

Thursday, March 17, 2022

## Mayor's Update

### Major Work Coming to Mass Pike/I-95 Interchange

The Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) will be investing \$230 million dollars to replace and/or rehabilitate eight bridges and to install more sound barriers at the Mass Pike/I-95 interchange at the border of Newton and Weston over the next 5 to 6 years.

Design plans for a five-phase project are now 25% complete. Construction is set to begin during 2023 and will be complete in 2027.

MassDOT Project Manager Valerie Kilduff stressed during a meeting this week that the bridges over the Charles River, the Worcester Mainline commuter rail tracks, and on ramps within the interchange itself are now safe, but their conditions are deteriorating. Five of the bridges will be replaced, one will be rehabilitated, and two will have their superstructure replaced.

Work will also increase vertical clearance for freight movement under the bridges, improve seismic resiliency in the case of an earthquake, and improve roadway safety by adding adequate acceleration and deceleration lanes and wider shoulders.

Importantly for the Auburndale neighborhoods near the Mass Pike, the project also proposes new noise barriers to be erected on the westbound side of the Mass Pike between Woodland Road and the Charles River, and for a short portion of the north side of the ramp from I-95 North to the Mass Pike, close to Oakland Avenue. Eastbound, noise barriers are proposed between Charles Street and Woodland Road.

MassDOT has plans to make sure three lanes of traffic continue to be open during the entire construction period with the exception of two weekends when traffic will need to be cut to one lane. They will also work with Riverside and other potential building projects in the area to coordinate construction schedules and potential traffic impacts.

Our Engineering, DPW and Planning teams will be in close contact with MassDOT as they move from the 25% to 100% designs. We'll make sure to get your feedback, advocate for Newtonians, and understand the impact on the Charles River and the trails as well.

Interested in hearing more about this project and how it will impact you and Newton? MassDOT will hold a virtual community meeting on Thursday, March 31, at 6:00 p.m. online at [mass.gov/massdot-highway-design-public-hearings](https://mass.gov/massdot-highway-design-public-hearings). Sign up for email updates about the project at [MADOT/subscriber/new](https://MADOT/subscriber/new) (enter your email and then click on I-90 Interchange). Send comments or questions to

[dot.feedback.highway@state.ma.us](mailto:dot.feedback.highway@state.ma.us) or by mail to Suite 6340, 10 Park Plaza, Boston, MA 02116.

*Ever wonder what those approximately 1,500 red fire boxes across Newton do? Use the boxes to call for help. They are connected to the City's emergency dispatch system which operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week. They also will work if the internet is down, the cellphone network is busy, or if power is out. Click the photo and watch the video to learn more from the Newton Fire Department.*

### **Additional Newton Public Schools Financial Assistance**

Here's the challenge we're facing as Superintendent Fleishman submits the recommended budget for the Newton Public Schools (which represents 65% of all our annual department spending) and I submit the budgets for all the other City departments (including our next three largest ones (Public Works, Fire and Police), and all our others from Parks, Recreation & Culture and the Library to Health and Human Services and Senior Services to Planning, Treasury, Law, Assessing, IT, Human Resources and more) as well as the budgets for our debt, pension and retirement funding.

- Our revenues are up but not as much as we would have experienced without the pandemic.
- Our budgets must balance. (That's state law.)
- Our costs are rising.
- Our needs are increasing. (Think about mental health challenges, food insecurity, housing affordability, climate change investments, village vitality, and people, businesses and non-profits still recovering from the pandemic.)
- Our need to catch-up on areas previously underfunded continue (e.g., road maintenance, field improvements, pension obligations and more).

Our access to one-time American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding is fabulous but the many thoughtful requests to invest outstrip the dollars available. How we invest our money is a reflection of our values. In Newton, our children's education is our top priority. This year, as we plan our Fiscal Year 2023 budget during this challenging financial period, the Newton Public Schools continue to be my priority.

In keeping with our values, in January I provided a 3.5% increase over last year's budget to the Newton Public Schools (NPS). The budget for NPS for next year will increase by \$8.9 million to \$262.1 million. I did this knowing it meant increasing City-side department budgets by only 3% as a whole. (This 3% cap does not include our debt and our retirement obligations.)

Even with the 3.5% budget increase, additional ARPA and one-time funds (see below), and approximately 1,000 fewer students in the school system compared to five years ago, NPS is wrestling with a budget challenge. With costs up and needs increasing, every dollar is stretched. Nonetheless, our budgets must balance and our one-time funds have to be invested for not just immediate needs but also long-term purposes.

