

Thursday, Aug. 18, 2022

## Mayor's Update



Newton and much of Massachusetts are in the midst of “critical drought” conditions.

We have had prolonged hot temperatures over the past six weeks and rainfall levels so far this year are approximately 9 inches below average. All of us can easily see that ponds, streams and rivers are low, lawns and gardens are turning brown, the ground is dusty and we know farmers’ yields are down. Drought is also stressing our trees, making them more vulnerable to being uprooted or damaged during storms.

Amidst these dry conditions, Newton and the other 46 communities whose water and sewer are provided by the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority (MWRA) have an ample water supply.

Why? Water levels at the Quabbin Reservoir which is the largest water source for the 47 MWRA communities is at 93.6% of its 412-billion-gallon maximum capacity, and the 65 billion-gallon Wachusett Reservoir is 88.9% full, according to the latest [MWRA water supply status report](#) from Aug. 1. The Quabbin/Wachusett system is so large it is able to withstand short and medium-length droughts, even those occurring three times in a decade as is now the case in Massachusetts.

That said, climate change is having an effect on New England, and while the MWRA is not recommending mandatory restrictions on water usage in their communities at this time, they are encouraging all of us to conserve water wherever and whenever possible.

Conservation works. Efforts by MWRA customers over the past 35 years have resulted in an average saving of approximately 160 million gallons of water per day, according to the MWRA’s latest five-year average.



Tips to conserve water in your home:

- Fix dripping faucets and showerheads.
- Test for hidden leaks in your system. An easy way to check is to take a water meter reading. Wait an hour while making sure no water is used, and

then take another reading. If the reading changed, you may have a hidden leak that needs investigating.

- Hear a trickling sound from your toilet? It could be wasting up to 50 gallons of water a day. You may need a new flapper or flush valve. They are inexpensive and easy to replace.
- Choose water-efficient appliances.

Find more information on conserving water at home [here](#).

Outdoor residential water consumption increases from 10% to 50% during the warm months of June, July, August and September.

How can we help minimize that increase?

- Water early in the morning before mid-day when there is a high rate of evaporation.
- Check soil for dryness and water only when the soil is dry to a depth of 1.5 inches.
- Raise the blade level on your mower to 2 to 3 inches.
- Use hoses with a shut-off nozzle. Hoses without a nozzle can spout 10 gallons or more per minute.

Find more information on conserving water in your yard [here](#).

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## **MBTA Communities and Multi-Family Zoning Requirements**

A law approved at the State House and signed by Governor Baker in January 2021 is getting closer to going into effect.

The “Multi-Family Zoning Requirements for MBTA Communities” is designed to address the housing shortage in Eastern Massachusetts by requiring the 175 cities and towns near MBTA mass transit stations to have at least one area of a reasonable size near a transit station (in our case, a Green Line T station or a commuter rail station) where zoning permits multi-family buildings by right. The goal of the law is to have up to 283,500 new apartments or condos built statewide in the coming decades near mass transit.

The final guidelines have just been issued. With help from the Planning staff, City Councilors are now thinking deeply about the details around the new MBTA Communities zoning requirements. They need to show Newton is taking active steps to enact a multi-family zoning district by submitting an action plan for full compliance to the state’s Department of Housing and Community Development by Jan. 31, 2023. The zoning update must be completed by the end of 2023.

If Newton fails to do so, what happens? We lose eligibility for funding from three state programs (MassWorks, Housing Choice Initiatives, and Local Capital Projects) and possibly other funding at the discretion of the Department of Housing & Community Development (which supports financially the construction of affordable housing).

The City Councilors are looking carefully at the nuances of the guidelines.

- How many units must be newly zoned near a Green Line or commuter rail station? The guidelines for Newton require a zoning district or districts that could accommodate 8,330 units of housing – 25% of Newton’s current total housing stock.
- Will 8,330 units be built in Newton if the zoning allows it? City Councilors are thinking deeply about that question. State officials point out that zoning is required but there is no mandate to build the new housing. They go on to say that changes would occur over many years. Notably, Newton’s current zoning allows for more units than are actually built.
- How close to the transit station(s) would the zoning district(s) be? At least 90% of the new zoning district(s) have to be within a half mile of an existing Green Line or commuter rail station.
- How dense would the multi-family housing be? The law requires at least 15 units per acre.
- What regulations would developers be subject to? The multi-family zoning district or districts would allow developers to build housing in these specific areas without going through a discretionary approval or special permit process. However, the City would continue to mandate site plan review which includes architectural design, screening of adjacent properties, and vehicular and pedestrian site circulation.
- How much of Newton would be subject to this zoning? Altogether, a minimum of 50 acres have to be included in the zoning. (Newton has approximately 11,580 acres altogether.) Councilors will have to consider that the smaller the area designated, the larger the buildings will have to be to accommodate the number of units required.

