

## **Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council Meeting Minutes, August 6, 2021**

### **Area Council members:**

Bob Burke, Groot Gregory, Nathaniel Lichtin, Srdjan Nedeljkovic, Larry Rosenberg, Amanda Theunissen, Amy Wayne; Not present: Barbara Darnell

### **Ex Officio:**

Bill Humphrey, Brenda Noel

### **Guests:**

Alicia Bowman, Rena Getz, Lisa Gordon, Tarik Lucas, Kathy Pillsbury, Carol Carroll, John Rice, Pam Wright, Robert Fizek, Dennis Rieske

Meeting called to order at 7:33 pm. Amanda Theunissen taking minutes. Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin presiding. The meeting was held using Zoom videoconferencing technology.

### Village Day 2021

Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin explained that he spoke with some of the people typically involved in running Village Day and the current recommendation is that we not hold Village Day for 2021. Sentiment is that there is not enough time to plan, the Delta variant is causing concern, and with the 2022 Village Day hopefully happening in June, trying to pull this off for Fall 2021 seems too difficult. Waiting until June 2022 seems to be the best option for the next Newton Highlands Village Day.

### Zoning Redesign Scheduling

Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin explained that NHNAC had agreed at a previous meeting to host two vision kit sessions for zoning redesign, one for the Lincoln St Village Center and one for Four Corners. Timing for these sessions was discussed with dates in both August and September considered. (Comments are due to Zoning by the end of September.)

Area Councilor Groot Gregory suggested that August can be a slow month with people traveling, and suggested early September. Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin expressed concern that September can be overly busy and suggested Aug 21 and Aug 28 (last Saturdays in August) as dates.

Kathy Pillsbury suggested that doing this in-person might be more helpful than doing it virtually, to be able to walk around, take pictures, and discuss what everyone is seeing. Dennis Rieske and City Councilor Tarik Lucas agreed that hosting these vision kit sessions in-person would be

much more do-able than trying to do it virtually. Newtonville Area Councilor Peter Bruce echoed this sentiment.

Following this discussion, Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin confirmed that he will tentatively schedule in-person vision kit sessions for Aug 21 and Aug 28, where a group will collaboratively complete the vision kit. Area Councilor Groot Gregory suggested incorporating rain dates.

Dennis Rieske mentioned that the Historical Commission is hosting a webinar related to this: Exploring the History of Newton's Village Centers. August 10 at 7 pm

### Election Debates

The Newton Area Councils typically host candidate debates prior to local elections. The area councils take turns chairing the debate committee (which is made up of members from each area council) and this time-round the Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council is due to take this leadership position. Area Councilor Bob Burke and Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin volunteered to take the lead in coordinating the committee with the other area councils.

Kathy Pillsbury asked about the timing of the debates. Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin suggested hosting a debate prior to the mayoral primary (the only contested race) in early September (primary is Sept 14) and the rest of the debates before the general election, perhaps around the weekend of Oct. 16 and 17. Dates are usually finalized by coordinating committee. Area Councilor Groot Gregory asked if there will be early voting (as this could affect timing) and City Councilor Bill Humphrey explained that mail-in voting will be allowed.

There was discussion about whether the debates should be live, virtual or hybrid. Area Councilor Amy Wayne expressed her recommendation that debates remain entirely virtual. Newtonville Area Councilor Peter Bruce suggested delaying the decision until closer to the date, when we know more about existing conditions with Covid situation. City Councilor Bill Humphrey stated that it is unlikely in-person debates will be possible.

Peter Bruce from the Newtonville Area Council asked if there are any thoughts about obtaining an unbiased moderator. Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin said that the Waban Area Council is in touch with Marjorie Barron, who moderated the special election debates in the spring, and she is a possibility.

Area Councilor Groot Gregory asked about appropriating money for the debates. Area Councilor Nathaniel Lichtin suggested that we wait until the Sept area council meeting to do so.

### Local and City Updates:

### 940 Boylston Street Dunkin Donut Drive Through

This proposal went before the Land Use Committee last month. It was not particularly well received, but they will have a second hearing once traffic peer review information is received.

