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Thursday, April 20, 2023

## Mayor's Newton Update



### Health Insurance and NPS Budget Update

Since the end of last summer, leadership from the Mayor's Office, the Newton Public Schools and City and NPS Human Resources and Finance teams have worked closely with a group of representatives from all our City and NPS unions to review competitive proposals for health insurance carriers.

Together with our Benefits Consultant (Lockton), we completed a thorough process and I am pleased to announce we will be partnering with Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts as of July 1, 2023.

Read more details about this process and plan [here](#).

The most important part of this switch is continued access to excellent health care.

An added benefit is that it provides cost-saving measures for our retirees, for the City and the Newton Public Schools.

The NPS budget has been strained over the past few years by new demands as a result of COVID-19, rising operational costs from inflation, declining one-time pandemic funds, and long-standing structural deficits. The operational override I proposed would have provided the Newton Public Schools operating budget with an additional \$4.5 million on top of the previously announced 3.5% increase of \$9.2 million for a total of \$13.7 million. Ultimately, though, Newton's voters decided not to approve the operational override.

I have been working since then to find additional sustainable funding for NPS as well as for another part of the operating override, the addition/renovation of the Horace Mann Elementary School. I am keenly aware of the deleterious impact of closing the budget gap facing NPS, including increased class sizes and the loss of instrumental offerings at the elementary level.

I previously announced three steps I have taken since the override to provide additional sustainable funding for NPS students and school buildings:

- Rather than the original 3.5%, I increased the NPS allocation by 3.73% or \$9.77 million, I am proposing to utilize strategically \$10 million of Free Cash to reduce required debt service on the new \$50 million Lincoln-Eliot building project. This will free up operating budget capacity on a sustainable basis, thereby increasing the NPS appropriation by \$600,000 per year, pending City Council approval.
- In addition to the \$9.77 million increase to the NPS budget base, I have also provided a “Bridge Grant” of \$1.4 million toward the significant increase (14%) that the Commonwealth’s Operational Services Division (OSD) has imposed upon school districts for tuitions for Out-of-District Placements. We expect that NPS will be reimbursed by the state for these additional expenditures in the following fiscal year and the “bridge grant” will mean that the OSD increase does not negatively impact NPS operations in FY2024. The funding source is Free Cash and is pending City Council approval.
- Chief Financial Officer Maureen Lemieux and I have worked collaboratively with the Newton Retirement Board to increase the base pension on which retiree COLA’s are calculated and to extend our full-funding date by one additional year to create a truly sustainable pathway forward. This ensures full funding of our pension system by August 2031 and provides funding to move forward with the Horace Mann Elementary School addition/renovation. The extension of the full-funding date by an additional year by the Retirement Board is dependent on City Council approval of the increase in the COLAs.

With this new partnership with Blue Cross, we'll lower health care premiums for our retirees and free up funding for our students.

- We have restructured our health insurance plans to provide access to excellent health care and a high level of plan designs while also implementing cost-saving measures for both our retirees and for the City and NPS, resulting in a decrease in Medicare Part B Reimbursement expenses for NPS in FY2024 of \$650,000 and an additional \$650,000 in FY2025.

### **Village Center Zoning & MBTA Communities**

Starting tomorrow (Friday) afternoon, check out the updated maps of proposed zoning for Newton’s village centers that our Planning staff will be making available [here](#).

The [version 2.0 maps](#) incorporate feedback from residents, businesses, architects, City Councilors and more. We heard from a lot of people during the winter 2022 info sessions, public comments provided at two January Council meetings, as well as emails and calls.

The village center zoning is designed to provide opportunities for more housing, including affordable housing, in village centers and in residential neighborhoods immediately adjacent to village centers and transit locations. Importantly, these 2.0 maps as developed also help Newton meet its housing unit capacity required under the MBTA Communities Law.

