

RIGHTSIZE NEWTON QUESTIONNAIRE TO CANDIDATES

RightSize Newton is a non-profit civic organization. We endorse candidates for municipal office based on the public positions of candidates and their answers to specific questions.

For the upcoming municipal election on November 2, 2021, we ask that you answer the questions below. If we have follow-up questions, we will contact you directly by email.

Your answers to our questions will be kept confidential. Only the RightSize Newton board will have access to them. You are of course free to release your answers to the public if you like.

Responses are due by Friday July 30, 2021. Send them to RightSize Newton at rightsizenewton@gmail.com.

1. The Zoning & Planning Committee of the City Council has been working on reforms to Newton's current zoning ordinance. The committee's work has been controversial. What zoning reforms would you like to see adopted?

The massive overall Zoning Redesign that is underway uses the promise of "doing something about teardowns" as cover for promoting greater density in the already-densest areas of the city. In fact, the latest draft would not even reduce teardowns in most residential areas, because new builds could be even larger than under current zoning. This effect would be compounded if two-family dwellings were allowed in all zones.

Instead, I would like to see targeted zoning changes such as increased side setbacks in particular, and stricter FAR limits, that reduce the incentive for teardowns, and preserve more green space in yards. This will also leave more room for trees. The recently passed garage door ordinance to address the "snout house" problem is an example of what can be accomplished with targeted changes, although I would have preferred stricter limits on the allowed width of garages as a percent of building width. I would also support much stricter energy-efficiency requirements for new builds. New builds on "old lots" should use the existing footprint or smaller, or be required to adhere to "new lot" dimensional standards.

I would also support raising Inclusionary Zoning unit requirements and applying IZ to smaller projects. Currently IZ only applies to projects of seven units or more, so the proliferation of townhouses of less than seven units makes it more difficult to reach the 40B safe harbor of 10 percent of units.

2. New Housing is proposed at the Dunstan Street site under Ch. 40B and approved by the Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA). What is your position on the proposal?

Because the City Council has no role in the approval of 40Bs, and due to conflicting meetings, I have not zoom-attended all of the hearings, but have spoken at some. I agree with the concerns of many residents that the size is excessive, and creates long walls and canyon-like north-south areas. I also think calling locations on the commuter rail “transit-oriented” is overly optimistic.

In my comments at ZBA hearings, I have noted the absence of any outdoor play area for kids on site, unless one counts the area that is intended accommodate Cheesecake Brook flooding in extreme rains. I am also appalled at the needless and environmentally wasteful demolition of attractive and useful buildings. The National Register-listed Carley Realty building was demolished just before the start of ZBA hearings. But at a ZBA hearing I spoke against demolishing the R.L. Tennant building, which is made of brick, is in perfect shape, and only 12 years old. I suggested it could be a great amenity as either a daycare center or fitness center.

A larger issue is that developments like Dunstan East show the need to either reform 40B at the state level – not likely to happen, or a mayor who wants to meet and preserve 40B safe harbor, either 10% or units or 1.5% Land Area Minimum.

3. In general, do you think that Newton should have a goal of significantly increasing its population and number of housing units? Please explain your position.

No. Newton is already at the size that the 2007 Comprehensive Plan projected as full buildout, in both units and population. Much ‘Infill development’ is happening at the expense of green spaces and trees, at a time when climate change means we should be increasing tree canopy. We need infill trees, not infill buildings, to cool and clean the air, mitigate heat islands, and absorb stormwater.

Before the pandemic, I argued that a Boston-centric economy and development agenda was unwise in view of rising sea levels and a public transit network centered in the future flood zone. I also said it was better to spread the wealth, and that good jobs and schools systems should not be concentrated in just Greater Boston.

Now, a recent study suggests MBTA inundation may happen even sooner than expected: <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/07/26/metro/rising-seas-an-existential-threat-mbta-study-warns/> Meanwhile, the Covid-19 pandemic has warped technological and attitude changes about work, that mean people have more flexibility in where to live, and can consider other factors than proximity to Boston.

4. Did you support or oppose the elimination of ward councilors as proposed by the Charter Commission in 2017? Please explain your position.

I opposed the elimination of ward councilors for all the reasons stated at the time, and spoke and leafleted and had a lawn sign against the proposed Charter change. It was bad for equal representation, and would have made it more difficult for candidates with limited financial resources to run an economical campaign by walking the ward. It would have moved Newton in the opposite direction of cities that are increasing district, as opposed to at large, representation.

5. Please tell us anything else that would help us better understand how you approach development and related issues in Newton.

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