

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, Beverly Craig, Philip Vergragt

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Minutes of the Meeting of February 23, 2022

The meeting was held on Zoom.

Attending: Halina Brown, Michael Gevelber, Stephen Grody, Philip Hanser, Jon Kantar, Jim Purdy,
Cory Alperstein, Philip Vergragt; Jon Sloat

1. Home Rule Petition

Jim reported that the petition was approved by City Council on March 21, 2022. It will be sent to the legislature as a letter from the Mayor. The petition covers new construction and substantial renovations for residential buildings and commercial buildings under 20 ksf. Councilor Crossley said the reason for the limitation is that BERDO will make electrification a major pathway to meeting its standards, and it was felt that businesses would be more receptive to BERDO than an ordinance that requires electrification.

2. Proposed survey

Philip Vergragt and Jon Sloat presented a project they are developing along with Bob Persons. NCCE endorsement is requested.

In order to accelerate Newton's progress with climate action they have developed a survey which they anticipate would be distributed through Newton NextDoor; listening sessions would follow.

Jon Sloat, whose company has expertise in surveys, shared his screen with pages from the survey. It is designed to be completed in 10-12 minutes. They are taking a neutral tone to build confidence in the person being surveyed. There are four questions on the person's opinions about climate change – its importance, possible harm, etc. These were included because Yale studies showed how US citizens can be classified by their opinions on climate change, and it is useful to know which segment the respondent is in.

The survey also asks how people hear and learn about climate. At Phil Hanser's suggestion they will add social media as a choice in the question.

Jon explained that their intent is to engage participants in an open-ended way. The survey asks about the actions that people feel they could take, including participation in the ones promoted by the City.

Phil Hanser commented that one needs to distinguish between behavioral actions (e.g. thermostat settings) and investment actions like installing insulation. Jon responded that they're looking to investments in particular, and asking about the barriers to investment that respondents list and which is most important. He also suggested putting "Help us ..." in the title.

Replies will be confidential. The survey asks open-ended questions about what should Newton be doing? Stephen commented that "City of Newton" is ambiguous; he suggested "What do you think should be done?"

The survey will invite the participant to a live session; they will try it one neighborhood as a test, then do all neighborhoods. They hope initially to target Chestnut Hill, Newton Corner, Newton Lower Falls.

Philip Vergragt said they feel that starting the conversation is the most important thing.

Jon said they would like to say that the survey is sponsored by NCCE, with individual member names at bottom. There was no objection. (Presumably, the members will be asked to vote when the survey is finalized.)

3. BERDO

Halina said Monday's BERDO presentation by Michael Gevelber and Bill Ferguson was well received including Councilors Baker and Laredo. Halina said they had a sense of energy and enthusiasm in those who were present. Michael said he generally agrees about the warm reception.

Councilor Crossley is requesting a resolution from Council [to be scheduled for April 4.

Halina talked with Bill afterwards – he would like BERDO to include emission standards and require compliance to become effective in 2026. Halina prefers 2025. Bill said there's a team of City staff comprising himself, Ann Berwick, Zach Lemel, Jenn Caira. He said they are all eager to be part of it.

Bill speaks to Boston often, including questions about software and tech details. He'd like NCCE to be involved in any way we think appropriate. And it is important to do outreach this year.

Halina asked the members to consider three questions:

1. What can NCCE commit to do to help the City develop BERDO?
2. What format should it take? How should this collaboration be structured – format etc.
3. What immediate follow-up actions should be taken?

propose our timetable, request more resources, etc.

Cory said she agrees with Halina regarding the general consensus.

Jon Kantar reported that he and Jon Klein met with Peter Merrigan, CEO of Taurus Holdings, which is the new owner of Wells Ave Office Park. They've done work in Texas, including a neighborhood geothermal grid in Austin. Taurus likes to buy 20-30 year-old buildings and invest in new systems and energy performance. Jon said we should connect them with Bill Ferguson.

Cory asked about the geogrid; Jon said it serves a large neighborhood, and they are still building it out.

Halina said that Jon Klein had suggested to her that NCCE should try to assemble a group of leading businesses who would support BERDO. Jon Klein will go through the list of commercial buildings in Newton and identify owners with properties in Boston as well.

Jon Kantar discussed follow-up : Jon Klein will write a meeting summary, then start to exchange information with Taurus. He will ask them what role we could play to help them with their Wells Avenue plans. What Taurus may want to see may change as they go forward.