The “Multi-Family Zoning Requirements for MBTA Communities” passed by the State Legislature and signed by then Gov. Charlie Baker in January 2021 is designed to address the housing shortage in Eastern Massachusetts. It requires the 177 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.

Learn more about the MBTA Communities Law requirements [here](#).

In addition to the village center zones, version 2.0 delineates a single large contiguous zoning district along portions of the Green Line (between Eliot Station, Newton Highlands and Newton Centre) to meet the MBTA Communities regulation that one single contiguous district comprise 50% of all the land area needed to by-right zoning capacity for multi-family housing.

Other key changes to proposed village center zoning found in Version 2.0 include:

- A strict requirement along a number of village center streets that the ground floor of the building be a commercial/retail use.
- A revised residential zoning district (Multi-Residence Transit) which provides an incentive for existing homes to be preserved and converted into multiple units as opposed to new construction. New multifamily buildings would be permitted but, in most cases, would be smaller than the single- and two-family buildings allowed today.
- Version 2.0 also proposes a single story height bonus when 25% affordable housing is provided.
- The addition of a district which allows for multifamily buildings of 2.5 stories and with some limited commercial uses (the former Village Center 1 district) focused just along portions of Route 9.

Newton’s Planning staff will present the updated maps to the City Council’s Zoning and Planning Committee on Monday, April 24 and updated zoning text will be presented on Monday, May 8. The upcoming ZAP meeting will be hybrid, in person at City Hall Room 204 and online via Zoom. You can find the zoom link and agenda [here](#).

### **Moving Forward with a New Gath Pool and Three Improved Athletic Fields**

Thanks to the vote by members of Newton’s Community Preservation Committee (CPC) last week to approve funding, we are moving forward with a new Gath Pool and with improvements at *three* athletic field complexes, Albemarle Field North, McGrath Field in West Newton, and Burr School Field in Auburndale.

After years of input from residents and work by the Parks, Recreation & Culture team, they now go before the City Council for final funding approval.

In 2001, Newton’s voters approved having a 1% surcharge on our property taxes to fund the preservation of open space, for historic preservation, to create affordable housing, and to develop outdoor recreational facilities.

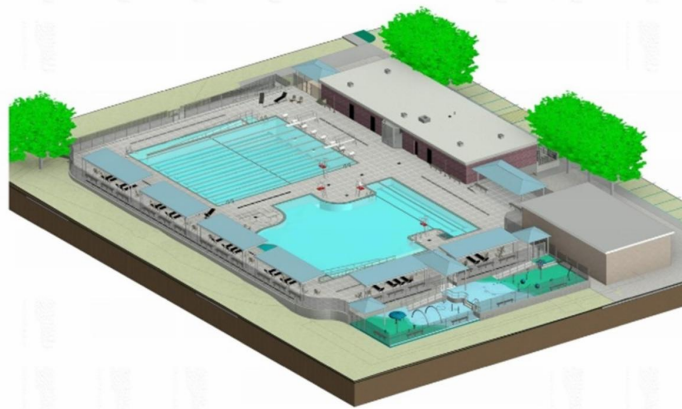
On March 14, the nine members of the CPC voted unanimously to recommend that \$5,834,362 in CPA funds be used to complete the new pool facility, splash pad and bathhouse. I, as Mayor, will also be adding \$1 million in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds to the project and State Representative Kay Khan secured a \$400,000 state earmark as well.

The CPC also unanimously voted on April 11 to recommend full \$9.1 million project funding to complete final design work and to construct the Albemarle, McGrath and Burr School Fields.

I am incredibly grateful to Commissioner Nicole Banks and the Parks, Recreation and Culture team, and Commissioner Josh Morse and the Public Buildings Department team, to the many residents and stakeholders who helped shape the plans, and to the CPC for their work getting us to this point. These are incredibly needed and exciting swimming and athletic field opportunities.

