

# **Newton Conservators**

## **2025 Newton Candidate Questionnaire**

**Respondent:** Brittany Hume Charm

**Office Sought:** Ward 5 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:**

Like many Newton residents, I treasure our open spaces and spend most weekends on playgrounds, trails, parks, and fields with family and friends. These areas strengthen individual well-being, foster community connection, and deliver vital environmental benefits.

Safeguarding these much-loved city assets is a priority of mine. That means maintaining current spaces, planning improvements to meet future needs, and supporting the financial and operational strategies to make them possible even as budgets are strained. These goals align closely with Objectives 1, 2A, and 2B of Newton's 2020–27 Open Space and Recreation Plan.

To the City's credit, significant progress has been made since the plan was adopted. Newton now has the new Gath Pool, Upper Falls Splash Park, turf fields at Albemarle, expanded sports lighting at both high schools, improved pedestrian and bicycle routes such as the Commonwealth Avenue carriageway, and a new community garden in Nonantum, among other accomplishments.

My first step would be to request a clear status update on the plan: which actions are complete, which are underway, which are queued with costs attached, and which remain untouched. I would also review the pledged performance indicators on usage and quality, alongside equity considerations such as Environmental Justice zones and accessibility needs. With this data, I would work with the Council and our new mayor to prioritize actions for the final two years of the plan that maximize impact given current financial uncertainty. This process can also clarify

where Newton's limited revenues force tradeoffs, informing longer-term planning for both revenue generation and future investments.

I am also eager to review the forthcoming Walk, Roll, and Bike Network plan, expected in 2025 (Goal #5). This plan could create a "spine" of safer corridors connecting village centers, train stations, and open spaces for greater—and safer—enjoyment by all residents. A network of secondary streets and Greenways with visible street painting and signage would allow commuters and families on bicycle to travel efficiently and safely while minimizing reliance on costly and logistically challenging protected lanes.

I saw this model succeed in San Francisco when I lived there. I often commuted along a designated bike corridor ("The Wiggle") that provided a safer, flatter alternative to traffic-heavy main roads. I believe Newton can adopt a similar approach, building a practical, equitable, and sustainable network that enhances mobility and complements our open space investments.

**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:**

Thanks to years of dedication from community leaders and city officials, Newton is a leader in environmental and climate policies. But the work is far from over. As climate events around the world remind us, Newton and other cities must keep pressing forward to achieve net-zero emissions and prepare for increasingly frequent and severe weather that threaten our residents, property, and infrastructure.

On climate matters, I am grateful to learn from the expertise of local partners who have advanced green improvements in Newton for years. These include council colleagues, citizen experts, and advocates such as the Newton Conservators, Newton Energy Commission, Green Newton, Mothers Out Front, and the new BERDO Commission. As with the Open Space Plan and the Walk, Roll, and Bike Network, I will build on these experts' own assessments of prior plans and what to prioritize next. I look forward to reviewing Newton's Climate Action Plan 2.0 this fall, asking questions to deepen understanding, and advancing its recommendations wherever possible.

I am mindful, however, that the next phase of Newton's climate work will be more challenging, given major federal policy shifts. As I review CAP 2.0, I will pay particular attention to how Newton can advance our goals independently of federal support—and sometimes in the face of direct federal resistance.

Several examples come to mind. First, with threats to large-scale renewable initiatives like offshore wind, Newton must accelerate renewable energy production at the local, distributed level. That means strengthening collaboration between Newton, the state, and the utilities to support private investment in solar on homes and businesses, while also advancing the intelligent grid and smart meters needed to expand distributed energy contribution.

Second, with the \$7,500 federal electric vehicle credit scheduled for elimination this fall, Newton should consider other ways to encourage EV adoption. Options include partnerships or incentives for home charging station installations, as well as expanding preferred parking with public chargers across the city.

Finally, given lagging national climate efforts, more frequent extreme weather, and reduced FEMA support, Newton must strengthen its own disaster preparedness. This includes keeping updated climate vulnerability assessments, mitigating high-risk areas, and communicating targeted education, alerts, and response plans with public safety departments, business districts, neighborhood groups, and facilities serving vulnerable residents.

I am grateful that the Newton community's own expertise can help us safeguard our future.

**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:**

Newton's current budget levels are not sufficient to maintain high-quality open space or meet our growing climate needs. The city is caught in a structural budget squeeze: costs such as health insurance and construction are rising far faster than the 2.5% annual revenue growth allowed by state law; pension obligations will continue to climb until FY2032; federal ARPA relief funds have run out; and the new federal administration is threatening cuts to vital state and local funding. Meanwhile, Newton's city council has repeatedly hindered development projects that would grow our tax base, and voters rejected a proposed tax increase (Proposition 2½ override) in 2023. The result is that every city department has already had to make hard

choices, and it will likely be worse next year. This annual cycle of controversy has eroded trust, particularly with confused and disappointed Newton Public School parents.

As a councilor, my priority will be to help Newton break this cycle so that we can fund our schools, public safety, and environmental stability efforts as they deserve. That means:

Creating near-term budget relief. One key lever is extending the pension paydown timeline from 2032 to closer to 2040 (the state deadline), which would free up several percentage points of our annual budget between now and 2032 to help meet critical needs.

Establishing clear priorities. When cuts are unavoidable, my first responsibility will be to protect schools and public safety. At the same time, I will work to protect the top strategic priorities within our open space, climate action, and sustainability initiatives.

Exploring new revenue sources. Modest increases in fees can provide some short-term help. In the medium term, though, Newton will likely need another override campaign to bridge the gap. Success will require broad coalition-building and clear messaging about why Newton must fund the values we share—schools, safety, sustainability, and quality of life—rather than depend on increasingly unreliable federal support.

Expanding the tax base long-term. To ensure financial sustainability while advancing climate goals, Newton should encourage smart new growth like denser housing near transit. Leaning into climate-friendly urban design strengthens both fiscal health and environmental resilience.

By aligning near-term relief with medium- and long-term strategies—and prioritizing schools and public safety while still advancing sustainability—we can protect Newton's quality of life today and for generations to come.