Over the last several weeks I directed additional financial assistance to NPS summarized last week in the [Mayor's Update](#). Those included the following package of \$1,883,000 in commitments:

- \$1,050,000 for educational technology purchases (ARPA funds)
- \$660,000 for social, emotional and mental health support staffing over the FY22-FY24 period (marijuana impact funds)
- \$185,000 for the final lease-closeout payment of the EDCO Collaborative (City funds)

Today I am authorizing an additional \$1,370,000 in funds from ARPA and other sources that will greatly assist NPS in managing their FY2023 budget challenge. The additional funds include:

- \$820,000 for COVID-19 related expenditures NPS has made including classroom air quality monitoring devices and air purifiers, medical supplies and Wi-Fi hotspots (ARPA funds)
- \$550,000 for emergency paid sick leave reimbursements (state reimbursement funds to the City)

I am also releasing today \$1,400,000 in ARPA funds to purchase and install high-quality athletic field lighting systems at Newton North's Stadium and Newton South's Brandeis Field. Details on this project can be found [here](#).

To date I have invested \$28.4 million in ARPA projects out of the \$63 million allocation made to the City of Newton. While all ARPA spending must be allocated by the end of 2024, of the \$28.4 million, \$15.7 million is invested thus far in our students and in NPS. We still have many needs throughout the City and many proposals submitted for ARPA spending. Several announcements will be made before and during the April 19<sup>th</sup> City Budget presentation for projects to address community needs, including for those most impacted by the pandemic, and high-priority projects of great value to the City.

I will continue to work with the School Administration and School Committee to evaluate possible ARPA and other sources of funds for NPS-related expenses over the next few years. It is clear, however, that the City cannot fully address the NPS FY2023 budget challenges using one-time money. The NPS budget must match our ongoing financial realities and using more one-time money for the FY2023 NPS budget will create an even higher funding cliff a year from now. As a member of the School Committee, I will work closely with the administration and School Committee

to develop the best budget possible given the funds available, various cost drivers, and educational priorities.

Newton continues to have one of the best school systems in the country. Our approximately 2,500 teachers, educators, specialists and aides in our classrooms and school buildings are skilled, caring professionals who serve our children well.

## **COVID-19 Update**

We had 74 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Newton over the past seven days from March 10 to 16, up 2 from the 72 cases over the previous seven days.

Our positivity rate fell to 2.0% of the 9,918 tests performed on Newton residents over the two-week tracking period from Feb. 27 to March 12, down from 2.7% (10,736 tests) last week. The daily incidence rate in Newton is now 14.2 per 100,000 population, also down from last week's 20.3. Students at one of Newton's institutions of higher education that conduct COVID-19 testing comprised 36% of the cases this week; the percentage was 52% last week.

The Newton Public Schools have had 41 cases among students and 11 among staff during the past week from March 10 to 16, and 24 cases among students and 4 among staff during the previous week from March 3 to 9.

## Deaths

Each week since the pandemic engulfed us two years ago, we have reported the number of Newtonians who died with COVID-19. This data which we began providing on April 1, 2020, comes directly to our Health Department from the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH).

When we reported out last Thursday, the cumulative total of Newtonians who died with COVID-19 stood at 241.

Earlier this week, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health updated its criteria for identifying COVID-19 deaths to align with [guidance from the Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists](#) which helps establish uniform methods to track and record various diseases.

At the start of the pandemic in 2020, the definition used by DPH for deaths with COVID counted anyone who has COVID-19 listed as a cause of death on their death certificate, plus any individual who had a COVID-19 diagnosis, regardless of length of time between diagnosis and death, unless the death was clearly unrelated to COVID-19 (e.g., a car accident).

In April 2021, DPH updated their definition to count anyone who has COVID-19 listed as a cause of death on their death certificate, plus any individual who died within 60 days of a COVID-19 diagnosis (unless the death was clearly unrelated to COVID-19).

The updated definition as of March 2022 reduces the timeframe from 60 days to 30 days for people who had a COVID-19 diagnosis without COVID-19 listed as a cause of death on their death certificate. DPH went back, reviewed statewide data, and reclassified some deaths as well as finding new deaths associated with COVID-19. Using the new guidelines, the the Massachusetts Department of Public Health now reports 199 Newtonians as having died with COVID-19 since the pandemic began.