### Gath Pool

The renovated Gath Pool complex will provide a universally accessible experience for swimmers and guests of all ages and abilities. The design includes a zero-entry recreation pool, a separate lap pool, an updated and fully accessible bathhouse, a splash pad with spray features, a water slide, diving boards, walking lanes, and expanded shade areas with seating.



The Gath Pool project design has been approved by the Parks & Recreation Commission, Community Preservation Committee, and the Design Review Committee. Commissioners Banks and Morse are working closely with the Conservation Commission as they review the design before going to the City Council for final project funding.

Everyone is working hard to meet our construction groundbreaking goal of August 2023, with the grand opening of the new Gath Pool just in time for the beginning of the 2024 swim season next summer.

### Athletic Fields Improvements

With hours and hours of great input from our youth sports leagues, the Newton Public Schools Athletics Department, Friends of Albemarle, neighbors and residents as well as City staff with expertise in transportation, accessibility, stormwater and forestry, we will be making much-needed improvements at Albemarle, McGrath and Burr School Fields.



Improved fields, new sports and pedestrian lighting, a relocated basketball court and our first dedicated pickleball court facility, new trees, new walking and biking pathways with benches, bike racks, raingardens, and more are all part of the plan for Albemarle.

Improvements to the Burr School fields and McGrath include expansion and renovation of the rectangular grass fields, accessible perimeter walkways with seating, and new trees.

### **Needham Street Improvement Reaches Winchester Street**

The great news is that the Massachusetts Department of Transportation, MassDOT, is doing the full depth roadway reconstruction and paving along Winchester Street from Needham Street to Centre Street on schedule as planned.

The not so great news for those of us who need to use that stretch of roadway is that the work is and will cause traffic issues, detours and inconvenience for the next couple of weeks.

Milling work began along this stretch on Tuesday this week from 7:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. and will continue through tomorrow, April 21.

Starting this Sunday, April 23 and continuing through Saturday, May 6, full-depth roadway reconstruction and paving will be done from 9:00 p.m. each night through 5:00 a.m. the following morning.

This work requires the road to be closed and vehicles to detour around the work area. Police details will be at the site to guide traffic, and messaging boards and signs will be in place to display the most up-to-date information.

Pedestrian access will be maintained during the work period.

This work is part of the \$43 million Needham Street MassDOT project which will bring much needed improvements along the entire 1.7-mile length of Needham Street for motorists, cyclists, public transit users and pedestrians. The project includes better turn lanes, continuous sidewalks, new crosswalks, state of the art traffic signals, better bus stops, raised bus lanes, safer bicycle paths, and renovation and widening of the existing bridge over the Charles River to accommodate all modes travel. (Work on the bridge has already started and is expected to be completed by the end of this year.)

Questions or concerns? Email the MassDOT Project team [here](#). Find more information about the project [here](#) and sign up for project updates and advisories [here](#).

### **Gas Main Work Starting on Homer Street: Expect Delays**

National Grid will start work replacing a gas main on Homer Street (right in front of the Library) on Monday, April 24. The work is expected to last for two weeks (weather permitting).

One lane of traffic along Homer Street will be closed during the weekdays and a detour will be set up. Crews will be working from 7:00 a.m. until 4:00 p.m. weekdays.

- Traffic will be allowed from Commonwealth Ave. *eastbound* on Homer Street.
- Access to the Library and City Hall Department Head parking lot will be allowed via Walnut Street. An electronic message board will be located at Homer and Walnut saying, **No thru traffic – open to library ONLY**. All other traffic will be detoured along Walnut Street to Commonwealth Ave. to Homer Street.
- Parking on Homer Street will be restricted. However, as it is a moving construction zone some spots will be available.
- Homer Street will be open in both directions after 4:00 p.m. each day.

We'll let the NGrid trenches settle for about 6 months and then DPW will repave that stretch of Homer. .



