

Thursday, May 19, 2022

## Mayor's Update

### Fire Chief Greg Gentile

I am so pleased to appoint Gregory J. Gentile who has been serving as Assistant Chief/Chief of Operations to be our next Chief of the Newton Fire Department.



*(Top Photo: with just retired Chief Gino Lucchetti to my the left and Chief Greg Gentile to my right.)*

Greg Gentile is an effective and adaptive leader who is committed to building on the traditions of excellence in the department and to a positive, inclusive and respectful culture. He brings deep experience to the role not just in fire suppression, fire prevention, code enforcement and training, but also with emergency medical response and emergency preparation and operations. He is filled with a love of Newton and the profession and also has a deep commitment to the health and well-being of the members of this critically important

department. His emotional and intellectual intelligence, curiosity and integrity, work ethic and interpersonal skills will serve him and all of us well.

*(Right, Chief Gentile with his father, retired Newton Firefighter Donald "Donnie" Gentile.)*

Chief Gentile is a lifelong Newton resident and a third generation Newton firefighter, with NFD serving as a second home since he was a boy. He is following in the footsteps of his father, Donald "Donnie" Gentile, and grandfather, Nicholas "Nick" Gentile. Together, Donnie and Nick served the City of Newton for 85 years and Greg brings another 18 of his own to the role.



My decision to promote Chief Gentile, in part, came after having seen firsthand his effectiveness and leadership during the past two years during the pandemic. In addition, the City's multistage selection process, which included an assessment of competencies by a skilled panel of independent experts and extensive interviews by a cross section of our residents and

department heads, reinforced our collective belief in his leadership abilities, competence, trustworthiness, and warmth.

“I want to thank Mayor Fuller for trusting me to lead this department. I will be leading one of the best fire departments in the country and am committed to building on the strong foundation left by my friend and predecessor Chief Gino Lucchetti,” said Chief Gentile.

Greg Gentile was hired as a firefighter in April 2004 and was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant in 2010. As Lieutenant, he served in both the Fire Prevention Division and as a company officer in the Suppression force. He was promoted to Captain in 2015, serving in the Training and Safety Division for four years. In 2019, he was promoted to Deputy Chief, serving as a shift commander, responsible for one of the four groups in the suppression force. He started serving as Assistant Chief/Chief of Operations during the early, challenging days of the COVID-19 pandemic in April 2020. With his leadership at the side of Chief Lucchetti, the Department reinvented how to do its essential work with the health and safety of both department members and the public they serve as paramount.

Chief Gentile holds a Bachelor of Science Degree in Business Information Systems from the University of Massachusetts and a Bachelor of Science Degree in Fire Science Administration from Waldorf College. He is also a certified emergency medical technician.

Chief Gentile started serving as Acting Fire Chief effective Monday, May 9 upon the retirement of Chief Lucchetti. I look forward to his appointment becoming permanent pending a vote of the City Council.

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## **Huge Step Forward for Commuter Rail in Newton**

Plans to rebuild our three MBTA commuter rail stations in Auburndale, West Newton and Newtonville, to improve frequency and reliability of train service on the north side of our City and beyond, has taken a big step today beyond the “dream & design” phase.

With design plans already 100% funded and well underway, Gov. Charlie Baker on Wednesday included \$85 million toward the construction of the new stations in the FY2022 Supplemental Budget proposal to the legislature. The 20-plus year dream of so many is now closer to coming to fruition. These new stations, when completed, will be a gamechanger for commuters, visitors, employees, and residents on the north side of Newton.

Designs are now underway for the three new stations to replace the current, inaccessible and significantly flawed stations that limit train frequency.

Construction of the new stations will include two fully accessible, high-level side platforms as well as elevators and accessible pathways to each platform. The estimated total construction cost for the three new stations is \$170 million. I am grateful to Gov. Baker, Secretary Jamey Tessler, MassDOT, and MBTA General Manager Steve Poftak for committing state funding for half the construction cost.

