units eligible for inclusion on the state’s Subsidized Housing Inventory (“SHI”) exist on sites comprising 1.5% or more of a municipality’s total land area or (2) the Housing Unit Minimum, achieved when a municipality’s SHI Eligible Housing units exceed 10% of its total housing units. (Click [here](#) to read a detailed memo on this subject.)

The City of Newton’s latest calculations from January 2021 show the total affordable housing unit calculation at 9.59%, still below the 10% safe harbor threshold. Newton’s land area percentage of affordable housing is 1.33% at last calculation, also below the 1.5% threshold.

The City will update its affordable housing calculations before the Northland 40B plans are officially filed. (We’ll let you know the results when they are done.) Once our calculations show that Newton has reached one of the thresholds, the ZBA will have the ability to invoke the safe harbor *prior* to review of the next Chapter 40B project.

Needham Street Improvements

The \$31.1 million Needham/Highland Street improvident project started on Highland Street in Needham during the fall of 2020.

Prior to coming to the Newton stretch, we updated the water mains in Newton under Needham Street from Oak and Christina Streets to Winchester Street and on Winchester Street from Needham and Dedham Streets to Route 9. This work is now complete.

Roadwork which will stretch the entire 1.7 mile length of Needham Street is scheduled to resume in May starting in the Oak Street area. These improvements include:

- Creating exclusive turn lanes, installing all new traffic signal equipment, adding lanes west of interchanges, and realigning the intersection at Needham and Charlemont Streets.
- Adding 5-foot wide raised bike lanes and shared use paths.
- Adding bus stops.
- Adding continuous sidewalks and designated crosswalks.

The project also includes improvements to the existing bridge on Needham Street over the Charles River. The bridge, constructed in 1875, is on the National Register of Historic Places and is structurally sound. Work will maintain the current bridge substructure while rebuilding the top of the bridge to allow three lanes of traffic, a new shared-use path and ornamental railings.

MassDOT's schedule has the work taking place primarily on weekdays from 7:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., with the important caveat that there will be no lane closures during peak traffic hours (6:00 to 9:00 a.m. and 3:00 to 7:00 p.m.).

Driveways, and pedestrian and bicycle access will be maintained at all times, so customers and employees will always continue to have access to all the stores, restaurants and businesses along this critical street.

Some road milling and paving will also be done at night to minimize traffic impacts. MassDOT committed to two weeks of advance notice before any planned work on Sunday through Thursday nights from 9:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m.

Learn more about the project at mass.gov/needhamstreet and sign up to get email updates about the project [here](#). According to the project website, work will be complete in the fall of 2023.

Congratulations Newton Police Officer Kimberly Conary! The Norfolk County Training and Technical Assistance Center, the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health and the National Alliance on Mental Illness honored her with an Excellence award for her outstanding work as part of Newton's Crisis Intervention Team (CIT). Officer Conary works with members of the Newton Police Department, Newton's Health and Human Services and



community partners with the shared goal of enhancing the response of public and private agencies when intervening with individuals who are mentally ill, developmentally disabled, struggling with substance use or experiencing trauma in their lives.

(Photo: From left, Sarah Eknaian, the social work clinician with NPD, Officer Conary and Newton HHS Director of Social Services Meghan Kennedy.)

Newton Public School Budget

As we are preparing our budgets for the next fiscal year, it's clear this is a challenging financial period. Costs are up and needs have increased. As we prepare the City of Newton's FY2023 budget, my highest priority continues to be our children and the Newton Public Schools. In keeping with our values, this year's NPS budget will increase by 3.5% over last year's budget by \$8.9 million, while the budget for the City-side departments will see a 3% increase as a whole.

To support our students during the pandemic, we have provided a wide range of additional funding in addition to the NPS operating budget during the past two years:

The City of Newton received approximately \$7.8 million in Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) funding; we dedicated \$6.3 million of this

funding to the Newton Public Schools to help provide a safer school environment for students, educators and staff:

- \$5M for ventilation upgrades at every Newton Public School building
- \$1M for NPS COVID-19 testing, and
- \$300,000 for NPS custodial overtime and building maintenance supplies

The City of Newton received approximately \$63 million in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding. Thus far, we have invested approximately \$14 million of the ARPA funds in NPS.

