

The Newton Conservators

NEWSLETTER
Feb 1998

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Message from the President:

Open Space Planning

Open space land use appears to be a hot topic in Newton just now. Both the Mayor's transition team environmental group and the Newton 2000 Environmental Task Force have this topic high on their agendas. Also, the aldermen from Wards 5, 6 and 8 recently convened a meeting on land use to better inform themselves on their constituents' feelings about issues involving land use and open space.

The City needs better and more informed feedback on its "1995" Open Space Plan, which has just been submitted to the state. Now that the Andover-Newton Theological School and Boston Edison are divesting themselves of 20 and 40 acre tracts of open space, respectively, it is clear that in developing its open space acquisition strategy decades ago, Newton planners did not foresee the loss of these spaces. While Newton was substantially successful in acquiring targeted tracts of private land, no contingency plans (or funds) were put in place to acquire lands belonging to religious/educational institutions or utilities. Perhaps one of the recommendations to come out of the various ongoing land use discussions will be a plan to set aside funds to acquire lands that institutions or golf courses may divest in order to remain solvent. Along with this, surveys of these few remaining large open space parcels to assess their value to the environment and as passive recreational space for the community would assist in setting priorities for accumulating and allocating open space acquisition funds in the future.

Mike Clarke

Budget Proposals for Care of Garden City Trees, Turf and Grounds

by Doug Dickson

For some time now, concern has been percolating about the impact of budget cutbacks on maintenance of city properties and trees. Two years ago, the Landscape Maintenance Task Force was formed to seek creative ways to approach this problem and many initiatives have been launched as a result. The Adopt-a-Space program, begun by Newton Pride, has been strengthened and over 80 sites throughout the city are now maintained by volunteers. This allows the city to redirect thousands of dollars to the care of other properties. Use of low-maintenance plants and plant-care techniques have further reduced costs and we'll see those benefits grow in years to come. We're calculating the future costs of maintaining new trees, renovated parks, newly landscaped traffic islands to make sure these investments are protected by appropriate care delivered for the full duration of their useful lives. And we're drawing on alternative funding sources wherever they can be found.

But, despite the contributions of hundreds of residents (and the amazing results they have generated), one inescapable fact stands front and center: the Garden City must shoulder a fair share of the cost of maintaining its properties through its own operating budget. The sad facts as they relate to the city's record in recent years are these. The tree budget has remained the same for eight years, with no adjustments to account for inflation, an aging tree population, hundreds of new trees planted with outside funds, and several severe storms. The turf maintenance budget has been constant for six years, even though the number of acres of athletic fields covered by this amount has more than doubled. The city staff charged with maintaining city properties has been reduced at the same time that federal, state and private funds have been poured into renovation of many city properties, increasing maintenance requirements.

This is a recipe for disaster, and despite our best efforts, that is precisely what we are seeing more and more. The antidote is a modest increase in the city's funding of landscape maintenance. By adding about \$300,000 to the Parks and Recreation budget, a speck when compared to the total outlay of city funds, we could begin a regular rotation of street tree pruning and care, we could maintain athletic fields in prime playing condition, we could keep our parks, grounds and open spaces looking like they indeed belong in the Garden City. And we would have a lot more credibility with volunteers and taxpayers, who have every reason to believe that their investments in city government will be reflected as clearly in the beauty and fitness of our physical environment as in the provision of other city services.

If you agree that this modest proposal makes sense, now is the time to make your voice heard. The city's annual budget process is underway and it is important for our decision-makers to hear the preferences of those of us who ultimately pay the bills.

Attorney General Moves to Require Disclosure of Pesticide Ingredients

by Ellie Goldberg, GreenCAP

Green Decade Coalition

In September 1997, thanks to the Green Decade's GreenCAP's initiative, Newton became the first municipality in the country to adopt a comprehensive policy designed to reduce the use of pesticides in all city owned buildings and grounds, especially schools. Sometimes inert ingredients can be more toxic than the active ingredient. *Our Stolen Future*, published last year, presents the evidence about pesticides as endocrine disrupters.

