

April Newsletter

From City Councilor Marc Laredo



Dear Friends

As we begin to emerge from this horrible pandemic, there is renewed hope for a return to normal life, or at least the new normal. With that in mind, here are my three observations for the month:

Schools

Our state Board of Education, relying on the judgment of our physicians and scientists, has issued a clear directive: our schools can reopen safely and must promptly do so and it set deadlines for reopening. Because of this state mandate, our elementary schools have fully reopened, our middle schools will resume in-person learning later this month. Our high schools will be open for in-person learning for four days a week and will eventually move to five days a week once required to do so by the state.

On Monday, March 27, the Programs and Services and Finance Committees of the City Council held a joint meeting to discuss the status of our return to school and plans for next year. At that meeting, I expressed my strong support for our public schools and my concerns about the need to rebuild our community's **trust** and **confidence** in our schools.

The School Committee members, school administrators, and representatives of the Mayor in attendance stated clearly and unequivocally that:

- we will resume full, in-person learning for all students in September; and
- neither finances nor the physical condition of our buildings will be obstacles to reopening our schools.

This is great news but we have more to do to rebuild trust and confidence in our public schools. Each year, the school department staff projects school enrollments for the next five years. This year, our school enrollment dropped precipitously below last year's projections: total enrollment was 11,910 students (projected to be 12,596), with the elementary schools reflecting most of that decrease. Significantly, the school department projected kindergarten enrollment to be 837 students, but the actual enrollment was 674 students. This steep decline in enrollment indicates that families voted with their feet - choosing private and religious school options over our public schools -and in the case of kindergarten, possibly delaying entry into the system. Since these options are expensive, it is more likely that those with greater financial resources disproportionately made this transition.

Public schools are a great way to help build a diverse community, but if more families of means choose to opt-out of our school system, then it will be less economically diverse. Moreover, when families leave the school system, support for the system is likely to decline. *Our school leaders must do everything they can to encourage families to return to our public schools.*

Elections

On March 16, we elected two new City Councilors, John Oliver (At-Large, Ward 1) and Tarik Lucas (At-Large, Ward 2), to fill vacant seats on the City Council. John and Tarik will bring progressive values coupled with a practical approach to their work on the Council, and I am pleased to be serving with them. I want to thank the three other candidates who ran for these seats. Running for office is not easy, and all three worked very hard in their respective campaigns.

Post-pandemic life

We must examine how new attitudes towards working

from home and shopping online will affect how and where people chose to live and work, the desire for additional open space, transportation needs of our residents and businesses, and our village centers' vibrancy. These are critical issues for Newton, and our city government must address them. Here are a few of the many questions to consider:

- What will working from home (at least part-time) do to the demand for office space in our village centers and commercial zones, and how will that affect those areas' vitality?
- Will we continue to shop online and, if so, how will we sustain the small businesses that are the bedrock of our village centers?
- Will work from home continue to lead to a demand for larger, not smaller homes?
- Will we have less commuting but more travel within the city?
- How will we ensure that we maintain and improve our open and recreational spaces?

We will need to be considering these and many other similar questions as we resume post-pandemic life. I look forward to the challenge.

As always, I welcome your thoughts, questions, comments, and criticisms!

Thanks,

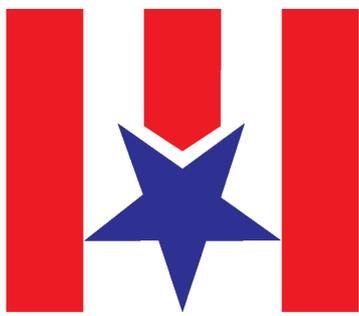
Marc

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