

Newton Conservators

2025 Newton Candidate Questionnaire

Respondent: Julie T. Irish

Office Sought: Ward 5 Ward Councilor

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:

As a Ward 5 City Councilor, my top priorities from Newton's Open Space Plan 2020–2027 focus on Goals 2 and 5, which are essential for preserving and enhancing our community's open spaces. Goal 2 emphasizes maintaining and improving the City's open space resources, including natural areas, athletic fields, parks, waterways, and the tree canopy. It is helpful to think of these resources as either active or passive spaces, since each requires different strategies for care and improvement.

As a Ward 5 resident, I am fortunate to have diverse passive open spaces within walking distance of my home. Hemlock Gorge Reservation, the Upper Falls Greenway, the Charles River Path–Quinobequin Trail, and Cold Spring Park provide biodiversity and strengthen climate resilience. To care for these spaces and others across the city, it is important to coordinate with and support existing volunteer groups such as the Friends of Hemlock Gorge, Friends of Quinobequin, and Friends of Cold Spring Park. These groups bring deep knowledge and commitment, and their expertise can guide work on tree canopy preservation, invasive species removal, and pollinator habitat creation. Newton will benefit when these volunteer networks are recognized, supported, and fully engaged.

Active spaces such as athletic fields, tennis courts, and playgrounds may require a different approach. Formal outreach to the families, coaches, and players who use these spaces will be essential. Building ongoing awareness, encouraging participation, and monitoring conditions (for example, heat islands or flooding) will help ensure these spaces remain well maintained and responsive to community needs. Ensuring that all active recreation areas are included in the

prioritization of enhancements and improvements will promote equity among Newton's neighborhoods.

To achieve Goal 5, we need to see Newton not only as 13 individual villages, but also as one large and diverse city. With more than 18 square miles, Newton has enormous potential to expand and connect its trails and paths for all types of users. A first step is conducting a detailed inventory and assessment of existing connections to identify gaps and areas without accessible paths. This review should evaluate accessibility for pedestrians, cyclists, and individuals with mobility challenges, as well as wayfinding how well routes are marked and whether signage is accessible to people with visual, hearing, or mobility impairments. Maintaining connections in all areas of the City is important, but a network that prioritizes paths to open spaces, schools and villages would be ideal.

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:

As a City Councilor, I would explore opportunities to accelerate both the Newton Climate Action Plan and the Newton Climate Vulnerability Assessment and Action Plan at the neighborhood level. Each neighborhood in Newton faces unique challenges. For example, Upper Falls is recognized as an Environmental Justice community because of its higher renter population, lower median household income, and lower English proficiency. This neighborhood also has smaller lots and less tree canopy compared to neighboring villages. Nonantum and Newton Corner, like Upper Falls, are EJ communities with similar conditions and may be eligible for state funding to help advance climate recommendations. In addition, some neighborhoods in Newton, especially those along the Charles River, face greater risks of flooding and storm damage and should be prioritized for investment and resilience funding.

We could also accelerate progress by integrating the goals of the Climate Action Plan, the Climate Vulnerability Assessment, and the Open Space Plan. All three plans emphasize expanding tree canopy, improving biodiversity, and maintaining open spaces to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. A careful review of these plans for overlaps, redundancies, or competing goals could streamline efforts and make it easier to achieve Newton's climate objectives.

Incorporation the ideas and expertise of existing community groups such as Friends groups, Area Councils, and local nonprofit organizations would also strengthen implementation. These groups bring valuable local knowledge, energy, and networks that can directly support climate resilience efforts across the city. There are also active environmental groups throughout the Newton Public School system - from elementary to high school – and their ideas and projects should be integrated into the City of Newton’s broader climate change and climate resiliency efforts. Supporting our youth’s efforts to address our climate crisis should be a priority.

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:

The City of Newton has a budget of nearly \$500 million, yet many critical needs compete for these dollars. Failing to invest in open space maintenance and climate mitigation infrastructure creates financial and environmental risks that only compound over time.

Thus, meeting Newton’s growing climate needs will require strong public and private partnership State and federal programs can provide significant support, while funding from local and national organizations could also generate additional revenue streams.

Maximizing these opportunities may require the City to hire staff dedicated to building relationships with federal, state or local organizations that fund climate resilience and mitigation projects. Although adding City staff should always be approached with caution, the long-term benefits of securing outside funding could outweigh the costs.

Lastly, if any City funds are reallocated to climate resilience projects, the administration must also develop a robust and transparent community outreach plan. That plan should:

Help residents understand the need to invest in climate resilience and mitigation efforts.

Provide a clear and detailed explanation of what is being funded and why.

If for some reason, any resident experiences financial hardship as a result of a City funded climate resilience effort, provide appropriate resources or support.