The Planning Department has been working with the City Council Zoning and Planning Committee to develop zoning which meets the requirements of the MBTA Communities Act *and* simultaneously meets Newton’s goals for our village centers – economic viability, housing availability, good design, sustainable buildings, and appropriate amounts of parking.

The Planning Department will be providing an update on the final guidelines to the Zoning and Planning Committee in September. Once scheduled, the meeting will be posted at [newtonma.gov/electronicpostingboard](https://newtonma.gov/electronicpostingboard).

## Climate Bill Ties Electrification to Housing Requirements

The City of Newton (along with nine other communities) can now move forward on an ordinance requiring all new construction and major renovations to use electricity for cooling, heating and hot water with one caveat – that we meet one of two housing requirements.

The Climate Bill approved at the State House and signed last week by Governor Baker allows Newton (along with Brookline, Cambridge, Lexington, Arlington, Acton, Concord, Lincoln and Aquinnah and West Tisbury on Martha's Vineyard) to require electrification once the City approves a multi-family zoning district or districts around MBTA stations (see the article above) *or* has 10% of our housing being affordable.

In order to meet the affordability requirement, Newton more specifically needs to meet one of two affordability thresholds to be a Chapter 40B "safe harbor." Chapter 40B is the state law enacted in 1969 that allows developers who include a specified percentage of affordable housing units to bypass local zoning requirements and apply for "comprehensive permits" with Newton's Zoning Board of Appeals.

Communities qualify for a "safe harbor" from Chapter 40B by meeting specific affordable housing levels. There are two ways to do this. Communities with at least 10% of their total housing that meet the state affordability requirements *or* with at least 1.5% of developable land area containing affordable housing qualify as "safe harbors." (Please know that once the City reaches "safe harbor" the ZBA may still consider comprehensive permits.)

The City's current 40B calculations show that Newton still has not met either safe harbor threshold. The City's Law Department is now in the midst of updating the 40B calculations. As soon as they finish, I will provide an update.

Why are we pursuing a requirement that new buildings and those that are substantially renovated use electricity?

Construction of new buildings using technology like electric heat pumps instead of fossil fuels is one of the main ways of addressing the climate crisis.

In Newton, more than 60% of our greenhouse gas emissions come from our homes and commercial buildings. Thus, the way we heat and cool these buildings, heat our water, and keep the lights on matters as we work toward reducing climate harming emissions.

We can make the electric grid cleaner and greener by generating electricity with cleaner, greener renewable sources, especially solar and wind. The same is not true of natural gas used for heating, heating oil, gasoline, or diesel fuel. Renewables dramatically reduce the greenhouse gases from generating electricity.

A new house built now will last decades. We must act now to ensure that we are building for a sustainable future, not one that relies on fossil fuels.

Based on our experience here in Newton, we know that full electrification is achievable. Since 2008, Newton has asked petitioners seeking special permits to achieve a significant reduction in the use of energy and natural resources for buildings over 20,000 square feet. In two recent quite large mixed-use developments, Northland and Riverside, the housing will be all-electric. These developers also agreed to study embodied carbon reductions; Northland completed its study and is incorporating the identified reductions. Small 20- to 26-unit apartments are also going all-electric for primary systems.

Some people and business owners have concerns about the electrification requirement. Numerous experts testified recently to the Legislature that the increase in construction costs associated with a new electric building is less than 1% compared to a building constructed with fossil fuel technology. Others reported that the electricity grid has the capacity to handle the increase in demand (see the rather lengthy discussion about this concern [here](#)).



