

December 2020 Newsletter from City Councilor Marc Laredo

Dear Friends,

The end of the calendar year is a time for reflection on the past and resolution about the future. With that in mind, this month's newsletter focuses on four areas: our response to COVID-19, the state of our public schools, our ongoing zoning review work, and our upcoming special election.

COVID-19:

While the promise of multiple vaccines gives us hope, we will be confronting the harsh realities of this pandemic for many more months. On a local level, our emergency response team has done a great job. Still, there is always more to do and lessons to learn. One immediate step is to form an advisory group of physicians and other public health experts to work with our city's health department. Our knowledge of the best ways to address COVID is changing daily. With so many world-renowned experts in our community, we need to take advantage of this expertise just as some of our surrounding communities have done. I will continue to urge the administration to convene such a group as soon as possible.

Schools:

We have taken some initial steps to return our children to additional in-person learning. There will be some additional class time at the lower elementary school grades. Our middle schools now have some in-person learning, and our high schools are scheduled to begin a partial reopening at the end of January. Additionally, we are going to start some COVID testing of teachers and staff in January and February.

While these are positive steps, they are not enough. We continue to lag behind our peer communities and numerous private and parochial schools in the amount of in-person learning that our students receive at all levels. Scientific and medical experts have repeatedly stressed the importance of in-person learning with appropriate safeguards in place. Recently, a group of physician/scientist parents in our community wrote to the city's elected officials urging us to increase the proposed testing frequency. We need to follow this guidance.

Finally, we need to start thinking **now** about what school will look like in the next school year. Even if vaccines are widely available, our children may be among the last to get them, and we do not know how widely they will be implemented. If there were staffing or physical constraints that limited our ability to have our children remain in

school this year, we need to make sure that they are addressed **before** we begin another school year.

Zoning:

The zoning redesign effort has shifted radically over the past several years. What began as a proposal to simplify our zoning code, revitalize our village centers, minimize tear-downs, reduce non-conformities, and then provide more affordable housing and housing alternatives while preserving existing housing patterns changed dramatically in recent months.

Over the summer, the city's Planning Department, with the support of some City Councilors, wanted the City Council to vote to eliminate all single-family only zoning in the city and all parking requirements for single and two-family housing. Instead, they proposed to allow developers (and other landowners) to have the ability to (a) build two-family houses by right anywhere in the city and (b) convert most existing houses throughout Newton into multi-family buildings which potentially could have, in some cases, up to six residential units by right.

Perhaps recognizing that this would have done little, if anything, to increase the amount of affordable housing in the city, the language now being used was increase "attainable" housing.

At the City Council's Zoning and Planning Committee meeting on December 14, the leadership of the committee abruptly shifted course, stating that the by-right two-family and conversion proposals anywhere in the city were off the table for 2021 (although those options would still be open for discussion in some areas of the city, such as near village centers). It also announced that the zoning work would not be finished and ready to vote by the end of 2021.

These are welcome developments and due, in large part, to residents of this city voicing their concerns about these proposals. But the zoning work is on-going, and it is incumbent on residents to pay close attention to this work and voice their ideas, support, and concerns. I will continue my efforts to ensure that we have a thoughtful, deliberate review of our zoning ordinance that places the interests of our residents ahead of the interests of developers and, at the same time, support efforts to revitalize our village centers, preserve and expand open space, increase the diversity of our housing stock, increase affordable housing, and continue to make Newton a welcoming community.

Elections:

Early next year (the exact date has not yet been determined but is likely to be March 16), we will have a special election to fill two vacant seats on the City Council. All Newton voters can vote in this election.

I am supporting **John Oliver** for the Ward 1 At-Large seat and **Tarik Lucas** for the Ward 2 At-Large seat:

- John Oliver is running to fill the seat of the late Allan (Jay) Ciccone, Jr. He will be an intelligent and independent member of the City Council. John is co-President of the Newton North PTSO and was President of the Horace Mann PTO, is on the Board of Newton Community Education, has coached youth sports, and helped lead the effort to preserve Albermarle Field and find an alternative site for a new Senior Center. Learn more about John at www.johnoliver4newton.org
- Tarik Lucas will bring a common sense, calm, practical approach to the City Council and add a diverse voice to the City Council. He is the son of a union postal worker and a union psychiatric nurse and a graduate of the Brookline Public Schools and Springfield College. Tarik is an active member of the Newton community, serving as a member of the Newtonville Historic Commission and having been an elected member, and vice president, of the Newtonville Area Council. Learn more about Tarik at www.tariklucas.org

Please do not hesitate to reach out if there is anything I can do to help you through this difficult time. I hope that you have a safe, healthy, and happy new year!

Marc