*The young changemakers at Civics Day at Bigelow Middle School were inspiring last week as they presented initiatives tackling climate change, school safety and homelessness.*

*(Photo: With Bigelow 8<sup>th</sup> graders, Izabella Adams (left) and Camila Coster.)*

### **Help Us Envision the Future of a California Street District**

On the north side of Newton, an historically industrial area along the Charles River has evolved into one of Newton's most diverse places.

Around California Street, we find residential neighborhoods, parks and open spaces, and a wide variety of businesses, including manufacturers.

A new housing development is also near completion along the Charles River on Los Angeles Street, north of California Street, by Forte Park. *Allee on the Charles* includes 204 apartments, 25% or 51 of which will be reserved as affordable.

Newton's Planning Department wants your input about how this neighborhood should evolve. Help us learn what this neighborhood means to you and how we can better prepare for the coming decades.

Join us on Thursday, April 27, from 7:00 to - 8:30 p.m. at the American Legion Post 440, 295 California Street. Questions? Please visit [newtonma.gov/california](http://newtonma.gov/california),

or contact John Sisson at [jsisson@newtonma.gov](mailto:jsisson@newtonma.gov) or (617) 796-1122.

## **Survey Shows Support for Plastic Water Bottle Ban**

A group of City Councilors has proposed a new ordinance that would ban the sale of single-use water bottles that are one liter or less in the City of Newton.

We wondered what Newtonians think of this plan and wanted to gauge how a ban would impact residents. One thousand, one hundred and thirty-one (1,131) of you responded to an (admittedly) unscientific survey.

Nearly 60% of respondents (59.89% or 678 responses to be exact) said they favor City Councilors adopting the ordinance that would ban the sale of small single use water bottles at restaurants, grocery and convenience stores and other retail establishments, 35% or 398 said they oppose the ordinance, and 5% or 56 answered they were unsure.

Among those who answered the survey, 68% said they use single use water bottles once or twice a month or less, with 13% responding that they never use them. In addition, 52% said they try and avoid using single use water bottles and only use them when they need to, 27% said they use them when they are away from home, and 26% said they only use single-use water bottles when there is no option to refill a reusable water bottle.

More than a quarter, 28%, said they want to have single-use water bottles available during an emergency.

The survey also showed that those who responded are fans of reusable water bottles, with 51% saying they use one daily and 64% saying they own more than one. Just 10% said they never use a reusable water bottle.

Read the complete results [here](#).

## **Community Meeting on Tuesday to Discuss Temporary Emergency Housing at 399 Grove**

Interested in learning more about plans for Temporary Emergency Family Housing at 399 Grove Street, (the former Hotel Indigo)?

Join a virtual community meeting next Tuesday, April 25 to hear directly from the State Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD), Catholic Charities, and State Department of Elementary & Secondary Education (DESE) officials about their plans to utilize the former hotel property next to the Riverside MBTA Station as temporary emergency housing for approximately 59 families.

Superintendent Kathy Smith and I will also be at the meeting along with representatives from the relevant City Departments, including Planning, Human Services, Inspectional Services, School Department, Police, and Fire, as well as Mark Development, which owns the property.

The housing is expected to open this fall and be open for two years.

The City has a [web-page](#) where you can find up to date information on the Temporary Emergency Housing that includes a list of answers to frequently

asked questions.

## **Marathon Day**

The joint objective of the Boston Athletic Association, the City of Newton and the Newton Police Department is for everyone - runners and spectators - to have a safe and joyous Marathon Day.

The running clubs at the beginning of Mile 21 are terrific champions of a diverse and inclusive running culture. We love having them here in Newton on Marathon Day, cheering on runners as they approach Heartbreak Hill.

A responsibility of the Newton Police Department on Marathon Day is to respond to calls about spectators on the course to maintain a safe environment for the runners.

On Marathon Day, after being notified by the B.A.A. three times about spectators traversing the rope barrier and impeding runners, the Newton Police Department responded respectfully and repeatedly requested that spectators stay behind the rope and not encroach onto the course. When spectators continued to cross the rope, the NPD, along with additional officers, calmly used bicycles for a period to demarcate the course and keep both the runners and spectators safe.