- \$7.6M (\$4.6M in FY2022 and \$3M for FY2023) has bolstered the NPS and Municipal Operating Budgets, allowing me to provide the current NPS funding levels and the 3.5% increase. Approximately 65% (or \$4.9 million) of the \$7.6 million goes towards the Newton Public Schools.
- \$1.2M for the Countryside Elementary School feasibility study
- \$250,000 for the Horace Mann Playground improvements
- \$550,000 for Elementary School facility planning and design
- \$3M for NPS educators and staff for dedication to public education, public service and public health
- \$2.45M at the Walker Center in Auburndale to make land available adjacent to the Williams Elementary School for future school improvements/renovations as well as for affordable housing

Recent investments from ARPA and other funding sources for NPS include:

- \$1M for educational technology (ARPA)
- \$660,000 for social, emotional and mental health support staff (marijuana impact funds)
- \$173,000 for the final closeout payment of the EDCO Collaborative program for deaf and hard of hearing students (other City funding)

Even with the 3.5% budget increase and approximately 1,000 fewer students in the system next year compared to five years ago, School Superintendent David

Fleishman told the School Committee this week he sees a \$5.2 million gap between NPS's proposed budget and the funds available. To close the gap, he expects to have to cut 50 to 60 of the schools' approximately 2,100 positions. This is in addition to the 12 to 14 positions cut because of enrollment declines.

We continue to work closely with NPS leadership and the School Committee to find additional ways that ARPA or other funding may be appropriately used for the needs of our students and educators.

We are also continuing to finalize our FY2023 budget proposal for the other departments in the City of Newton. I will outline my proposal during my Budget Address to the City Council on Tuesday, April 19.

Hiring the Next Fire Chief

As we begin the process of celebrating the 45 year career and retirement of our exceptional Fire Chief and Emergency Management Director, Gino Lucchetti, we are also starting the process of finding his successor.

My goal is to identify a candidate with exceptional integrity and demonstrated leadership, effective management capacity, and excellent interpersonal skills. Our next Chief will lead this outstanding and stable department and its dedicated members who are committed to serving and protecting, without prejudice or favoritism, the lives and property of the residents and businesses of Newton from both natural and man-made disasters.

I have been working closely with our Human Resources Director, Michelle Pizzi O'Brien, on a comprehensive recruitment process.

We have developed a *Fire Chief Candidate Brochure and Profile* for any internal and external candidates interested in this critical leadership position. (Click [here](#) to see the brochure.) The next Chief must ensure high quality fire suppression, fire prevention, emergency management and EMS services here in Newton. The Chief will focus on continued, deliberate, mission-driven improvement of the Department with an eye toward 21st Century concepts of fire service and public safety; community engagement; and creating and impacting Department culture in a positive and inclusive way.

The recruitment brochure and opportunity will be shared with the International Association of Fire Chiefs, the Fire Chiefs Association of Massachusetts, the Massachusetts Municipal Association, the International EMS & Firefighters Pride Alliance, the National Association of Hispanic Firefighters, the International

Association of Women in Fire & Emergency Services, the International Association of Black Professional Firefighters, and the Black Chief Officers Committee, as well as additional groups and recruitment organizations identified by our HR team.

We have also retained the services of Mark Morse and his team at the MMA Consulting Group. MMA Consulting has decades of experience helping with leadership selection for city, towns and other public agencies, with a focus on public safety and emergency response. The MMA Consulting Group will work with me and the Human Resources team to design and administer a robust assessment process of candidates to help us identify the most qualified leader.

MMA Consulting will work closely with me to select a panel of assessors with experience in the fire service industry and in public administration, and develop exercises and assignments meant to ensure our new Fire Chief meets the core competencies required for this position and the personal characteristics needed to lead this department and serve our city in this important role.