*Let's go Jonny Hunt! The rising 7<sup>th</sup> grader at Oak Hill Middle School is one of eight power hitting finalists in the Little League Home Run Derby in Williamsport, PA, next Thursday, Aug. 25. The event starts live at 5:00 p.m. and will be broadcast on ESPN the following night, Friday, Aug. 26, at 7:00 p.m. Good luck slugger!*

### **Accessory Apartments: Another Housing Option**

Accessory apartments, known officially as accessory dwelling units (ADUs), are apartments in an owner-occupied home, or in a detached structure on the property.

Examples include apartments created externally in historic carriage houses or internally as "in-law" apartments created in homes that can be used by family members or as rental units.

We know there is a housing crunch across the state. Accessory apartments are a unique way to add housing often without constructing new buildings, or small ones away from the street if we do. Accessory apartments provide new options

for people who don't want to or can't afford to live in a single-family home while adding flexibility to homeowners to house family members or caregivers separately but in close proximity. Accessory apartments also provide a way for homeowners to earn extra income on a property with a long-term rental apartment.

Accessory apartments were first allowed in Newton in 1987. We have updated the ordinance several times since then. Most recently in 2017, internal accessory apartments were allowed by-right within specified allowed size requirements. In addition, accessory apartments were no longer tied directly to lot size and minimum parking requirements were removed.

These changes made a modest difference in the number of new accessory apartments in Newton. We continue to have only a small number of them, 94 in total. From 2008 until early 2017, a total of 25 ADUs were granted, or an average of just under 3 per year.

Since the ordinance revisions in 2017, at least 10 or more ADUs have been permitted each year. Internal ADUs make up the majority of new units permitted (55 since 2008), and of the 72 total ADUs permitted since 2017, 17 were detached (24%). Thirteen (13) of those 17 were in pre-existing structures, including 10 historic carriage houses.

The City Council's Zoning and Planning Committee (ZAP) is now considering additional revisions to the Accessory Dwelling Units ordinance to make it easier to create these new housing opportunities.

Among the possibilities would be to remove the requirement that a home must be at least four years old before an ADU could be added and allowing small detached ADUs by-right and relaxing set back requirements. Read the Planning Department memo [here](#).

Do you want to learn more or to provide input? The City Council's Zoning and Planning Committee will hold a public hearing to hear from residents on these proposed changes in September. The date, time and zoom information for the meeting will be posted [newtonma.gov/electronicpostingboard](https://newtonma.gov/electronicpostingboard).

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### **Architect Selected for Countryside Elementary School Project**

We have partnered with the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) to rebuild the Countryside Elementary School. This state agency provides substantial financial support (approximately 25%-30% of the cost) and helps manage the project.

Earlier this week, the Massachusetts School Building Authority Designer Selection Panel voted unanimously to rank Dinisco Design as the top design



firm for the Countryside Elementary School project.

Dinisco's team will join residents, elected officials, and Countryside staff on the School Building Committee, as well as our Owner's Project Manager, Dore + Whittier, to help move this critical project forward.

Dinisco Design has extensive design experience on school projects throughout Massachusetts. They served as the architect for both the Angier and Cabot Elementary Schools.

Register to join our next meeting to meet our team from Dinisco on Tuesday, August 23, at 6:00 p.m. [here](#). (Catch up on previous public meetings [here](#).) Find more information about the project at [countrysideelementaryschoolproject.com](http://countrysideelementaryschoolproject.com).

## COVID-19 Case Data

We had 117 new confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Newton over the past 10 days between Aug. 8 and 17. This is down from the 163 new cases we saw over the prior 11 days. (As a reminder, these numbers may be directionally correct, but don't reflect most of the cases found through rapid antigen home tests.)

The incidence rate in Newton for the State's two-week tracking period from July 31 to Aug. 13 is 4.9%, down from 6.6% over the previous two weeks, and our positivity rate is currently 13.3 cases per 100,000 population, down from 19.9.

We also again had another week when no one in Newton died with COVID-19.

This week's MWRA wastewater also shows more good news with levels systemwide trending downward. See the MWRA data [here](#).

## Updated CDC COVID-19 Guidance on Exposure

With many ways now available for reducing COVID-19 severity, including vaccines, boosters, and treatments, there is significantly less risk of severe illness, hospitalization, and death compared to earlier in the pandemic. As a result, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) last week [updated its COVID-19 guidance](#) for the public.