Attorney General Harshbarger has warned that consumers can be dangerously misled into assuming that inert ingredients, which typically make up to 98% of the pesticide product, are harmless. Harshbarger is now taking steps to make pesticide manufacturers reveal all their products' ingredients. Under current law pesticide manufacturers are required to disclose only those chemicals that are used against the target pest. This leaves many potentially dangerous chemicals undisclosed. The disclosure of pesticide ingredients will inform people that pesticides may not be good to use, especially in environments designed for the care and education of children.

Newton 2000 Environmental Task Force Underway

by Doug Dickson

The Environmental Task Force held its first meeting in November 1997 and has met two times since then. Formed as a part of the Newton 2000 project, the task force is working to draft an environmental vision for the city to help guide decisions that will have an impact over the next 25 years or so. The group is also looking to take on specific projects and to advocate for others that will move our community in the direction of achieving that vision.

Newton 2000 is described as a community opportunity to remember our past, explore the present, and create a vision of our future. Under this umbrella, there will be celebrations, symposiums and other community events. Task forces have been formed to assess the city's current state of affairs along a number of dimensions, including the environment. These groups will articulate a vision and recommend ways to build on strengths and close gaps to help achieve the vision.

It's not always easy to create a climate of receptivity for visionary thinking and long-term planning. But the approach of the millennium, coupled with changes in city government, has put many in the mood to take stock of where we are and to reflect on the environmental legacy we leave to future residents of the city. It is one of those moments that doesn't come around often and it seems only fair that we take full advantage of it.

For the purpose of this exercise, we define environment broadly: how the city looks, how we use land, how we manage the quality of air and water, how we conserve natural resources, how we conserve and maintain open space for both passive and active recreation, how we protect our waterways, how we assure environmental health and safety, and how we create sustainable systems.

To date, about 30 individuals have participated in brainstorming sessions and discussions about possible projects, opportunities and issues that the Environmental Task Force might pursue. We are closing in on an initial draft of a vision statement that we can begin to test in various forums. As we begin to feel confident about the direction of our collective vision, we can sort among the many ideas we have generated to select those that speak most directly to our hopes for an environmentally sound future. And perhaps generate more ideas. Or redouble our efforts in areas in which activity is already underway. Or revive dormant initiatives whose time has come again.

I believe the way to make this effort work to our greatest collective advantage is for as many environmentally-concerned individuals as possible to contribute their ideas. It broadens input and builds our confidence in the outcome. If you have a pet peeve or a great idea, if you've considered the consequence of inaction, if you think local action is an important step in making the world a better place, then join us in this effort. It's not a huge commitment of time but it has the potential to influence the city's direction for the next decade or two.

If you would like specific information regarding the discussions to date for this task force and others that have been organized as part of the Newton 2000 effort, visit the City of Newton web page at www.ci.newton.ma.us. If you don't have an Internet connection at home, you can find one at the library. Or call Linda Plaut at 552-7130.

Newton's Telecommunications Ordinance: A Status Report

by AnnaMaria Abernathy

On January 5, the Newton Board of Aldermen, by a 16-8 vote, adopted a Wireless Telecommunications Ordinance that will regulate the placement of antennas for wireless communications devices - primarily cell phones - in the City. Despite strong support by the Conservators and other civic groups, the measure had twice previously been defeated by aldermen who objected to its setback requirements for free standing monopoles.

The ordinance encourages siting of antennas, by right, in or on existing structures, where they are not noticeable. Lattice towers are prohibited. Special permits are required for free standing monopoles, and their height cannot exceed 100'. Their distance from the nearest residence must be four feet for every one foot of height (2' for every 1' of height from a non-residential building), and they must be 125 feet from the property line. The 4/1 ratio for setbacks is designed to protect residents whose property abuts large open spaces such as golf courses. Special permits may also be granted for antennas on utility poles up to 60' tall on the public way; these will be needed as cell phone use increases in future. Because Newton has many church towers and tall buildings on which to place their antennas, all four providers of wireless communications services have testified that they do not need any monopoles, and can function under the ordinance.

Since the ordinance was approved, the Massachusetts Department of Telecommunications and Energy (DTE, formerly the Department of Public Utilities) has ruled that telecommunications companies are Public Service Corporations (text at <http://www.mass.gov/dpu>, DPU Docket #95-59). This means that telecommunications companies can bypass or appeal local communities' decisions about siting of towers to the State, rather than appealing directly to Federal jurisdiction. Communities lacking an ordinance are more likely to be affected by this ruling than Newton.