In addition to our candidates participating in an *Assessment Center*, I will also be developing a series of interview teams. We will include people from City departments who work closely with the Newton Fire Department, residents, a City Councilor and others who are experienced fire service members and public administrators. Our HR Director and the HR Business Partner to the Newton Fire Department will also be scheduling interviews with Fire Department staff who volunteer to provide their insights on what characteristics our new Chief should possess. In addition to the staff feedback, I look forward to getting the input of our Fire Union President, Marc Rizza, as well.

Two Years of COVID-19

Two years ago today Gov. Baker declared a State of Emergency in Massachusetts as the first cases of COVID-19 started spreading through our communities.

In Newton, we reported our first positive case of COVID-19 the previous day, on March 9, 2020. One of the first five cases found in Middlesex County, the resident was linked to the now infamous Biogen convention in Boston.

Three weeks later, we reported the first Newtonians who died with COVID-19. Over the grim twenty-four months that followed, we lost 241 of our family, friends and neighbors who died with this virus. This includes two more Newtonians whose deaths we learned of over the past seven days.

We have had a cumulative total of 12,491 reported positive cases in Newton in our population of approximately 88,000 residents.

As we look at the most current data, the news continues to be encouraging.

This week from March 3 to 9, Newton had 72 confirmed new cases compared to 127 last week and 197 during the seven days prior to that.

Our positivity rate has fallen to 2.7% of the 10,736 tests performed on Newton residents over the State's two week tracking from Feb. 20 to March 5 (down from 3.2% of 15,533 tests last week). Our daily incidence rate is now 20.3 per 100,000 population, down from 34.9 last week. This week just over half of the cases (52%) were among students at one of Newton's institutions of higher education that conduct COVID-19 testing; this percentage was 73% last week.

The Newton Public Schools had a total of 24 cases among students and four (4) among staff during the past week from March 3 to 9.

At Newton-Wellesley Hospital today, just one patient is hospitalized with COVID-19, and that person does not require ICU care. This week, for the first time over these long, difficult two years since March, 2020, Newton-Wellesley Hospital had a day with ZERO patients with COVID-19.

Balancing the despair emanating from Ukraine, we have real hope about the pandemic.

Warmly,

Ruthanne

P.S. Interested in transportation, land use, housing or economic development issues along the segment of Route 128/I-95 between Newton and Lexington? MassDOT is conducting a **Route 128 Land Use and Transportation Study** to plan for this corridor's future and they're looking for ideas. Attend a virtual public info session next Tuesday, March 15 from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m. Find more information at mass.gov/route-128Study.

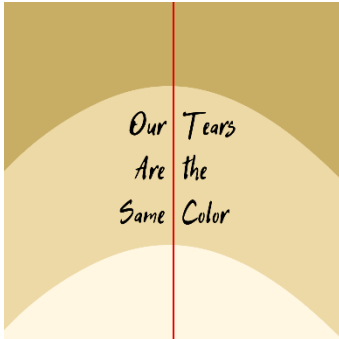


Public Informational Meeting
Tuesday, March 15, 2022
6:00 – 8:00 PM
Virtual Meeting via Zoom



P.P.S. Join Erika Reitshamer for a virtual Newton Free Library lecture that examines the **extraordinary rise, fall, and posthumous rehabilitation of Mario Lanza**, the

20th Century's most controversial tenor. He sang pop songs to the masses and attracted some of the biggest names in Opera to turn to the craft with his film *The Great Caruso*. Register [here](#) for the Tuesday, March 29 lecture from 7:00 to 8:00 p.m.



P.P.P.S. The **Newton Theatre Company's** next production is an original work based on interviews with Israeli and Palestinian families who have lost someone in the conflict. *Our Tears are the Same Color: Parallel Narratives of Bereaved Palestinian and Israeli Women* tells the deeply personal stories of four women, two Israeli and two Palestinian, and their shared grief. The show runs from Friday, March 25 through Sunday, April 3 at St. John's Episcopal Church, 96 Otis Street, Newtonville. Tickets are available at

NewtonTheatreCompany.com.

P.P.P.P.S. Back in 2019 Auburndale resident Dana Hanson and I made a public service announcement about having an **emergency "go bag"** ready with things you'll need to live for 72 hours without food, water or power. The video is lighthearted, but the message is important and we thought worth repeating. Take a look and check out ready.gov.

