

Dear Friends,

We will soon celebrate Thanksgiving – one of my favorite holidays – where we traditionally gather with family and friends. But of course, this year, as with much else in this world, it will be different. I hope that, despite all this turmoil, we will still be able to take time to reflect on what is good in our lives and how we can help our city, state, and nation become a better place for all of us. As President-elect Biden said, "*I pledge to be a president who does not seek to divide, but unify, who doesn't see red states and blue states, but only sees the United States.*" So too may we work together in Newton to better our community. With that frame of reference, here are my three key November observations regarding our city, but first, I must begin on a sad note.

On November 7, we lost our colleague and friend, City Councilor Allan (Jay) Ciccone, Jr. Jay was a Councilor (formerly Alderman) At-Large from Ward 1 for many years. Jay served Newton's residents with decency and compassion, bringing a good heart and common sense to his work. He was a devoted son to his parents (his father, former Alderman Allan Ciccone, Sr. survives him) and a loving and proud father and grandfather. I will miss him greatly.

Schools

On October 27, I worked collaboratively with eleven of my City Council colleagues to submit a memorandum to the Mayor and the School Committee regarding the urgency of resuming in-person learning and the need to take action now [[Link to Memorandum](#)]. On November 5, the School Committee voted to reject the memorandum of understanding (MOU) that it had negotiated with the Newton Teachers Association (NTA) regarding remote and in-person learning. This rejection was a wise decision because the MOU would have served as a significant barrier to getting our children back to in-person learning if approved. I hope that the School Committee and the NTA will swiftly negotiate a new MOU that better serves our students' interests.

Nevertheless, I remain deeply concerned about the slow pace of returning our children to in-person learning as we continue to lag far behind our peer communities in this effort. While every one of our peer cities and towns has some form of in-person high school learning, our high school buildings remain closed to virtually all of our students. Our middle schools are scheduled to partially reopen on November 16. At the elementary level, one recent comparison showed that we are last among our peer communities in the amount of in-person learning that our children are receiving.

We cannot afford further delay, especially if public health concerns require us to switch to all-remote learning for some time. I will continue to work to get our children back

into real (not virtual) classrooms, with appropriate safeguards in place, as quickly as possible.

COVID

As we all know, the numbers are not heading in the right direction. I fear that we are heading into a bleak winter with increased illness rates, required isolation, and further economic hardship for retail establishments and other businesses.

As a city government, we must continue to do all we can to maintain good public health, reduce isolation, and assist our businesses. Our entire city must continue to follow our health professionals and scientists' expert advice, including the team in our city's health department. Other cities and towns have formed advisory groups of physicians and other public health experts to work with them. With many world-renown experts living right here in Newton, I have encouraged the health department to take advantage of this expertise in a similar fashion.

We also must work closely with our local businesses to help them survive. This assistance has already included creating sidewalk areas for outdoor dining and reduced liquor license fees for restaurants. I will be open to all ideas to aid our businesses, so please contact me if you have any.

City Finances

The pandemic and economic slowdown have significantly impacted our city's finances, both for fiscal 2021 (which ends in June) and beyond. While most of the city's revenue comes from property taxes (a revenue source that remains stable as long as taxpayers can pay their taxes on time), we are seeing sharp declines in other sources of income, such as parking fees.

On the expense side, we will continue to see significant additional expenses related to responding to the pandemic, both on the city and the school portions of the budget (over half of our city spending is devoted to our schools). For example, we have spent approximately \$2 million to improve ventilation in our school buildings and have increased technology costs associated with virtual learning. While these school-related expenses may be somewhat off-set by federal and state funds as well as cost-savings associated with not having students in our buildings, we need to watch these numbers closely.

The administration is forecasting continued financial pressures for the next fiscal year, and I expect that we will be faced with some tough decisions when we review the budget in the spring.

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

Thanks,

Marc