

March Newsletter

From City Councilor Marc Laredo



It is great to see one another in person, without masks, as we emerge from two years of COVID isolation! Of course, we still need to get vaccinated and boosted, but hopefully, we will continue to keep COVID at bay.

The City Council will soon begin in-person meetings again, although with the continued ability for some remote participation. This will be a welcome change, as I think there is a great benefit to the informal interactions that we have at in-person meetings.

We continue our work in a number of areas, including examining the zoning regulations in our village centers, addressing climate change, meeting our infrastructure needs, and, of course, conducting our annual budget deliberations. So here are my thoughts for the month:

Village centers and last-mile delivery services

Major cities - including Boston and surrounding areas - have recently seen the introduction of storefronts that serve as warehouses for so-called last-mile delivery services, which deliver goods from a central location directly to homes and offices. These services are another facet of the online shopping and delivery industry that has grown enormously in recent years, particularly during the pandemic. Unfortunately, while these services are convenient and popular, empty storefronts with no foot

traffic (other than the delivery personnel) do not add to the vibrancy of our village centers.

Newton does not have specific rules regarding where and how such services can operate, and I have docketed an item to create a new ordinance to regulate these services. Our Planning Department has created a draft ordinance and has worked with city and community groups, including the Charles River Regional Chamber and the city's Economic Development Commission and Planning and Development Board, to refine the draft ordinance. I applaud the collaborative approach we are taking as we strive to regulate this use appropriately, balancing the need for village center vibrancy while encouraging innovative businesses that will serve our residents. The ordinance is scheduled to be considered by the Zoning and Planning Committee on Monday, March 14, and I look forward to it being enacted by the full City Council

NewMo

Newton introduced a new ride share program in 2019, called Newton in Motion or "NewMo," to replace our reliance on subsidized taxi services for our older residents. We expanded the program in 2021 to offer ride-sharing services to residents, employees, and visitors within Newton's borders (with a few out-of-city stops for medical services). By all accounts, the program has been a success, with significantly increased ridership.

In order to better understand how we can continue to maintain and grow this service, I docketed an item that was recently discussed by the City Council's Finance Committee about NewMo's financial structure. Currently, we charge \$2 per person per ride (and \$.50 per ride for low-income individuals). The total cost per ride is approximately \$16-20 per ride. Since payments from customers cover only a small portion of the program's total cost, other funding is needed to make up the difference. Right now, most of these funds have come from federal and state grant money, with the city continuing to provide the same amount of money (\$275,000 a year) that it did for the subsidized taxi services. This model is not sustainable, especially if the program continues to grow.

So how should we continue to fund this program? We cannot count on grant money indefinitely. While we might seek some subsidies from developers and businesses, they are unlikely to be a steady source of funds. I think we have three choices: use city funds to maintain the program while keeping the user fees the same; raise prices for customers to make up the difference (with continued subsidies for low-income individuals); or some combination of the two. On balance, I think the third approach is the way to go. While we want to encourage ride-sharing rather than single-user automobiles for as many people as possible, we have limited city funds and, as a general principle, I think those funds should go to those most in need and not just as a blanket subsidy to those who can otherwise afford a service. At the same time, we do not want to raise prices too much so that we discourage an activity we are trying to promote. We will be continuing to address this issue going forward, and I welcome your thoughts on how we do so.

Infrastructure

I continue to be a strong supporter of addressing our infrastructure needs and spending the money (wisely) to do so. We have much more work to do on our streets and sidewalks, athletic fields, other recreational facilities (both active and passive), and our school buildings, and I will continue to support these efforts.

I also support the current proposal for a new Senior Center (NewCal) in Newtonville. There is no disagreement that we need to improve our Senior Center. The discussion has focused on where and how to do it. I believe the current plan to build a new Senior Center is the right way to go. Among its attributes are its location in the heart of a village, more and better designed interior space, and easier access to and from the building. While I share the desire of some to preserve the exterior of the building and some of the open space in front of it, doing so would cost significantly more money and reduce the building's functionality. Decisions like this involve tradeoffs, and I think these are the right ones to make.

Budget

On April 19, the Mayor will present her proposed budget to the City Council. After that, we will review the budgets for the city departments and the proposed capital improvement plan. Key issues to watch for are (a) how the Administration intends to use American Rescue Plan Act funds; (b) the school budget (the school administration recently announced a reduction in staffing beyond enrollment-related adjustments); and (c) spending on capital improvements

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

Thanks,

Marc

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