Philip Vergragt suggested moving forward by making a plan with a task force of Newton companies who can be leaders.

Jon Kantar said they can help us understand what is doable in a BERDO timeframe. Boston did a lot of work in setting up the benchmarks etc.

Halina said we should schedule another meeting with Taurus.

Jon Kantar said we should create a figurative map of BERDO in Boston and Cambridge.

Michael asked, are they members of the Chamber? He suggested that we get a couple of Boston owners to come and speak about BERDO with the Chamber.

Jon said Taurus has in-house capability to assess their emissions and mitigation methods; they could help influence the Chamber from within.

Michael said we need to strategize about how to approach the Chamber, e.g., go down the list of 140 organizations that are members. He will participate. He thinks we have some power with the Chamber.

Halina said she will reach out to Asa Hopkins, whose company played a big role in Boston's BERDO.

Philip Hanser said, BERDOs don't require immediate investment in the first 10 years or so. That gives owners plenty of time to plan for how they will meet the requirements.

Michael emphasized the need to provide them the information they need.

Philip Vergragt suggested that we start with 3-5 companies including Taurus. Bring them together and develop a strategy.

Philip Hanser said he worries about getting building improvements into the business plans of owners. If the front line is businesses who are already doing it, it might scare off some businesses who aren't prepared for it.

Halina asked how NCCE should work with the City. Should we do our own thing which gives us the freedom to make decisions?

Phil Hanser said he's tried several times to get spreadsheets from Bill without success. So he's frustrated and has mixed feeling about how to get involved with the City.

Michael said Bill is the person we need to work with, so we should figure out the best approach. He's good at exploring the technical issues of data collection etc. We can provide a timeline and a plan for getting resources. Don't just push, but also provide answers.

Halina said we will need a rough sketch of a plan forward in say two months. Someone needs to reassure Newton owners, and we can help Bill frame the answers needed to work with the Chamber. We need to get key people at the table. There are lots of important and interesting issues; it can't be only the City providing the answers.

Cory said she thinks Bill wants consultants to assist, and may need the budget to hire them. Working with the City is difficult. Need to engage a consultant to help.

Jim and Phil Vergragt concurred. Jim added that it needs to be a "gray-haired advisor" (a term of art for a seasoned individual who has credibility) who can offer advice to the key players, not a consulting company that will spend a lot of money on data collection and editing big reports.

Phil Vergragt thinks NCCE should prepare a timeline/plan. Provide Bill what he needs in order to move forward. We need to lay out the sequence of steps that City needs to follow, and we will support them. Halina added that we could be the one who defines the steps.

Phil Hanser said we should work with the City's internal process. Start with a meeting with them to set out the schedule. 'Them' being the four staff charged with getting BERDO done. We can ask them how they prefer to work with us.

JP agree with hiring a facilitator/consultant when needed.

Stephen said the question is not whether an advisory board is needed, but rather who needs to be advised.

We should encourage Bill to set up a small tactical plan.

Phil Hanser suggests an organized list of things needed to get BERDO moving. NCCE should act as an inhouse consultant. He worries about City hiring a poor consultant.

Halina said we agree that not to create an advisory board in the front end. But when the process gets started the stakeholders will appreciate our help. Phil Hanser worries that the City might get off prematurely.

Halina summarized:

1. We will be an in-house consultant to the process.
2. We need to make a list of things to be done.
3. We should start the process of creating a plan for action, including a timetable.
4. We should help assemble business people; the City needs to be able respond to their questions.

How did Boston do it? It was a big process with a Green Ribbon Commission, city staff, and the public.

Philip Vergragt added that in Boston the internal champion was a City Councilor.

Stephen proposed a hypothesis regarding our fundamental challenge and a possible method for resolving it. The problem is not lacking technical expertise, but rather an organizational dynamics problem. Only Boston has gone very far down the path. We need a recognized luminary/brand that people would buy into, particularly the Mayor. His suggestion is to ask a Harvard Business School chair to suggest a consultant from their ranks, e.g., a PhD candidate or junior faculty. The Mayor (who got her degree from Harvard Business) would have a role.

<https://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/profile.aspx?facId=883075>

<https://www.hbs.edu/environment/about/Pages/default.aspx>

So Stephen suggests getting the Mayor to ask HBS for suggested person.

Phil Hanser said he knows a former Brattle Group employee who might fill the bill.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:15 pm.

Respectfully submitted by Jim Purdy