We are now working closely with Congressman Jake Auchincloss and our partners at MassDOT and the MBTA to secure federal matching funds. MassDOT and the MBTA have offered to take the lead on writing the grant for a promising federal funding opportunity. This transformative project matches well with funding opportunities in President Biden's Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) recently passed by Congress, so we are optimistic.

None of this would be possible without the persistence of State Rep. Kay Khan and the enthusiastic support of Congressman Auchincloss and State Sen. Cindy Creem. With their continued support, Newtonians will be taking the train from three new stations within seven years.

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### **Letter to MBTA General Manager Poftak**

The MBTA this week announced its Bus Network Redesign proposal which makes significant changes in Newton bus service.

Here is the letter that I, along with City Council President Susan Albright and Vice President Rick Lipof on behalf of the Council, are sending MBTA General Manager Steve Poftak:

Dear General Manager Poftak,

Envisioning "*Gold at the end of the rainbow.*"

On behalf of Newton's residents, employees, staff and elected officials, I along with Council President Susan Albright and Vice President Rick Lipof want to thank you for the opportunity to submit this response to the MBTA's recently released Bus Network Redesign proposal.

We recognize some significant benefits to Newton and across the region, but we do have mixed feelings and some very strong concerns. But, we can envision the "*Gold at the end of the rainbow,*" if we spend time working to redesign some of the proposed routes. Let me explain my thinking below.

FIRST: THE GREAT NEWS

I applaud and appreciate the proposal to improve service frequencies on various routes throughout the City and region, as well as the proposed extension of *Route 60*, from its current terminus in Chestnut Hill, to serve Newton Centre via Langley Road. This proposal is a significant improvement which will provide new travel opportunities among various markets, including a convenient connection to and from the Green Line.

A proposed new route, *Route 53*, has a lot of promise by connecting the Green Line with Brandeis University and areas of Waltham. We suggest, however, that the MBTA consider changing the proposed route so that it connects to the Woodland MBTA Station via Commonwealth Avenue and Washington Street (instead of the proposed route to Riverside Station via Grove Street). This revised route would retain some service along a section of Commonwealth Avenue, where service is proposed to be eliminated, while also providing access to Newton-Wellesley Hospital (one of the two largest employers in Newton), and avoiding the need to run additional buses on narrow Grove Street.

#### AND NOW: THE EVEN GREATER NEWS

With the support of Governor Baker, Secretary Tessler, General Manager Poftak, and leaders throughout government, we recognize that we are closer than ever to completing the design and construction of two-sided, accessible commuter rail stations in Newtonville, West Newton and Auburndale.

It now appears that within a few years, this project will be completed, and it will transform travel throughout the northern side of Newton and, in fact, along the entire Worcester Line. I cannot express loudly enough how exciting and significant this project will be for Newton and the region!

It's been a long-time coming and we thank you for turning this vision into a reality. The operational difficulty, as you know, is that the platforms at the three stations in Newton are currently only one-sided, meaning that trains must all switch onto a single track before and after the three Newton Stations, in order to stop here. To stop in Newton, an outbound train toward Worcester must switch onto the southerly track before arriving at Newtonville Station, and then must switch back to the northerly track after stopping at Auburndale Station. Because of this operational challenge, along with the move toward "clockface" schedules across the region, the MBTA skips service in Newton for large periods of the day. New, accessible, two-sided platforms will allow trains to stop in Newton throughout the day, as they do throughout the rest of the MBTA Commuter Rail system. We believe that these stations could then become feeder locations, where passengers would connect between local buses and the commuter rail, for service to and from Boston. The timeline for this vision has recently changed from a long-term aspiration to a short or medium-term reality.

## AND THE REALLY, REALLY BAD NEWS (BUT HOW TO AVOID IT)

We find the proposed changes to our Express Bus network in Newton to be very concerning, especially in light of the current challenges of our Commuter Rail system, as described above.