*I'm passing along sad news for so many of us who value local print journalism. The Newton TAB announced yesterday that it will cease publication of its print edition in May. It will be available only online through paid subscriptions. (A "limited number" of articles will be available to readers free each month.) This news comes after the TAB in August, 2021, cut circulation of its free newspaper to just 40% of the households in Newton.*

*Our local newspapers, both here in Newton and in Boston, provide information, build community, put events in context, and keeps decision makers on their toes. It's a real blow to us to lose the Tab.*

*Newton Al Fresco is back. Nearly 20 restaurants across the City will be using parking spaces in front of their establishments for outdoor dining again this year starting in a few weeks on April 1. The City will also be setting up tables and chairs in village centers for all of us to enjoy our favorite take-out. Our DPW crews will begin installing barriers (so everyone will be safe while eating) this Friday, March 18, on Langley Road, Union Street and Herrick Road in Newton Centre. Find more information at [newtonma.gov/AlFresco](http://newtonma.gov/AlFresco).*

## **Congratulations West Suburban YMCA**

The West Suburban YMCA is opening a second facility on the south side of Newton at the Wells Avenue Office Park at the site of the now-closed Boston Sports Club.

The new facility, which includes a four-lane full-length swimming pool, fitness area, indoor track and multipurpose fieldhouse, will expand access to the Y's terrific social, recreational, and educational opportunities for our residents, young and old.

The West Suburban YMCA expects to open the Wells Avenue in the fall following renovations and we look forward to collaborating on the use of their great new facilities.

The West Suburban YMCA is a valued community partner in Newton. They provide care during the school year and in the summer so parents can navigate new working models, enable members to manage their health more effectively, and partner with our community to feed and care for our most vulnerable residents before, during and after the pandemic. Congratulations Jack Fucci (President & CEO), Ned Morse (Chair), Aaron Goldman (Vice Chair) and the rest of the team.

## St. Patrick's Day at City Hall

Irish Step Dancers (including students from both Newton South and Newton North) from the Sullivan School of Irish Dance performed beautifully at the City Hall rotunda this afternoon and brought a smile to our faces.

The moved yesterday to their new location at 49 Winchester Street in Newton, just in time for today's celebrations.

Happy St. Patrick's Day (and, happy birthday to my husband, Joe!).

Warmly,

Ruthanne

P.S. Happy Holi tomorrow to all our Hindu neighbors. Everyone of all ages and backgrounds is invited to join an open air celebration (weather permitting) of color to welcome spring and **celebrate Holi**, on Sunday, March 27 at City Hall (1000 Commonwealth Avenue). Dances start at noon to 12:30 p.m., with color play at 12:30 and 1:00 p.m.

P.P.S. The annual **City Census** was mailed to every household in Newton on March 8. Please fill it out and return it. Not only does the census help us provide better municipal services, it also allows voters to change their information (name, address, party affiliation) and keep their status active. Find more information at [newtonma.gov/Census](http://newtonma.gov/Census), including how to complete the process online if you have no changes.

P.P.P.S. Planning is underway by Families Organizing for Racial Justice (FORJ) from Newton North High School for **Juneteenth celebrations** on Saturday, June 19. Interested in volunteering to help with planning and logistics to make this year's celebration even better than last's year's event? They expect to include Black-owned businesses, food trucks, performers and art exhibitions. Email FORJ NNHS at [forjnnhs@gmail.com](mailto:forjnnhs@gmail.com) to join the celebration.

### P.P.P.P.S. **Calling All Artists**

- Our City of Newton Cultural Development team is looking for artists to create accessible public art that we will install in six of Newton's public parks and green spaces from mid-May through the end of August. **Flutter** will focus on butterfly depictions as they

have lives of transformation and resilience – an uplifting message during these times. Submit proposals by Friday, April 8, 2022. Visit [newtonma.gov/culture](https://newtonma.gov/culture) for more information. Questions? Email Danielle Moriarty at [dmoriarty@newtonma.gov](mailto:dmoriarty@newtonma.gov).

- Interested in transforming church pews into three-dimensional, functional public art? Newton Community Pride is looking for you. Once transformed, the 19 pews, donated by Newtonville's Boston Chinese Evangelical Church, will be placed throughout Newton from June through October. Submit applications to participate in ***Sit & Let Your Spirit Soar*** by Friday, April 22. Find more info at [sitandsoar.org](https://sitandsoar.org).

**P.P.P.P.S Congratulations to Newton resident Dr. Ashish Jha** who joins President Joe Biden's Administration as the COVID-19 Coordinator. Dr. Jha, Dean of the Brown University School of Public Health, has been generous to us. He serves as a member of the Newton Public Schools Medical Advisory Board. Throughout the pandemic, he has been an invaluable source of information and advice as we navigated through emerging variants, our changing understanding of the virus, and new tests, vaccines and therapeutics. Click [here](#) to see Dr. Jha with me answering questions from residents at NewTV last October and click [here](#) to see his latest presentation to the School Committee in January.



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