### 1021 Boylston Street Drive Through

This is the Starbucks drive-through proposal that came before the NHNAC a few months ago. The petitioner went before the Land Use Committee last month and received a very negative reception. The applicant henceforth withdrew their petition.

### Levingston Cove Improvements

This was supposed to go before zoning and planning in July but was pulled because it is being redirected to another committee. This is a proposal to make improvements and changes at the site— to reduce run-off and erosion at the site. The city is looking to put \$1.4M of CPA funding into the project for construction and that is what is being discussed at this point. Area Councilor Nathaniel Lichtin noted that there are significant concerns and questions about some aspects, including the presence of the fishing area extension, the railing height, and the general feel of the area becoming more structured and less natural. E.g. the beach areas may become less hospitable for people trying to get down to the water. City Councilor Brenda Noel stated that there is a misconception about the plans – the fence around the fishing area is going to be lowered. There is this idea that there are going to be sharp rocks that will prevent people from enjoying the area, but this is not true, there will be smooth stones. She asked that the community please be aware that this is a collaborative plan, that there is room for feedback. Robert Fizek stated that yes, there was a collaborative group, but members of X group do still have concerns and would like to see more collaboration on the part of the city. They feel there needs to be a more detailed discussion before moving forward. Councilor Noel stated that she agrees and that this conversation is still very much open, nothing has been finalized, concerns are still being heard and addressed and Commissioner Banks is open to comments. Councilor Bowman added that the height of the wall is a standard height and is in line with ADA requirements. She offered to forward a letter explaining the details of the wall and pathways. Lisa Gordon stated that there are a number of abutters who are unaware of all of these discussions and asked Councilor Noel to be sure that the commissioner reaches out to these abutters and let them know that these discussions are going on. Councilor Noel responded that we were very close to a plan and in the last couple of weeks, it fell apart due to the feeling that the city needed to include more feedback from the neighborhood. This happened basically this afternoon, so perhaps people have not yet heard. Everyone is in agreement about erosion and lake runoff, and everyone wants a lake that we can all enjoy, so hopefully we can find common ground, make this a collaborative process, and make everyone feel respected and involved. Commissioner Nicole Banks is working hard to be collaborative, she doesn't have a hidden agenda. A lot has happened in the last day. If people feel this has not been collaborative, let's reset, start over, give people the benefit of the doubt, and work together. Lisa Gordon emphasized that she did not intend to be critical in any way, she was simply trying to make sure

that abutters weren't left out. Nathaniel Lichtin invited Commissioner Banks to attend our Sept meeting to help further explain this process.

<https://www.newtonma.gov/government/planning/community-preservation-program/proposals-projects/levingston-cove-improvements-project>

In addition to this discussion, Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic, who was unable to attend the meeting, asked that the following comments be recorded:

Levingston Cove project. There is significant opposition to at least 2 aspects of the current design, and I would like to concur with both concerns. The first concern is that the design for the fishing wall is overwhelming and that it should be significantly downscaled. Even with the recent decision to reduce the height of the proposed new railing at that site, there are calls to maintain the current more natural appearance of this area. The second concern is that the new proposal includes the dumping of stones at the water's edge with the intention to block access. I cannot in good conscience support anything in these plans that would exclude or make people feel unwelcome to use the lake as they have done in recent years. The current plans include a barrier of plantings blocking access to 80-90% of the shoreline. A dumping of gravel and stones is proposed to cover the remaining section of water access. The intent of these physical barriers to exclude people is obvious and they must be removed from the plans, especially the unnatural dumping of sharp gravel and stones on the shore. We must remain a welcoming and inclusive city to all people who want to access and enjoy the lake.

