

# **Newton Conservators**

## **2025 Newton Candidate Questionnaire**

**Respondent:** Sean Roche

**Office Sought:** Ward 6 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 roundly endorse all of the goals and objectives of the Newton Open Space Plan. My top three priorities would be:

- \* Expand open space opportunities and address heat-island exposure in environmental justice neighborhoods
- \* Restore the tree canopy
- \* Plan for development of the golf courses

Since the plan was written, we have become even more aware of the urgent need for relief from rising temperatures. We need to ensure that the effects of climate change are not being felt disproportionately by the lowest income Newton residents. We need shade and aquatic resources. We are going to need more trees to provide shade, but we also need to build shade structures. There are plenty of opportunities to reduce asphalt and add rain gardens. And, we don't have enough pools for a city our size.

We must turn around the decades-long net loss of tree canopy, keeping in mind that replacing a mature tree with a young tree is not really net neutral. It's time for a plan to turn around our tree loss. And, it's time to fund such a plan.

We need to develop a plan for the 540+ acres of privately owned golf courses in the city. While they are large and green, they are poor open spaces. Golf courses are ecologically poor open spaces. They are heavily maintained non-native grass surfaces, with very modest forestation. As

recreational facilities, they are terribly inefficient, supporting very few users per-acre. The section 61B tax benefit generates a subsidy to exclusive clubs for the very wealthiest..

In addition to those priorities, I would focus on lawns. With so much of the city already developed as residential, much of our “open space” is the portion of private residential lots that are not covered by buildings. Too much of that is ornamental lawn. As a matter of policy, the city should discourage ornamental lawns. Lawns lack bio-diversity. Lawns require water for no productive purposes. Lawn maintenance tools emit greenhouse gases. And, lawn chemicals contribute to water pollution. One thing we can do is to raise the water cost for outdoor uses. There is little public policy justification for cheap water for lawn maintenance. And, we should continue to promote low-water-use, pollinator-friendly vegetation instead.

Please note: I played key roles in the development of both the Lower Falls Bridge and the Upper Falls Greenway.

**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 process matter, across the city we need to understand and address the climate impact or opportunity of absolutely every decision and action and quantify the impact before we make any tradeoffs. We see some of this woven into the Climate Action plan as suggestions for organizational coordination. As a city councilor, I would ensure that we’re considering the climate impact of every decision the council makes and every action the council takes and explicitly identifying any climate tradeoffs we’re making. Climate action and climate resilience need to be priority 1a and 1b.

What’s missing from both plans: more housing. There is a growing understanding that more housing, especially around transit, commerce, schools, places of worship, and other amenities reduces vehicle miles driven per household. Recent development in Newtonville is bearing this out. Strategically adding housing is probably the single biggest climate action that a municipality can take, especially a municipality like Newton with rich transit assets.

While both plans recommend improvements to transit service and accessibility, I would like to be explicit about one necessary action: continuing the decade-plus lobbying effort for commuter-rail stations that are accessible and serve both tracks. Platforms that serve both tracks will lead to shorter trips and more frequent service, from and to Newton. As a city council and as city councilors, we must keep lobbying for new platforms.

We need to collect better data on the sources of car trips within and through the city so that we can identify the best opportunities for reducing car travel.

We know that families driving students to and from school is a big source of motor-vehicle travel in the city. We should adopt a city-wide goal to increase the number of students walking and biking to and from school. We need to take necessary steps to make it safe and convenient to have our young people walk and bike to and from school.

**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:**

No, current funding levels are not sufficient. As the Climate Action Plan notes, each year the budget is filled with objectives worthy of city funding that compete with open space and climate-related needs. We need to find more money. I would look into increasing the CPA levy, lobbying for a real-estate transfer tax, and generally generating new tax revenue and allocating a portion to take on the most urgent climate and open-space issues.