

Statement in support of An Act Relative to Natural Gas Leaks.

June 16, 2010

My name is Julia Malakie. I live in Newton and am involved with two tree-related organizations: the Newton Urban Tree Commission, a volunteer city commission, and the Newton Tree Conservancy, a two-year old non-profit. This is my own personal statement however.

I definitely hope this bill will pass for obvious reasons. We are losing many trees for all sorts of reasons, and anything that slows down the rate at which our street trees decline and die would be very helpful.

I do have a couple of suggestions, however. First, it is not clear whether the bill would cover berm locations which once had trees, or could have trees, but do not currently.

Newton has approximately 30,000 street trees. At one time we may have had as many as 45,000, but records are not very clear. However, over the past 17 years for which I have data from the city (FY1993-2009), over 6,100 more trees were removed than were planted, so it is likely that there are at least that many plantable spots which are currently empty of any vegetation except perhaps grass. They may have just weeds, or not much at all in the case of square tree wells in village centers. I'm not sure whether such spots would even be covered as Grade 2 leaks (damaging public vegetation) and get repaired within 15 months.

We encountered this problem this spring. The Newton Tree Conservancy planted 50 trees this spring, at locations selected in December from applications received from groups of homeowners. Because Bob Ackley's Newton gas leak survey was already underway for the Massachusetts Public Shade Tree Trust, he checked our planting locations and we found that eight of our 50 locations had underground gas leaks, including seven on a one-block stretch of Parmenter Road in West Newton (photos attached). These people really wanted trees, having watched their street get increasingly bare over the years. People getting trees agree to water them weekly for two years, and one couple on Parmenter was going to water not only a tree in front of their own house, but two more trees in front of houses with absentee landlords. We had to tell them we couldn't plant there.

I'd like us to be able to plant in spots like this that really need trees, without having to plant in a gas zone and say "now the gas is in a tree root zone, fix it in 6 months."

My other suggestion would be that gas companies be required to report their lists of known gas leaks (with date of discovery, and date of repair if done) to the municipalities, or make the information available online. This would both aid in the enforcement of the repair deadlines in your proposed bill, and also be a useful reference for the Newton Tree Conservancy, the City of Newton, and homeowners to check before doing any planting.

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Parmenter Rd., looking north from Falmouth Rd./Parmenter Terrace intersection. Seven tree locations where Newton Tree Conservancy planned to plant trees were not planted due to detection of underground natural gas leaks.



Below is a view of the same stretch of Parmenter Rd. as seen on Google Street View. Since this photo was taken, the tree at far left has been removed, and the empty spot is one we had intended to plant.



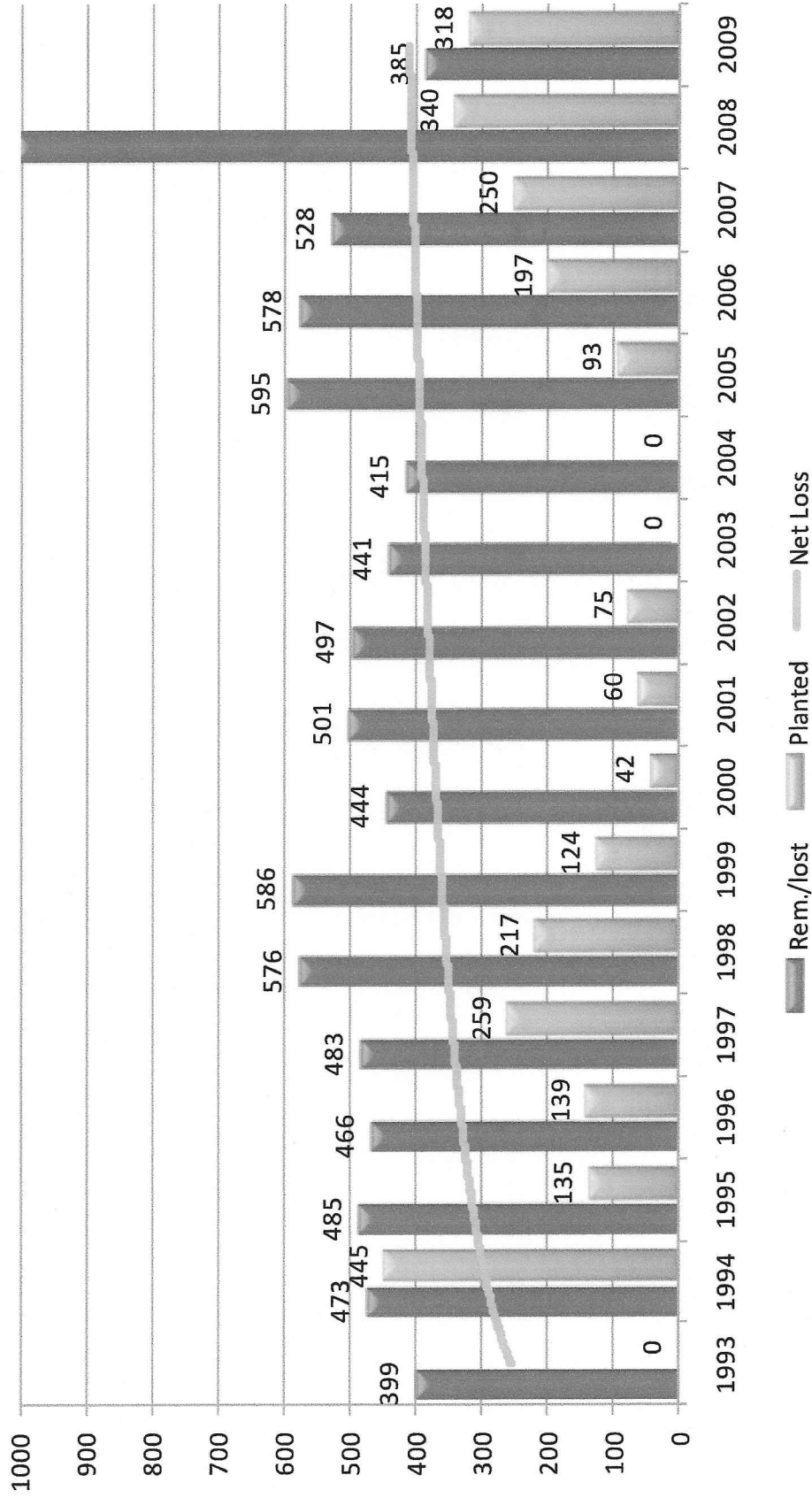
Below is a current view of 67 Webster St., also in West Newton, which was the other location we eliminated as a current planting spot due to gas being detected. The leak was reported to National Grid in April, they marked the street right away, but two months later, there's no sign of work being done on the street.



tree replacement

For approximately the last twenty years the number of trees planted by the City has been less than the number of trees removed or lost. If the current trend continues the City can expect to have nearly no street trees by 2079.

Tree Loss vs Planting FY1993 vs FY2009



Σ Removals = 8,852
 Σ Plantings = 2,694
 Net Loss = 6,158

the state newton's urban forest