

Newtonville Area Council 2021 Annual Report – DRAFT

The Newtonville Area Council (NAC) members were active this past year with several key community issues and projects. Hosting meetings via Zoom, the council met 15 times over 12 months. Following is a summary of meeting discussions and votes taken by the Council in 2021.

The Newtonville Area Council activities in 2021 included revisiting and discussing the Washington Vision Plan; evaluating the city's zoning reform process, focusing on village centers; concerns about Garden Remedies and a proposed gun store on Washington Street; ongoing concerns about the appearance and upkeep of Walnut Street; plans for the CVS building; the Area Council's role in the March 16th local city council election debates and the general municipal election on November 2nd, the use of the Austin Street plaza; the number of rat sightings on Foster Street and nearby streets; proposed design and use of the current senior center; and Village Day.

NAC election of officers and City Council candidate debates

At its January 14th meeting, the Newtonville Area Council elected Peter Bruce, President; Kartikey Trivedi, Vice President and treasurer; and Kirill Alshewski, Chief Technology Officer.

Carolyn Gabbay and Jessica Archer announced that the municipal special election debate, involving at-large city council candidates from Wards 1 and 2, was scheduled for Sunday, February 21st via zoom. In addition, the four area councils organized additional debates in all Newton's general election contested races, which were held on October 17th and 18th.

Garden Remedies

Responding to concerns of a Newtonville resident, the NAC opened a discussion with Garden Remedies about the addition of "CANNABIS," in large letters, to the Garden Remedies sign; its request to drop the "by appointment" requirement, and the Mass Pike billboards advertising the store, which were all violations of the dispensary's special permit. The NAC sent a letter to the Planning Department noting concerns of local residents and their frustration at the city's lack of responsiveness. City Council President Susan Albright reported at NAC's June meeting that Garden Remedies had filed an amendment to its original special permit. At an NAC meeting with area residents, city council members and Garden Remedies representatives, the attorney for Garden Remedies agreed to continue the police detail at the site.

Oakley Spa and the Washington Street Vision Plan

The NAC initiated several meetings regarding the development of the properties at 969-979 Washington Street (the Oakley Spa and adjacent stores) into a 4-story, 28-unit apartment house, exceeding the Washington Street Vision Plan recommending 3-story developments for the area. Both Council President Albright and Councilor Emily Norton supported the 4-story development. Councilor Pam Wright agreed with neighbors that 4-stories is too much for the site. At an NAC meeting with area residents, city councilors, the architect, and attorney, the 3-story model prevailed with interior green space. However, both Walker and Brookside Streets residents met in November to object to the development because they had not been included in discussions concerning the development's density and the location of driveways, which have been located on the smaller Walker Street and not Washington Street.

Gun Store on Washington Street

At the April meeting, attended by Mayor Ruthanne Fuller, members of the Newtonville area raised concerns about a proposed Washington Street gun shop in close proximity to the pot shop. Council member Tarik Lucas asked Mayor Fuller when she learned of the permit request - which was granted in January. She commented that there were 2nd Amendment issues to consider in outright banning the shop. Members of the Area Council and the public expressed deep concerns about safety and security, particularly since there are three schools within several blocks of the proposed location. City Councilor Marc Laredo joined the NAC for a discussion of the city's zoning ordinances, none of which were geared to gun store regulation. Kartikey Trivedi and Carolyn Gabbay agreed to submit a public records request to the City of Newton for all documents relating to the gun store. Councilor Lucas and President Albright

reported on on-going zoning discussions. Kartikey Trivedi and Carolyn Gabbay were deputized to attend the City Council public meeting to voice area objections to the proposed site. Ultimately, the City Council voted to approve of an ordinance limiting siting for gun stores - none of which included the Washington Street location.

Zoning Redesign

Several NAC meetings focused on zoning redesign, particularly in the village centers, and much of the year was spent discussing zoning redesign and "Vision Kits" available through the Planning Department to determine what specific groups of people want in their village centers. President Albright said that community engagement was essential to the process and acknowledged there had been some misunderstanding about focus groups. Many felt that the vision kits did not represent a scientific survey. Councilor Lucas suggested that there be a community tour of the village and vision kit session led by President Albright, Councilor Norton and himself. The three Ward 2 councilors led the session on September 12th in the Austin Street Plaza, attended by NAC members and area residents. Many voiced concern about the lack of cohesion in Newtonville Center development. NAC members and Newtonville residents also raised concerns about the scientific value of the Polis survey, available to individuals, presented by the Planning Department, because the questions and focus seemed subjective.