A second development is a lawsuit by John Donahue, owner of Tody's Garage in West Newton Square, who claims that the ordinance is illegal because: 1) it was heard by the 1997 Board of Aldermen but approved by the new 1998 Board, and 2) he claims it effectively precludes anyone from erecting a tower in Newton. Donahue also has an earlier suit pending in Land Court, appealing denial of a special permit to build a 150' monopole at his West Newton station.

For more information on the 1996 Telecommunications Act and what it means for Newton, see F.H. Abernathy's article in the April-June 1997 League of Women Voters Newsletter, (on the Newton Conservators web page, <http://chemserv.bc.edu/Conservators/>)

Charles River Pathway

by Mike Clarke

On a remarkably warm Sunday in January, my wife and I decided to see how far we could bicycle along the Charles River Pathway beginning from the Newton Marina. While the older sidewalk path from the Marina to Galen St. is narrow with poorly placed lamp posts and other obstacles, the section from Watertown Square to Bridge St. is remarkably lovely with several side decks to enjoy views of the wetlands. We also scouted the unfinished sections along California St., and the continuation by Alison Park. After crossing a wooden bridge, on which a family was feeding ducks as it overlooked a beautiful wetlands, we stopped for lunch at a Brigham's in a Waltham shopping center and then biked along the short section from Moody to Prospect Streets.

The next day Dan Driscoll, the MDC planner who is responsible for extending the CR Pathway, happened to call to say that the MDC has just printed 5000 brochures with maps of the pathway printed and that he would be sending me some. Dan said that the sections of the path that I had seen through Newton & Waltham should be finished in July. The paved part of the path will then terminate at Prospect St. While it is possible to bike along River Rd. in Mt. Feake Cemetery, a route along Crescent St. connects with

Woerd Ave., Grove Rd. and then to a path leading to Auburndale Park and Flowed Meadow. I walked in this area on a subsequent sunny Sunday, which confirmed Bud Elliott's vision that the Rumford Depot (DPW), Flowed Meadow (Conservation Commission), MDC Forest Grove Park and Auburndale Park (Parks and Rec) should be planned for as a cohesive wetlands area as the MDC Pathway progresses.

The MDC has also cleared an outermost section of the path and put in granite markers on the section near its southern terminus between Highland Ave. and Kendrick St. on the Needham side of the river opposite Nahanton Park. Since this connects with the section that was cleared with the help of the Conservators along Wells Avenue, I suggested that the MDC place signage on either side of the river on Kendrick/Nahanton St. to guide hikers to cross the bridge between these two sections. Utilization of the CR Pathway at either end of Newton will likely add to the already substantial momentum to finally connect the Pathway through Newton that has been on the books for the last 25 years.

For copies of the MDC Charles River Pathway brochure contact Trelles Randall at 727-9693 x261 or e-mail her at TRandall@mass.gov.

Green Decade Environmental Speaker Series at the Newton Free Library

Monday, February 23 *Citizen Action and the Environment:*

A Conversation on Legislation Advocacy

Panel discussion with Mayor Cohen. Co-sponsored with LWV of Newton

Monday, March 23

Generations at Risk: the Reproductive and Development Risks of Pesticides

Ted Schettler

Monday, April 20

The Intersection of Solar Energy and Politics

John T. O'Connor

Hemlock Gorge Cleanup

The Friends of Hemlock Gorge will meet to clean up the Gorge on April 25 from 10 am to noon. Meet at the parking lot in Needham across from Mills Falls Restaurant between 10 am and noon or later in day at the parking lot at the foot of Ellis St. Details are on their website at:

<http://www.chanel1.com/users/hemlock>

Board of Directors Meeting Dates

Members are welcome to attend the open meetings of the Board of Directors of the Newton Conservators, Inc. Meetings are usually on the fourth Wednesday of the month.

Scheduled dates are: Wednesday, February 25 Rm. 202, Newton City Hall

Wednesday, March 25 Rm. 202, Newton City Hall

Wednesday, April 29 (5th Wed) Rm. 202, Newton City Hall

Wednesday, May 27 Annual Meeting, Andover-Newton Theological School

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