Newton has historically been served by Express Buses, that complement our infrequent Commuter Rail service, particularly for access into and out of Boston. Our concerns have been exacerbated by the recent service cuts and modifications to our Express Buses routes. Until recently, Routes 553, 554, 556 and 558 ran throughout the day, and riders relied on these routes to travel between Newton and Boston, especially during the hours when the Commuter Rail vehicles didn't stop in Newton. However, as part of the recent "Forging Ahead" process, the MBTA Control Board voted to terminate these four Express Bus routes at Newton Corner, where riders must now transfer to another Express Bus, to continue on to Boston or from Boston to points west.

These changes, which we understood to be temporary COVID-related service modifications, have now become the "current service" in the MBTA's maps and "compare your trip" features. But, to understand the scope of service deterioration in Newton, it is important to compare the proposed new bus network service with the Pre-Pandemic Express Bus service – not with the Post-Pandemic "Forging Ahead" service changes.

Yet, even when comparing the current (Post-Pandemic) bus service with the proposed redesigned bus service, we have many concerns, including the following:

- Service is proposed to be eliminated along our Adams Street/Chapel Street corridor in Nonantum. Through a lens focused on equity, it seems inconsistent for the MBTA to propose to eliminate service in Nonantum, where some of Newton's most transit-dependent residents live. The same holds true for other services proposed to be eliminated, including the Elliot Street corridor, along with sections of Crafts/Waltham Streets, and the Commonwealth Avenue/Washington Street area. These are areas where transit service should be improved – not eliminated – with the only options available to walk longer distances and/or transfer between vehicles.
- Our Express buses, already cut back from Pre-Pandemic services, are now proposed for elimination during mid-day and weekends. We are very concerned about this significant service loss. These changes will negatively impact many Newton residents, including our many transit "by choice" commuters. Of a more regional concern, these changes will encourage more commuters who previously used the

Express Bus to give up on public transit and choose to commute to Boston via private vehicle. This will happen just as major construction projects get underway on Storrow Drive and I-90, including the straightening of the Massachusetts Turnpike in Allston. Shifting more commuters from Express Buses to private vehicles will create even worse traffic delays for anybody who uses the Massachusetts Turnpike to travel between Boston, Newton and points west.

- Our two bus stops with the highest passenger volumes, by far, are located in Newton Corner – one stop is located on the north side of the circle, the other stop on the south side of the circle. Since Newton Corner remains a difficult location for pedestrians to cross, MBTA buses have historically circled Newton Corner, to provide safe bus service to both stops. Unfortunately, in an apparent attempt to speed up bus service, the proposal changes this historic safety feature, with buses proposed to serve only one of these two bus stops in each direction. We strongly feel that this proposal will cause safety concerns and inconvenience to our residents and employees. Until significant pedestrian safety improvements can be made in Newton Corner, MBTA buses must stop at both the northern and southern stops, in both directions. (We are grateful that MassDOT is moving forward with plans to improve the Newton Corner circle and the exits on and off the Mass Pike to improve safety for pedestrians, bicyclists and drivers. But, in the meantime, we need the buses to circle Newton Corner.)

Our clear, consistent and urgent suggestion is the following: **Immediately return our Express Bus service to how it had operated pre-pandemic.** While the Commuter Rail stations are being renovated, we propose that our City staff and elected officials work with MBTA staff, and their consultants, to update the network of bus routes in Newton to take advantage of, and focus on, providing transfer opportunities to and from our improved future Commuter Rail stations. We need access by buses to and from Boston while the exciting work is done on the Commuter Rail Stations. Plus, it makes such little sense to move forward with the proposed bus service plan, with inconvenient or no service available, especially when Newton lacks a consistent Commuter Rail option, just to potentially change the bus network once again a few years down the road.

Please **restore our Pre-Pandemic Express Bus network now**, and take the time to work with us to create a cost-effective, usable plan for a new bus network that would take advantage of the pending new Commuter Rail stations and service, which is now expected to be up-and-running sooner than had previously been expected. This new, future bus network would use transfer opportunities at our three Commuter Rail stations to provide connections to and from Boston, and would no longer require transfers at Newton Corner for service continuing to or

from Boston. This is the “*Gold at the end of the rainbow*” that we all envision, and the way to avoid the really, really bad news for our Newton residents and employees.

