

Newton Conservators

2025 Newton Candidate Questionnaire

Respondent: Susan Albright

Office Sought: Ward 2 City Councilor At-Large

Question 1:

What are your top 2 or 3 goals and/or objectives from the Newton Open Space Plan:2020-2027 (see pages 147-150 for the Plan's Goals and Objectives) and what do you plan to do to promote them? (FYI, a priority of Newton Conservators, relating to Objective 6C on page 150, is to complete overdue and future Conservation Restrictions in a timely manner.) Are there items that you believe are missing from either the open space plan or conservation discussions in our community, and how would you address that? (400 words or less)

Response:

I am most interested in the following three areas and I include what i propose to do about them.

Maintenance and Improvement: In the past several year the city has instituted fees for field use. We need a better understanding how these fees were created and how they are being used. A public/private is essential given budget constraints but care should be taken to assure the private fee-payers understand how the funds will be used.

Accessibility: Advocate documenting and updating park infrastructure to include ADA-compliant paths and facilities. The council will work with city departments, Parks & Rec, DPW, and the ADA Coordinator to secure targeted funding and integrate universal design in forthcoming capital upgrades.

Connectivity: I support the expansion of trail networks—such as rail-trail projects—by collaborating with the planning department and the Conservators I will advocate for accessible maps and wayfinding to encourage greater public use. I love trails in other cities and towns where they are well marked even for naive users.

Items Missing from the OSRP / Conservation Discussion

Biodiversity Monitoring & Native/ Invasive Species Management: The Plan lacks explicit objectives around assessing ecological health, enhancing native plant communities, or

controlling invasives. To address this, I'd propose incorporating semi-annual biodiversity inventories and habitat restoration initiatives (e.g. pollinator meadow projects) into actionable goals—perhaps through volunteer-based citizen science programs.

Wildlife Corridors & Urban Canopy Expansion: Beyond connectivity for people, wildlife movement and tree canopy continuity are important. I suggest specific objectives like identifying habitat corridors and expanding street-tree planting in underserved areas. We also need to take into account the needs of dog-owners and their pets to engage with the parks and forrests in Newton.

Interpretive Trails & Village Center Signage: Engaging the community through signage, interpretive nature trails, and way-finding (especially in village centers) would increase awareness and use of open space. Setting up that goal could tie into both equity and connectivity.

Question 2:

The climate crisis is one of the biggest detrimental impacts on our open spaces. How would you accelerate or add to the actions recommended in both the Newton Climate Action Plan: A Living Plan for 2020-2025 (focused on reducing greenhouse gases) and the Newton Climate Vulnerability Assessment and Action Plan (focused on changes to protect natural resources and reduce effects of extreme weather events)? (400 words or less)

Response:

Accelerating Actions in Newton's Climate Strategies

1. Ramp Up Greenhouse Gas (GHG) Mitigation Efforts (Climate Action Plan 2020–2025):
 - a. As Chair of Public Facilities this term I've engaged with National Grid and Eversource to reduce reliance on gas.
 - b. In June the two companies made a proposal to engage Newton in an 18 month planning process to abandon gas in Newton by 2050. We are now awaiting an MOU from National Grid and Eversource on roles and responsibilities of each group.
 - c. I am working with the sustainability team on a pilot program with 20 streets proposed by National Grid where gas pipe would be abandoned and those homes on the pipe would be electrified. Working out the details of this pilot is challenging but we continue to push National Grid.
2. I would advocate for the expansion of the Energy Coach Program beyond current levels.
3. Push for stronger building electrification incentives with our state legislators.

4. Highlight natural climate solutions:. I'd propose accelerated urban forestry and green infrastructure in open spaces to combine mitigation with resilience.

5. Enhance Resilience and Natural Resource Protection (Climate Vulnerability Assessment & Action Plan)

- a. The DPW has applied for two large grants from the DEP to assess our storm water infrastructure. The goal is to inventory our stormwater infrastructure and plan its upgrade. Much of Newton's land was filled in over the years, culverts were created to bury streams. Many parts of the city have high water tables causing flooding in the city. While we are under orders from the Office of Dam Safety to upgrade the Bullough's pond dam, many are concerned with overtopping that will happen regardless of the dam's upgrade. (Flooding would be greatly exacerbated if the Dam is not fixed). Newtonville, Oak Hill, etc need protection from catastrophic floods that could occur given climate change. A plan identifying strategic changes in our storm water infrastructure with aggressive implementation and search for funding are essential.
- b. Embed resilience in zoning and infrastructure design by incorporating flood protection (e.g., raised grading, green buffers) and drought-tolerant landscapes into zoning updates, ensuring all new development supports resilience.
- c. These enhancements align closely with existing frameworks while adding urgency, equity, and ecological co-benefits to Newton's climate planning—leveraging both the 2020–2025 Climate Action Plan and the Vulnerability Assessment for a more robust, integrated climate response.

Question 3:

Do you believe current funding levels in the City budget are sufficient to maintain high quality open space and address growing climate mitigation needs? If not, what would you do about it? (400 words or less)

Response:

I do not believe current funding levels in Newton's City budget are sufficient to maintain high-quality open space and meet our growing climate mitigation needs. We are fortunate to have excellent planning frameworks—the Open Space and Recreation Plan, the Climate Action Plan, and the Climate Vulnerability Assessment—but progress requires sustained investment that has not yet kept pace with the scale of need.

Maintenance Gaps: Trails, parks, and conservation lands face ongoing issues such as invasive species management, accessibility upgrades, and infrastructure repairs. Too often, we rely on volunteers rather than consistent city funding.

Accelerating Climate Costs: Extreme weather, flooding, and heat stress are already straining public resources. Building storm-resilient parks, expanding the urban tree canopy, and installing stormwater infrastructure will require a level of investment far greater than current allocations.

Competing Priorities: Education, transportation, health, police, fire, library, etc understandably demand budget attention, but without dedicated funds, climate and open space priorities risk underinvestment year after year. Our current mayor has vastly increased spending for our open space. I hope this will continue.

What I Would Do

Ensure Strategic Use of CPA Funds: Assure that grant requests are presented to the Community Preservation Committee for open space protection, conservation restrictions, and climate-resilient projects—while still balancing affordable housing and historic preservation needs.

Maximize External Grants and Partnerships: Aggressively pursue state and federal funding, including MVP (Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness) grants, Inflation Reduction Act climate funds, and the Land and Water Conservation Fund - hopefully these sources will survive the purge of federal grant programs. Public-private partnerships—with nonprofits, local businesses, and universities—can further expand capacity for urban forestry, trail connections, and ecological restoration.

Establish a Dedicated Climate & Open Space Fund: We should explore adding a dedicated portion of an increased stormwater fee to create an open space resiliency fund earmarked for climate resilience and open space projects, paired with clear public reporting to ensure accountability.

Leverage Community Stewardship: Build on the strong base of Newton Conservators, Green Newton, neighborhood associations, and volunteer groups. City support for stewardship programs—training, tools, and small grants—can amplify impact without large ongoing costs.

Conclusion: Newton residents consistently rank open space and climate action as top priorities. To honor those values, we need reliable, expanded funding streams—not just plans to advance Newton’s climate commitments.