#### Christina Street Pedestrian Bridge Study

The feasibility study came out after the NHNAC's last meeting, the city's preferred option is to demolish the existing bridge and replace it with a new one. The other option is to rehabilitate the current bridge. Rehabilitation would be faster and cheaper (over the next 40 years) but would result in a bridge with a shorter lifespan and would be more disruptive of the river, wouldn't remove the pilings in the river, and would result in maintenance issues (icing etc). The new design would not require pilings in the river. Area Councilor Nathaniel Lichtin mentioned that nothing in the study looked at climate change issues associated with demolishing the bridge, which he feels is an oversight. He is considering inviting the planning dept to come and talk to the NHNAC about why they chose to demolish rather than rehabilitate the bridge. Robert Fizek expressed his concerns, in agreement with Area Councilor Lichtin, about climate issues. He also mentioned that Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic (who was not present) emailed his concerns, which were as follows: Christina Street Pedestrian Bridge, Newton Senior Center, Newton Highlands MBTA station, and Demolition Delay Ordinance. My comments about each of these items are similar. What I've observed in Newton lately regarding history and context is very disquieting. There is an almost blatant disregard for historical continuity. One of the latest examples is the redesign of the senior center. As usual, a decision has been made to tear down the existing building and build a grandiose large structure triple in size. Most likely, it will be a big box design, another "Home Depot" like structure. A fine, architecturally significant building, a landmark in its village center, will face the wrecking ball. In recent weeks, we lost a 1700's house on Greenwood Road near the high school. And we lost an

1810 federalist house on Fuller Road, gone to the bulldozer and wrecking ball. These were both rare examples of pre-Civil War houses left in Newton. Even the 1950s Christina Street rail bridge, which was admired by international visitors just a few short years ago for its eclectic and unique design, will hit the buzzsaw of demolition to be replaced by a prefabricated metal structure at a much higher cost. Recently, the Newton Historical Commission voted unanimously to reject the MBTA's plans for the Newton Highlands MBTA station and its surrounding grounds. What was being proposed there was an abomination of concrete and metal, a \$32 million project ostensibly to build ADA-accessible ramps, but really a garish display of wasteful overindulgence. Being a wealthy community in a wealthy state, Newton apparently has enough money to do as much damage to historical structures, views, and landscapes as it possibly can - unimpeded. I would like to encourage everyone to speak out and demand some balance to how we move forward with these projects with a greater respect for historical continuity and without always demolishing everything.

### Demolition Delay Ordinance

The Demolition Delay Ordinance came before ZAP in July and was once again continued. The current discussion revolves around the development of an appeals process. The law dept and working group will be coming back to ZAP at some point with a proposal for a potential appeals process and a discussion of what other communities are doing regarding demolition delay. There was some discussion about properties over 50 years old, and whether they would be subject to the demo delay ordinance or whether or not context alone could be a determining factor in deciding to issue a demolition delay. There will be ongoing discussion between the ZAP working group and the historical commission. There were dueling interpretations of what the language in the ordinance actually says. Rena Getz said that the next session will include discussion of context (how they determine historical context), to better inform city councilors. Robert Fizek stated that he feels this discussion has been drawn out and delayed again and again and he feels the general tone of the chair to the historical commission was not particularly respectful and maybe they should allow the commission to do their job.

### NewCal

The current plan for NewCal is to do a demolition of the current senior center and construct a new building. This is the recommendation of the working group on NewCal and the Council on Aging, as well as other groups. The current building has accessibility issues and site design constraints that would make parking difficult and would encroach on neighbors in a significant way. The existing stain-glass windows and some other architectural features of the current building will be maintained and incorporated into the new structure. Feedback so far is that the building should be more traditional, less modern, to better fit contextually with Newtonville. Next steps: to begin the design work for the actual design of the building. There will be many community feedback sessions. Area Councilor Amy Wayne commented that she agrees with the points that have been made and feels positive about how this is moving forward.