*(Click [here](#) to find more information about the Bus Network Redesign as well as information and dates to attend virtual public meetings on these changes.)*

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## **COVID-19 Weekly Data**

We have 362 new confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Newton over the past seven days from May 12 to 19, a slight dip from last week’s 381 new cases. (Remember, these numbers may be directionally correct, but do not include most of the people who are testing positive with at home rapid antigen tests.)

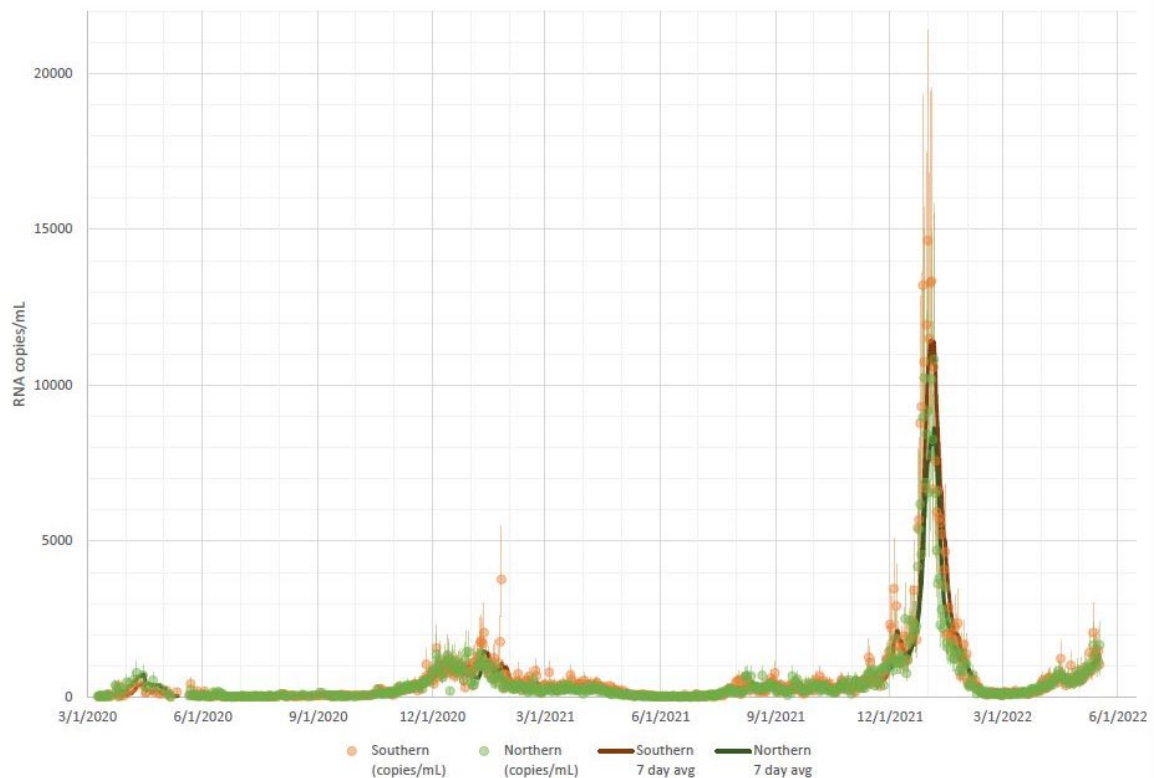
As of Wednesday, May 18, Newton-Wellesley Hospital is caring for a total of 24 patients who are hospitalized and have COVID-19. None of the patients hospitalized with COVID-19 over the past week have required care in the ICU. The hospital reports that the volume of patients with COVID-19 has been trending down during the past week and that approximately 54% of those who are COVID positive were admitted primarily for COVID.

In Newton, the latest data from the State Department of Public Health shows more than 95% are fully vaccinated, and 100% have had at least one vaccine.