In meetings attended by Mayor Ruthanne Fuller, City Council President Albright, ZAP chair Councilor Crossley, Councilor Laredo, and Councilor Lucas. Mayor Fuller met with the NAC in April to answer concerns that public opinions were not being heard or included in the Zoning Redesign process. The Mayor responded that "robust" citizen participation was essential. According to the Mayor, Covid had been an inhibiting factor in local participation. Questions persist regarding tear-downs, changes to single family zoning, transit-oriented development, the definition and purpose of village centers. The Mayor said that the City Council was the place for Zoning Redesign discussions and the Planning Department and Law Department are professional and are not influenced by her or the City Council.

In a meeting with ZAP Chair Councilor Crossley, she discussed Mayor Fuller's commitment along with fourteen other Boston-area mayors to add 185,000 units of housing and that Newton is not built to capacity under current zoning ordinance. She said that more and denser housing should be built near transit and village centers. Councilor Crossley agreed with concerns about the limited commuter rail and the more frequent and reliable Green line service as more suitable for multi-family development. According to President Albright, a two-track plan for Newton's commuter rail is "shovel ready." New village boundaries have not yet been determined, but ZAP will start with their centers and work out. Councilor Crossley defined "suburban areas" as those parts of the city with larger lots and houses, further away from the village center and too far to walk to them. ZAP needs to resolve goals for village centers including by-right height of buildings.

Newtonville resident, attorney Peter Harrington presented his draft of a new zoning ordinance for village centers, relying on the height preferences of three and four stories in village centers, expressed in the NAC survey results. Two-story buildings could be built by right, but development with a larger percentage of affordable units, including for people making less than 50% of AMI, might be granted a "bonus" story. He recommended more resident participation in the zoning process.

CVS Walnut Street development

Development of the former CVS site into a five-story, apartment complex, potentially blocking some windows of the Mason's building is still under discussion with the property's purchaser, Jeff Cohen and his wife, Justine Cohen, who owns Down Under Yoga which is currently located in the basement of the building. The five-story development does not conform to the Washington Street Vision Plan's four-story limit. The owner and his attorney (Stephen Buchbinder) have engaged in negotiations with the Masons to provide a setback from some of the windows. Many raised concerns about the impact of construction on the 126-year-old Masonic building landmarked in 2021. Residential abutters on Newtonville Avenue noted that they had not been notified about the development plans. Councilor Lucas has been participating in on going meetings with the Masons and the developers. President Albright proposed that she, Councilors Lucas and Norton, and the NAC should convene another large community meeting before the proposal came before the City Council.

Benches on Walnut Street and Village Center clean-up

Another ongoing discussion was the newly installed benches on Walnut Street and the graffiti and trash blighting Walnut Street. To the majority of negative comments about the benches, Barney Heath, Director of Planning and Development said that "pictures were shown," before their purchase, although he did not identify that audience. Susan Reisler volunteered to contact the high school. In addition, David Porat, a volunteer, undertook a one-man clean-up of the street and benches.

NewCAL/ Senior Center

A recurring issue for the NAC was the decision to demolish the current senior center, built as the John R. Prescott branch of the Newton Library in 1938, to build a much larger Newton Center for Active Living. Many local residents complained that they had not been engaged in the planning. Petitions on both sides of the issue were submitted to the mayor and the city council, along with an initiative to landmark the building, allowing some part of the exterior to be preserved.

RATS

Residents of Foster Street, Lowell Avenue and neighboring streets, reported an influx of rats resulting from the TRIO development. Although the Newton Public Health Department denied an increase in the rat population, despite complaints, residents were urged to log their sightings on the city's website. In response to Foster Street complaints, City inspectors met with residents, urging them to keep trash in sealed receptacles. TRIO established a liaison committee, led by Foster Street resident Beth Smith and has engaged the services of a pest control company to assist with extermination. Rats have been reported on surrounding streets as well as at the Austin Street plaza.

Austin Street Plaza

There were on-going discussions about the use of the Austin Street Plaza, which served as a venue for a concert series in the fall.

Village Day

After a year's hiatus and much concern about Covid, Dana D'Agostino and Maura Harrington organized the most successful NAC Village Day on Sunday, September 26th. Martina Jackson joined the effort in soliciting contributions and sponsorship from Newtonville business owners, many of whom were new to the area or had not contributed before. Over 2,000 people enjoyed 7,600 free cupcakes. There were 55 vendors, including many new businesses and restaurants. There were 19 events, including a running train - ridden twice by Newtonville resident Congressman Jake Auchincloss and his toddler son. Leo the Newton Police puppy was a non-stop attraction. Village Day 2021 netted a \$10,000 profit. The NAC voted to donate \$1,500 of the proceeds to Newton's food pantries and Newton Community Education.