## Electrical Heating, Cooling, and Hot Water Requirement Proposal

Newton City Council has approved a request to the state legislature for home rule authority to require all new/major reconstructions to use electrical cooling, heating, and hot water (or solar), instead of gas— except for stoves, gas stoves will still be allowed. Because of state law, city council needs permission from the state legislature. Other communities, including Brookline, have also asked for this proposal to be approved. If you are interested in seeing Newton move away from natural gas, you should contact your state legislator and ask them to support this proposal. City Councilor Tarik Lucas commented that he has and likes his electric stove. Area Councilor Amy Wayne asked about the cost difference between gas and electric heat. City Councilor Pam Wright state that electric heat is more expensive, but the feeling is that new construction offers insulation that is so much better than old construction that electric heat would be affordable. Amy Wayne expressed concern for homeowners of older properties that would not be able to afford to better-insulate their older property. City Councilor Alicia Bowman reminded the meeting that there is a goal to move off of fossil fuels completely by 2050 and she feels this proposal is a reasonable place to start. She added that gas is subsidized and that Newton has 900 gas leaks due to the old infrastructure (most in the state). Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin explained that there is a waiver in the draft proposal that would allow an exception for projects that could not financially sustain this. Carol Carole asked how this couples with improving our electrical grid. Councilor Bowman responded that we won't be able to shore up the electrical grid until we stop shoring up the gas industry.

## MBTA Green Line Work

The most recent email from the MBTA said that they are carrying out final details and testing and then they will be done with the track replacement. So, we are getting to the end. Regarding bus routes, they have a survey out asking where people want to go using the bus service. We are at risk of losing our bus service in Newton, so everyone is encouraged to fill out this survey- the link will be shared in the google group. It is open through Aug 8 (this weekend).

## MBTA Station Improvement

Robert Fizek updated the group on the Newton Highlands MBTA Station improvement: The historical commission told the MBTA that their plans do not conform with the historic protections of the site. This started as a \$3M project and has expanded into a \$32M project. There has been a lot of pushback from the community, and the historical committee agreed. Dennis Rieseke reiterated the importance of protecting the historic context of the site. Area Councilor Bob Burke expressed his dismay at the design presented by the MBTA and their lack of respect for the historical context of the site. Various members of the public suggested that the mayor should be involved. Rena Getz stated that groups are reaching out to the mayor. Carol Carole stated that the historical commission looked at the issue with canopies over the ramps going down to the tracks but not at the bicycle canopies, and she has concerns that this should be looked at in context with the Stevens building and surrounding buildings.

## **Administrative Items:**

Approval of July Minutes: The revised draft minutes were submitted for review from the July Area Council meeting. No changes were proposed. The minutes were approved.

Treasurer's Report: Area Council Treasurer Groot Gregory stated that there were no transactions this month.

## **New Business:**

### Area Council Election

Anyone interested in running should obtain papers from city hall, they are due back Sept 17. Nathaniel Lichtin noted that there will be no early or absentee voting for area councils. You must vote in-person on election day. Councilor Bowman offered to ask at the clerk's office about requesting a special ballot to allow residents to vote outside of election day.

### John O'Hara Square

John Rice stated that he is in touch with Carl O'Hara regarding John O'Hara Square, which they have been waiting to inaugurate. They are looking at Sept 19 at 11 am to have an official ceremony. They would need to shut down the end of Lincoln St for an hour to accommodate a large crowd. Everyone will be invited for free food and beer afterwards to honor John. Councilor Bowman stated that the date is also Tour de Newton and shutting down Lincoln St could be difficult, she asked if time could be slightly later. John Rice responded that it would be preferred to keep it at 11am, but he will coordinate to be sure the Tour is not disrupted. He also explained that he has been working with Laura Foote on a historic Newton sign and the final is almost ready and will soon be on view next to the Hyde playground. He also mentioned that Summer in the Highlands is ongoing, despite the rain, every Friday. Details are on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, as well as The Hyde web site.

### Food Insecurity Awareness Week Aug 22-28

Lisa Gordon announced Newton's first Food Insecurity Awareness event: Newton Eats, A Meal is More Than Just A Plate of Food. This will be a week of action around food insecurity. It will happen the week of August 22 – 28. Events include: Sunday - 8/22 - screening of A Place at the Table at Newton City Hall; Monday- 8/23 - Community Garden talk via Zoom; Wednesday - 8/25 - Community Dinner-- details to follow; Saturday - 8/28 - Kids Food Fair around Food education. During the week there will also be a Spice Drive for the Food Pantry.

## Announcements

Area Councilor Amanda Theunissen announced that she is re-locating outside of Newton Highlands and therefore must resign from Area Council. She expressed her gratitude for having had the opportunity to serve on the council.

Meeting Adjournment:

The meeting was adjourned at approximately 9:15 pm.