Over the State’s two-week tracking period from May 1 to 14, the incidence rate and positivity rate both again increased. The incidence rate in Newton is now 55.4, up from 46.3 last week. The positivity rate is now 7.7% of the 9,868 tests performed on Newton residents, up from the 6.3% (11.001) last week.

The latest MWRA wastewater tracking data from Tuesday, May 17 shows the curve continuing to go up. Click [here](#) to see all the data.

Wastewater COVID-19 DATA



The CDC continues to show Middlesex County, where Newton is located, in the high transmission level category. (Read more at the CDC data tracker page [here](#).)

During this time when the community transmission level is high, the Newton Health & Human Services Department continues to strongly encourage people to wear masks in indoor public spaces, stay up to date with vaccines/boosters, get tested if experiencing symptoms, and consider taking additional precautions if at a higher risk for severe illness. Thankfully, this COVID-19 variant is managed relatively well with routine care (isolation, fluids and rest) and is not resulting in widespread serious illness in people who are fully vaccinated.

### Third Set of Free COVID-19 Home Tests Now Available

With the increase in cases across the Commonwealth, early and frequent testing continues to be a key tool in slowing transmission of COVID-19. Newton HHS encourages everyone to get tested if experiencing symptoms, even if they feel like allergies.

Every home in the United States is eligible to order a third round of free at-home tests at [covid.gov/tests](https://covid.gov/tests). Need help placing an order for your at-home tests? Call [1-800-232-0233](tel:1-800-232-0233) (TTY [1-888-720-7489](tel:1-888-720-7489)) or go online for answers to [FAQs](#). Click [here](#) for guidance on what to do if your test is positive.



## Keep an Eye Out for CDC Booster Approval, Ages 5-11

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) this week authorized a booster dose for individuals 5-11 years of age at least 5 months after completion of their primary series with the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 Vaccine. Read the announcement [here](#).

The booster dose will *not* be available until approved by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The CDC's advisers on vaccine practice met today and recommended the booster dose for this age group so this may happen soon.

## Newton Public Schools Data

The Newton Public Schools had 359 cases among students and 42 cases among staff during the seven-day period from May 12 to 18. (Last week there were 332 cases among students and 62 among staff.) With the increase in cases, the Newton Public Schools is reminding everyone that they strongly recommend students and staff wear a mask indoors in public, regardless of vaccination status. Find more information on the Newton Health and Human Services Data [page](#).

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## **Memorial Day**

Join us on Memorial Day weekend to honor those who have died while serving the United States in our armed forces.

*(Photo: With Mayor David Cohen at the Memorial Day Wreath Laying Ceremony in 2019)*

On Sunday morning, May 29, at 9:00 a.m., we'll meet at Forte Park (235 California St.), and proceed together to hang wreaths in honor of the Newton soldiers memorialized at a number of sites in Newton.

Later on Sunday at 3:00 p.m., the Newton Memorial Day Parade returns in person with bands, antique cars and military vehicles, horses and lots of activities for kids including "Touch a truck" at the Crafts Street Fire Station from 2:30 to 4:00 p.m. This year's parade will follow our usual two-hour route as year's past, starting at Newton North High School at 457 Walnut Street, crossing over the



Mass Pike, turning onto Watertown Street and ending at Coletti-Magni Park in Nonantum near the corner of Adams Street.

Our Memorial Day Wreath Laying Ceremony begins at 10:00 a.m. the following day, Monday, May 30, at the Newton Cemetery (791 Walnut Street). The ceremony will begin at the first Veterans gravesite near the front entrance (drive straight ahead when you enter and you'll find us).

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## **Cooling Off in Newton**

This weekend will be hot with temperatures on Saturday and Sunday in the high 90s.

Here are some tips to stay cool and healthy:

- Drink cool, non-alcoholic, non-caffeinated beverages such as water.
- Take a cool shower, bath, or sponge bath.
- Seek an air-conditioned environment, if possible.
- Wear lightweight, loose-fitting clothing.
- Remain indoors during the heat of the day.
- Do not engage in strenuous activities.

Remember also that the heat in cars rises rapidly. Never leave children or pets unattended in a vehicle.