Most notably, the CDC no longer recommends quarantining if you are exposed, regardless of vaccination status.

The [updated guidance](#) for those who are exposed and those who test positive was adopted by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health on Aug. 15.

The joint [early childhood & K-12 guidance](#) for students and staff has also been updated.

#### What if I'm exposed?

[If you're exposed](#) to someone with COVID-19 and do not have any symptoms, regardless of your vaccination status, you should wear a high-quality mask for 10 days and get tested 5 full days after your last exposure.

#### What if I test positive?

[If you test positive for COVID-19](#), you should isolate from others for at least 5 days. If after 5 days you are fever-free without the use of medication and your symptoms are improving (or you never had symptoms), you may end isolation but should continue masking around others and in public.

If you had moderate illness (experienced shortness of breath or had difficulty breathing), severe illness (hospitalized due to COVID-19), or have a weakened immune system, you should isolate through day 10 and consult with your health care provider before ending isolation.

After you have ended isolation, if your COVID-19 symptoms recur or worsen, restart your isolation at day zero.

Regardless of when you end isolation, avoid being around people who are more likely to get very sick from COVID-19 until at least day 11.

#### Continuing CDC Guidelines

While the CDC has updated some of its COVID-19 guidelines, many of the recommendations remain the same and are rooted in the most effective strategies to protect ourselves and others:

- Get vaccinated and stay up-to-date with boosters.
- Test if you have symptoms or have been exposed to COVID-19.
- Stay home if you have symptoms and/or test positive.
- Wear a mask if you are in an area with a high [COVID-19 Community Level](#).

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### **Affordable Housing Opportunity at Golda Meir House**

The 2Life Communities Golda Meir House at 160 Stanton Avenue near the Woodland MBTA Station and Newton-Wellesley Hospital on Washington Street is now taking applications for 68 new rental apartments (60 of which are affordable) for older residents ages 62 and up to age in community.

*(With Millie Kessler, 95, at today's summer*

*carnival at the Golda Meir House.)*

Applications are due by Friday, Sept. 30. Occupancy is expected to begin next February 2023.

Interested? Join an information session; interpretation services will be provided. Click [here](#) for more information.

- Monday, Aug. 29 at 2:30 p.m. at the Newton Senior Center, 345 Walnut St.
- Thursday, Sept. 22 at 5:30 p.m. at the Golda Meir House, 160 Stanton Ave. (There is no parking on the property.)



I'm proud of 2Life Communities and the City of Newton's partnership with them (and MassHousing) to provide funding from Newton's Community Preservation Fund and our federal Home Investment Program.

Warmly,

Ruthanne



**P.S. Saturday, Aug. 27: Early, in-person voting** for the State Primary Election begins in the first-floor lobby at Newton City Hall, 1000

Commonwealth Avenue, next Saturday, Aug. 27 from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. Early voting continues at City Hall on Sunday, Aug. 28, from 11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and through the week from Monday, Aug. 29 through Friday, Sept. 2, 8:30 a.m. to 5:00

p.m. Polls across Newton will be open for in-person voting on primary election day, Tuesday, Sept. 6, from 7:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. Find your polling location [here](#). See a sample ballot [here](#). Questions about mail-in voting? Find more election information [here](#).

P.P.S Are you a practicing or retired lawyer or judge looking for a fun and interesting volunteer experience working with high school students? Newton South's **Mock Trial Team needs a new "attorney" coach**. The coach provides legal expertise, helps the team develop case strategy and arguments, explains basic trial procedures and more. Interested? Find more information [here](#).

P.P.P.S. The Charles River Chamber is reminding us of the great restaurants, shops and destinations close to home with their new campaign, "[Take a Trip Up the Charles](#)" – check out their suggestions for a "dream day" in Newton.



P.P.P.S. The feasibility study to create a **new community garden** on a quarter acre of green space along Washington Street at Walnut Park, near the Jackson School in Nonantum, are moving forward. Register [here](#) for the next Community Garden Project meeting on Monday, Aug. 29 at 6:00 p.m. Questions? Email Director of Parks and Open Space Luis Perez Demorizi at [pdemorizi@newtonma.gov](mailto:pdemorizi@newtonma.gov)



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