We know this was very upsetting for these spectators. We have heard their deep concerns.

Police Chief John Carmichael and I look forward to speaking with the Pioneers Run Crew and the TrailblazHers Run Co. about what happened and how we can do better in the future, if and when that works for them.

We look forward to welcoming these running clubs back next year. We will join in their enthusiasm, working with everyone to keep the day safe and joyous for athletes, spectators, volunteers and supporters.

Warmly,

Ruthanne

P.S. **Celebrate Earth Day** in Newton this weekend on Saturday and Sunday, April 22 and 23:

- Saturday: Join the Newton Democratic City Committee Climate Crisis Subcommittee, environmental activists and elected officials at a **Climate Rally** and Visibility on Newton Centre Green, 1221 Centre Street from 1:00 to 3:00 p.m.
- Sunday: Newton's **Earth Day Festival** with fun for all ages at Newton City Hall, 1000 Commonwealth Ave., from noon to 4:00 p.m. Enjoy face painting, a petting zoo, delicious sustainable food and plenty of opportunities to learn how to go green, live more sustainably and save energy in your home and on the road. Click [here](#) for a full list of events hosted by the City's Climate Team, Green Newton and Newton's EV Task Force.



P.P.S. Join Dr. Tessa Charlesworth, a Harvard University researcher, for a discussion on **Disrupting Implicit Bias** on Wednesday, April 26 from 7:30 to 9:00 p.m. at Angier Elementary School, 1697 Beacon St. The Newton Parent Teacher Organization Council, Families Organizing for Racial Justice, Special Education Parent Advisory Council, and English Learners Parent Advisory Council are sponsoring this event which will also be available on zoom at <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83085228831#success>, Meeting ID: 83085228831.

P.P.P.S. Thinking about signing up for curbside composting? [Black Earth Compost](#) is running a special from April 23 through May 13. Get half off on starter kits (a \$19 savings), which includes a 13 gallon lockable cart and one roll each of cart liner and countertop bags. (I can highly recommend this composting service. Joe and I have been doing it for years and love it.)



P.P.P.P.S. Test your knowledge of our federal, state and Newton government, the U.S. Constitution, voting rights, current events and history and compete for prizes at the **Newton League of Women Voters Civic Challenge** on Sunday, April 20 from 4:00 to 6:00 p.m. This is a free event and open to the adults and students in grades 8 and above. Individuals and teams up to four members are welcome. Click [here](#) for more information and to register.

P.P.P.P.P.S. The great news is that the new rubberized safety surface at the **Newton Centre Playground** is being installed and the refresh should be complete in about six weeks. The not so great news is that the two large play areas will be closed while the work is being done. Click [here](#) for more information about the project.

P.P.P.P.P.S. See world class talent perform in person and free of charge during eight concerts at the **Newton Piano Summit** on two weekends, May 6 & 7, and May 13 & 14. The afternoon concerts at the Second Church in Newton, 60 Highland St., will feature Classical, Latin, Jazz and more. Click [here](#) for more information.



P.P.P.P.P.P.S Spend an evening with fascinating Newtonians at **Newton Inspires** on Thursday, May 4 at Newton South High School. Presenters include keynote speaker host of Radio Boston on WBUR, Tiziana Dearing. More information and tickets can be found at [NewtonSchoolsFoundation.org](http://NewtonSchoolsFoundation.org).

P.P.P.P.P.P.P.S. The 115<sup>th</sup> season of the **Newton Centre Clay Tennis Courts** is opening on Monday, May 1. Seasonal memberships are available offering court reservations and discounts on clinics, round robin tournaments and socials. The season runs through Tuesday, Oct. 31, weather permitting. Click [here](#) for more info.



Mayor Ruthanne Fuller | 1000 Commonwealth Avenue, Newton, MA 02459

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