Heat exhaustion can develop suddenly *or* over time for people of all ages. Signs include heavy sweating, cold/pale/clammy skin, fast/weak pulse, nausea or vomiting, muscle cramps, dizziness, headache, and fainting. If you are experiencing any of these symptoms, move to a cool place, drink some water, and loosen your clothes. If possible, take a cool shower, bath, or sponge bath. Seek medical attention immediately if your symptoms get worse or last longer than one hour.

## Social Services

Any Newton resident who needs assistance with a cooling plan may call one of the City of Newton social service professionals at 617-796-1420, Monday – Friday, 8:30 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. We are here to help.

## Power Outages

If your power goes out, please contact Eversource at 800-592-2000 to report the outage.

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## Solidarity with Buffalo

Newton City Hall was lit in orange on Tuesday night in solidarity with the residents of the City of Buffalo, in memory of those ten people murdered in last Saturday's racist shooting, to make it clear that Black lives do matter, and to support national gun safety laws.

We'll use the color orange again to tint the fountain water in front of City Hall during the month of June to call attention to Gun Violence Awareness.

Why orange? Orange brings awareness to the epidemic of gun violence in this country in poignant memory of 15-year-old Hadiya Pendleton who was murdered by a gunshot in a Chicago playground. Her friends honored her by wearing orange, the color hunters wear as protection.

Last Saturday, the target was Black people. Jews, Asians, Latinos, LGBTQ+ and others have also been targeted in mass shootings by hate filled people with access to firearms.

As we continue to grapple with the pain and loss from these hate motivated shootings, we need to find a way to talk with our children to help them process what is happening across our country.

Newton's Families Organized for Racial Justice (FORJ) released a powerful statement yesterday denouncing the terrorism and standing in solidarity with the Black community in Buffalo. They included a link to [Talking to Kids About Racism and Violence](#), which may help with having these heartrending discussions. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) also shared information for adults trying to explain these horrific acts to young people which can be found [here](#). For adults, consider learning more at the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute by clicking [here](#)

Warmly,

Ruthanne

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P.S. Learn more about mental health and mental illness, how to respond and support family, friends and neighbors experiencing a mental health crisis, and how to connect directly with local mental health agencies. Join staff from Newton's Health & Human Services Department, Samaritans, Riverside Community Care, Families for Depression Awareness, and The Resilience Project at Newton-



Wellesley Hospital next Wednesday, May 25 for **Mental Health: Supporting Our Community**. The conversation will take place in person from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m. at the Newton North High School Cafeteria (457 Walnut St.). Register to attend at [newtonma.gov/mentalhealth](http://newtonma.gov/mentalhealth).



P.P.S. **Congratulations to 92-year-old Elly Pollan**, a Newtonian who graduated from Lasell University on Saturday with the college degree she's worked a lifetime to earn. Elly took courses over the years as she and her husband raised their five children, but somehow family obligations always took precedent over her degree – until she moved to Lasell Village where the University

encourages residents to continue learning. On Saturday, her fellow graduates gave her a standing ovation. Elly, your city is also cheering you on. (Globe subscribers can read more about Elly [here](#).)

*(Photo: Elly Pollan receiving her degree from Lasell University Provost Eric Turner on the right and Lasell Village President Anne Doyle on the left. Credit: John Gillooly/Professional Event Images, Inc.)*

P.P.P.S. **Interested in playing football** next season? Meet coaches from the Mustangs youth football and cheer squads, as well as Newton South and Newton North coaches at Albemarle Field this Sunday, May 22 from 1:00 to 3:00 p.m. Players from the 2021 United Bowl Champion Mass Pirates Indoor Football team will also be on hand, along with Wayland Stretch Zone running some athletic stretching activities for the kids. Find out more about the Newton Mustangs [here](#).



P.P.P.P.S. I received a friendly email from Newton resident Rick Sheehy asking me to remind dog walkers to **pick up after your dog**. Cleaning up after your dog and properly disposing of the bag is the law in Newton; we also know it's the right thing to do.

