

Dear Friends,

I hope that you are continuing to stay safe and healthy. September traditionally marks the beginning of the school year. I remember my own excitement (coupled with a bit of trepidation) as I started a new year in the Newton public schools and as Roberta and I watched our three children go through the same process. But, of course, this year is very different. Let us all hope that this year goes well and that next year is much better. In that spirit, here are my three September observations about our local government.

Elections:

We have many dedicated public employees in our city who do their jobs without publicity or fanfare. Our assessors, building inspectors, building department and public works personnel, and customer service representatives – to name just a few – work diligently to keep our city running smoothly. Because they do their jobs so well, we often do not even note their work or appreciate their efforts. Please join me in thanking them for their work.

City Clerk David Olson and his team in the Clerk's office epitomize the best that our city employees have to offer. They ran our recent election process smoothly and without incident, despite having to deal with unprecedented levels of mail-in voting, postal service complications, and a host of other matters. The integrity of elections is central to our democracy. Our city staff, through this great work, allows us to have complete confidence in our local voting process. Newton is very fortunate to have Mr. Olson and his team oversee this responsibility. THANK YOU FOR A JOB WELL DONE!

I also would like to congratulate my colleague Jake Auchincloss on his win in the Democratic congressional primary and my colleagues Becky Grossman and Alison Leary on their hard-fought campaigns for Congress and state representative. All three demonstrated the best spirit of public service.

Now that Jake is likely to move on to Congress, we will have an open at-large Ward 2 City Council seat. I am supporting Tarik Lucas in this race. We need people like Tarik who are independent thinkers and who are willing to consider each issue on its merits. Tarik is the descendant of immigrants from the island of Nevis on his mother's side, and freed slaves, indigenous Canadians and Ukrainian Jews on his father's side. He grew up in Brookline, the son of a union postal worker and a union psychiatric nurse, and graduated from Brookline High School, where he played football and basketball. After graduating from Springfield College, he has worked at Harvard University Press for a dozen years. Tarik has been very active in Democratic and local politics, volunteering his time on Senator Markey's campaign and serving as a member of the Newtonville Area Council. As a basketball referee for many years, Tarik is calm and decisive. I hope that you will join me in supporting him in the special election that is likely to be held early next year.

Schools:

Having served as a member of the School Committee for eight years, I know first-hand how difficult its job, and the job of the Superintendent, are. They must balance competing interests and make decisions that will make some, and at times many, unhappy. Grappling with COVID-19 has been a particularly difficult challenge. Nevertheless, as a parent of a 10th grader at Newton North, I must express my personal disappointment that our daughter and her high school classmates will be in a remote learning mode for the “foreseeable future.” I hope that our children will be back in the classroom as quickly as possible with appropriate safeguards in place.

While much of the decision-making is done by the School Committee (which includes the Mayor), the City Council does have a budgetary role in this process and I will do my best to ensure that there are sufficient funds to do what is needed to get our kids in middle and high school back in the classroom. In response to my questioning at a recent meeting of the City Council and the School Committee, I was assured that financial considerations are not an issue.

I am troubled by the lack of any metrics as to when the high schools will resume in-person learning. Will it depend on COVID-19 rates, staffing requirements, having a certain amount of personal protective equipment for staff and students, how often we can test, or some other standards? Regardless of which ones we choose, we must have them so that parents, students and teachers are fully informed and can have confidence in future decisions. I hope that the School Committee develops these standards as quickly as possible.

Zoning:

Our zoning work on the City Council continues to move forward - the proposals set forth in the Planning Department’s August 7, 2020 memorandum and draft ordinance are being given serious consideration. For my detailed analysis of these proposals, you can read my [July 15](#) and [August 10](#) newsletters.

On September 14, the Zoning and Planning Committee had a public meeting at which the new proposals for residential zoning were discussed. Additional meetings are planned for the remainder of the calendar year on the residential aspects of the zoning code. A straw vote on these proposals can be anticipated near the end of this year. While I believe that we can, and should, improve our zoning code, I have a number of concerns about these proposals and remain troubled by the timing and process of this work. As I noted previously, our collective attention is elsewhere (including struggling with COVID and providing for our children’s education) and, because of COVID, we have few meaningful ways to fully engage our residents. I urge you to continue to follow this work closely and share your thoughts with us. You can find current zoom links and reading materials (updated every Friday) on the City Council’s website at <http://www.newtonma.gov/gov/aldermen/fridaypack.asp>. You also can send emails to the City Council at citycouncil@newtonma.gov and to Mayor Fuller at rfuller@newton.gov

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

